

What are the Teachings of Modern Day Lutheranism?

Having heard what historic Lutheranism taught concerning the important Christian teachings of Justification, the Bible, the Means of Grace, and Fellowship, the next step in our study this evening is to see how the teachings of modern day Lutheranism compare to those of historic Lutheranism on these four points of doctrine. Is there any change between the historic and the modern? If so, to what extent? And what kind of effect would such changes have on members of the Lutheran church?

When people want to learn what a church or synod teaches, one useful way is to look at their official confessions. That is what we have done in the first part of our seminar in regard to certain teachings of historic Lutheranism. However, an examination of official confessions alone is not always sufficient to provide a person with a clear and accurate picture of what is actually being taught in Lutheran church bodies today. A Lutheran synod may have official confessions that are faithful and true to the Word of God and are quite adequate in every way. And yet, where there are religious schools or congregations within the synod which deviate or completely depart from those confessions and this is condoned or tolerated by the church body, then, quite obviously, their official confessions are not a true reflection of what their church teaches. There is also the situation today in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America where the doctrinal platform for its formation was so brief that it left room for a wide variety of opposing teachings to be held and promoted in its synod. Here again, the official confessions do not give a clear picture of what is being taught through out this synod. In order to ascertain the teachings of modern day Lutheranism on the Bible, Justification, the Means of Grace, and Fellowship, it would be helpful to examine what is being taught in the synods' religious schools and what is being written in their official publications, and what is being proclaimed and practiced in their local congregations.

The Bible

What is being taught in Lutheranism today on the Bible? In the relatively smaller Lutheran synods there appears to be agreement with the confession of historic Lutheranism, namely that all of the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God and that it is the only source and norm for Christian faith and life. However, in the largest Lutheran synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), there is quite a different viewpoint on the Bible to be found.

In the seminaries of the ELCA where the "Christian Dogmatics" textbook by Braaten/ Jenson is used for doctrinal instruction, we find the author referring to the doctrine of divine inspiration of the Bible as being only a 'theory.' 'Fundamental biblicism' which holds to a divine, infallible Bible that is absolutely reliable on all matters that it speaks of is referred to as an opposing view to what is being taught in ELCA seminaries.

The ELCA textbook, which identifies with non-fundamentalist Protestants, states that, "Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel. Non-fundamentalist Protestants also accept the Bible as the Word of God in some sense, but they point out that the concept of the Word of God... cannot be confined to the Bible. We cannot say that the Bible is the Word of God in a simplistic way, for the concept of the Word of God bears many diverse meanings in the classical Christian tradition. ("Christian Dogmatics," Braaten, Jenson, Vol. 1:74,75, ELCA)

"...the churches that claim the heritage of Luther and the Reformation still affirm the Bible as the Word of God. This is not meant in the fundamentalistic sense that everything in the Bible stands directly as the Word of God." ("Christian Dogmatics," Braaten, Jenson Vol. 1: 76, ELCA)

"The role of the Bible in constructive theology is radically qualified today by historical consciousness. Luther believed that the literal meaning of Scripture is identical with its historical content; things happened exactly as they were written down. Today it is impossible to assume the

literal historicity of all things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place." ("Christian Dogmatics," Braaten, Jenson, Vol. 1:76, 77, ELCA)

In summary, non-fundamentalism, which is held by ELCA seminaries, has this to say about the Bible: the verbal inspiration of the Bible is only a theory; not everything in the Bible is the Word of God; the Bible contains errors and contradictions in it; not everything that the Bible reports concerning cosmology, biology, geography, and history can be taken literally or factually.

Justification

What kind of confession is to be found among modern day Lutherans on 'Justification' which is the most important teaching of historic Lutheranism? In Lutheranism today where the Bible is confessed to be the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God and the only norm and source for Christian faith and life, most generally, there is also to be found the same confession on the teaching of justification as that of historic Lutheranism. But where the teaching on the Bible has suffered violence at the hands of Bible critics and detractors, there the teaching on justification has most often also greatly suffered, even to the point of it being lost altogether.

The comforting teaching of justification that we are forgiven of all our sins and eternally saved alone through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ is dependent upon the teaching that Jesus is true God and true Man born of the virgin Mary and that His death on the cross atoned for the sins of the world. How have these very crucial and most precious teachings fared where it is taught that there are myths in the Bible?

This is what is said in the ELCA dogmatic's book concerning the teaching of Jesus being the incarnate Son of God, born of the virgin Mary, "...the story of the descent of the Son of God to earth and his ascent into heaven cannot be taken literally. The question is whether the meaning of the myth of the incarnation can be saved without taking it literally yet without getting rid of its mythic structure." (1:529) "The notion of the preexistent Son of God becoming a human being in the womb of a virgin and then returning to his heavenly home is bound up with a mythological picture of the world that clashes with our modern scientific world view." (1:527)

As for the teaching of Jesus' death on the cross atoning for the sins of the world, the ELCA dogmatic's book states, "Put in its crass form, this view would hold that Jesus' death is a sacrifice in which he is a substitute for us who pays the divine justice what is due for human sin, and/or appeases the divine wrath. As we shall see, there is a long tradition, especially among Western conservative Christians, which has taken this line. There seems to be a virtual consensus among contemporary biblical scholars, however, that this tradition finds little support in Scriptures, either in the Old Testament or New Testament. " (2:14,15)

But what about the gospel accounts that quote Jesus as saying that He would be dying in order to take away the sins of mankind? In Mark 10:45 Jesus said that He came "to give His life a ransom for many." Also in Matthew 26:28 we find that at the Last Supper Jesus revealed the purpose for the shedding of His blood on the cross when He said, "this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." The ELCA textbook says of these Bible verses, "Such passages, in their present form at least, are usually regarded as having come not from Jesus himself but from later interpretative traditions." (2:13) In other words, you can't believe the Bible when it says Jesus spoke these words, since these are considered only to be the ideas and notions of man that have been added to the Bible.

Also, in a Teacher's Guide of ELCA catechism materials for seventh- and eighth-grade children we find that the teaching of Jesus dying in order to "satisfy the offense created by human sin" is labeled as only being a 'theory'. (Affirm, The Apostles Creed, pp.22,23)

Since these modern day Lutherans have rejected the belief that a person is saved alone through faith in Jesus' redemptive work, how then would they say people are saved? In 'The Lutheran' a

religious magazine that was published by one of the synods (LCA) that later joined the ELCA the following answer was given to the questions, "Q. How do we inherit eternal life? Is belief in Christ enough, or must we be baptized and do good works?" "A. In answer to that question, Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all he had, give it to the poor and 'come and follow me.' This meant that he must put Christ first in his life. To a lawyer who asked the questions, Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan. 'Go and do as he did,' Jesus advised. Briefly stated, we inherit eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ and through obedience to his commands. Among those commands were to baptize all nations and to love our neighbors. But the most important factor is faith. Baptism or good works alone are no guarantee of heaven."

We would expect this kind of answer from a Roman Catholic and not from a Lutheran. For as was stated before historic Lutheranism upheld the Scriptural teaching that a person is saved alone through faith in Jesus' work of salvation and it rejected as false the Roman Catholic teaching that people are saved through faith in Jesus plus their good works.

Yet, not only do we find the Catholic view of salvation being taught in the ELCA, but also the belief that salvation can be obtained through non-Christian religions. Again from their dogmatic's textbook we read, "If we are told there is salvation in the other religions, there is no a priori (valid independently of observation, M.G.) reason to deny the claim. It depends on what is meant by salvation. If salvation is the experience of illumination, then the Buddha can save. If salvation is the experience of union with God, then Hinduism can save. If salvation is being true to the ancestors, then Shintoism can save... The reason Christians are confused and have appeared so smug about salvation is that they imagined they held a monopoly on salvation." (1:565) It should be noted here that all the non-Christian religions in the world believe and teach that a person is saved through work-righteousness, namely, that people are saved on the basis of their own works and deeds. This stands in striking contrast to what the apostle Paul testifies in Ephesians 2:8,9 where he declares, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

Means of Grace

The stance of historic Lutheranism on the Means of Grace has also undergone a change in modern day Lutheranism. While there are still Lutherans today who regard the gospel in word and sacrament as the only means through which the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and preserves the whole Christian Church on earth, nevertheless there are growing numbers in Lutheranism who are resorting to other ways and means in an attempt to accomplish the same results. In order to gather and retain members there are Lutheran churches that are using popular forms of entertainment in their worship services. This is what one Lutheran said about their church services: "When people come to Community Church of Joy on Sunday morning, they have fun. We may have a stage band, comedians, clowns, dramas, mini-concerts and productions, high energy choreography, as well as many other entertainment forms." While this may draw and appeal to the masses, yet if the Law and Gospel message of sin and grace is made little or no use of what has become of what the apostle Paul identifies as being "the power of God to salvation," namely, the gospel of Christ? Jesus didn't say for His church to go and make disciples of nations by entertaining the masses. Rather He gave the command to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mk. 16:15) and to baptize "them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Mt. 28:19)

In his book "Ministers of Christ" John P. Meyer of the Wisconsin Synod makes a valid observation about resorting to entertainment in order to draw people into church when he writes, "The type of minister to which we referred above as using entertainment in order to lure the people is employing panourgia (Greek word in 2 Cor. 4:2 for craftiness and trickery, M.G.), and is therefore guilty of committing secret things of disgrace. The Gospel is the word of Truth. To resort to ruses in proclaiming it, even though with the best of intentions, is heaping shame on the Truth. Not only are the Truth and lures incompatible in their nature, but to use lures in connection with the Gospel

ministry treats the Truth, the eternal Truth of God, as though it were inefficient, not attractive enough in itself." ("Ministers of Christ," John P. Meyer, NPH, 1963, p. 62.)

Fellowship

Finally, what about the teaching on Fellowship? Has there been a change in this teaching as well?

Back in 1932 the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod drew up a fine confession on church fellowship that was consistent with historic Lutheranism. In what was called the Brief Statement it was confessed, "Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, I Pet. 4:11; John 8:31, 32; 1 Tim. 6:3, 4, 4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21." (Brief Statement: Of the Church, 28. On Church-Fellowship) Since the writing of this confession there have been other smaller Lutheran synods who have subscribed to this statement on church fellowship.

Now, while there are Lutheran synods today who say that they agree with the Brief Statement's confession on church fellowship, nevertheless some of them have deviated from it either to a greater or lesser degree. The Missouri Synod has the practice in their midst of "levels" or "degrees" of fellowship, which represents a departure from what they confessed in the Brief Statement. An official statement by one of the synod boards had this to say of it, "On the basis of the Biblical principles of fellowship we must insist that expressions of Christian unity be proportionate to the measure of consensus in confessing the Biblical Gospel that we enjoy with the other Christians involved. While not articulated in detail in official synodical documents, this has been in fact the Synod's way of proceeding for many years." (quote from LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations views on fellowship in LCMS 1991.) In other words, they would say that some expressions of church fellowship, like pulpit and altar fellowship, require more doctrinal agreement than others, such as that of prayer. Evidence of this belief and practice in Missouri Synod can be found with their congregations engaging in worship and prayer with those holding to false teachings at "joint Christian celebrations, gatherings, rallies, convocations, commencements, baccalaureates, dedications, exhibitions, pageants, concerts, colloquies, conferences, and other public events."

In the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod we find a practice that is not consistent with historic Lutheranism and the Brief Statement. This is shown in their own words when at their 1959 synod convention they stated, "Termination of fellowship is called for when you have reached the conviction that admonition is of no further avail." The Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which is in doctrinal agreement with the Wisconsin Synod, stated the following as to when one should stop fellowshiping with those who hold to false teaching, "When a person or church body with whom we are in fellowship causes divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned, we mark them immediately, then admonish, and if this proves fruitless, avoid them." ("The Lutheran Synod Quarterly," June 1962) These two statements would make allowances for continuing in fellowship, for a period of time, with false teachers who in the meantime could lead people astray from God's Word. Their basis for finally severing fellowship with a false teaching group rests upon a subjective judgment of determining if there is any hope of the false teachers forsaking error and embracing God's word of truth. The question then follows, how do you know when or if they will change? Romans 16:17 does not leave us with this kind of predicament. Rather it teaches that once it has been determined that a certain church group is a false teaching group they are then to be avoided by not having fellowship with them.

The practice of church fellowship in the ELCA is the broadest and widest of all the Lutheran

Synods today. Since many in the ELCA believe that it is not possible to reach full agreement on the teachings of the Bible and since they believe that there are only certain essential teachings that need to be agreed upon for fellowship, they join in fellowship with the Roman Catholic church and Reformed churches, which still hold to false teachings that historic Lutheranism rejected and therefore refused the hand of fellowship. The ELCA also overlooks and minimizes the errors found in their own midst. This makes for a very confusing situation for Lutherans in these churches. They are left with the false impression that the Bible is not a very clear book. This could make it difficult for them to follow the important counsel of the apostle Paul who exhorts Christians, saying, "But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (2 Tim. 3:14,15) Also, people may think that it is neither possible nor important to follow Jesus' protective words of warning to "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves." (Mt. 7:15) Our Savior not only wants us to guard against falling prey to false prophets, but He also would have us contend for the truths of God in order to help those who are overtaken by errors. Even as the apostle Paul exhorts Christians in his letter to Titus, "holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict." (1:9)

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