

What Is Going on in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? Some Reflections on Its 2005 Churchwide Assembly

Every two years, the biggest Lutheran church in America holds a convention to discuss and decide issues of current concern for the church. This past week, ending today, the ELCA gathered in Orlando, FL, to do just that. Out of the many debates and decisions, I select three issues: the new ELCA hymnal; church fellowship with the United Methodist Church; and, last but not least, the question of homosexuality. These topics provide a good snapshot of the positions held by the majority of ELCA delegates.

1. A New Hymnal

Beginning in the 1960s, the predecessor bodies of the ELCA (ALC and LCA) together with the Missouri Synod began preparing a new hymnal that was to replace, in the LCMS, The Lutheran Hymnal of 1941 and, in the other churches, the Service Book and Hymnal of 1958. Those years were marked by a spirit of reform and change, even revolution, both within the church and in society. Those years also saw renewed attempts to restore the broken unity of the various churches here in America and worldwide.

By the second half of the 1970s, the hymnal project was finished. Language had been modernized (e.g., “you” in; “thee” out); some hymns had been changed to fit the theological “openness” of the time; music had been updated and changed in style; and orders of worship had been overhauled. The predecessor bodies of the ELCA accepted the new hymnal, the (green) Lutheran Book of Worship. Missouri rejected the proposal and, within a few years, came up with its own hymnal, Lutheran Worship, that built on LBW, but made significant changes, especially in the orders of worship.

Today, almost 30 years later, both the LCMS and the ELCA are set to introduce new hymnals. At its last convention in 2004, the LCMS adopted its new hymnal, the Lutheran Service Book. And, this past week, the ELCA did the same for its new hymnal project, which as of yet does not have a name. Comparing these two hymnals is amazing, especially considering the almost joint adoption of the LBW in the late 70s. The ELCA has, at an accelerating pace, continued on the reformist path of the 1960s. Its hymnal bears witness to this. A minority of delegates (about 30%) voted against the new proposal. One reason they mentioned again and again is a notable change in language: “Masculine” and “authoritarian” titles for God, such as “King” and “Lord,” and the word “man” were often carefully avoided; the male pronoun “he” met the same fate. Are such changes really a surprise in a church body that, setting aside God’s Word (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11-12), began ordaining women 35 years ago and celebrated this fact at this year’s convention? The same feminist theology that led to women’s ordination is now confident to change biblical language. – In addition to this problem with the new proposal, I mention another one that would have warranted at least a thorough overhaul: ELCA’s orders of service betray an almost absolute absence of the teaching of original sin (Ps. 51:5; John 3:6) that is crucial to Luther’s biblical theology. This has, as will be seen below, far-reaching practical consequences.

2. Towards Church Fellowship with the United Methodist Church

The Methodist Church is an 18th-century offshoot of the Anglican Church or, as it is known in America, the Episcopal Church; John Wesley was its founder. Fellowship with the United Methodist Church (UMC), the largest Methodist body in America, is not without problems. This is so because the UMC deviates, for example, from the biblical doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Already this one difference would make fellowship impossible for Lutherans faithful to the Small Catechism. For it is necessary that those who are in fellowship agree on what they believe and teach. This is common-sense logic. Jesus puts it this way: “A house divided against itself cannot stand” (Mark 3:25). You cannot, e.g., deny and affirm that the bread and wine in communion are the true body and blood of Christ; both cannot be true. If you nonetheless say yes and no, confusion and indifferentism must be the outcome.

And yet, the ELCA, after forging agreements with the Episcopal Church, various Reformed churches, and the Moravian Church, now again combines what, according to God’s Word, cannot and should not be combined, for example, when it comes to the Lord’s Supper. How can they do that? Obviously, not without changing their own position first. For several years now the ELCA has been teaching that it is Christ who is present “in the forms of bread and wine,” not simply Christ’s true body and blood, as the Small Catechism asserts based on God’s Word (Mat. 26:26, 28). The overwhelming majority at the ELCA convention (877 - 60) has once more confirmed this grave change in the public doctrine of the Gospel. They have thus paved the way to engage in, as they call it, “eucharistic sharing” between ELCA and UMC (a Methodist can now receive communion in the ELCA and vice versa). This is meant to lead to “full communion” (a Methodist pastor can become the minister of an ELCA

congregation and vice versa).

3. Is Committed Homosexuality OK?

For more than a decade now, the ELCA has again and again affirmed to be “welcoming” of homosexuals (what does this mean?). Now it has, after spirited and lengthy discussions, decided to move a step further. One of the pertinent recommendations of the ELCA’s church council was adopted: It defined marriage as between one man and one woman and therefore declined to authorize a church-wide rite for the blessing of same-sex couples. However, as was understood by all parties to the debate, the recommendation is broad enough to allow for “local” approaches to “pastoral care” to homosexuals, including the blessing of homosexual couples. In other words: It leaves it for individual pastors or congregations to decide whether they want to bless same-sex couples as a means of providing pastoral care to them. This is bound to create more problems and disorder. A case in point is provided by Rev. Dr. Stephen Bouman, bishop of the ELCA's Metropolitan New York Synod. A recent New York Times article reports Bishop Bouman's reaction: "They allowed us to continue to have pastoral space in local situations for people to offer sensitive and graceful ministry to gay and lesbian people and their relations." Bishop Bouman said that Lutheran churches "in most regions of the country" already performed same-sex blessings and that the vote in Orlando on that issue "creates a little more public room" for such ceremonies.” (NY Times, August 13, 2005: “Lutherans Reject Plan to Allow Gay Clerics”)

Another recommendation, concerning the ordination of people in committed same-sex relationships, failed: It required 2/3 approval, but it was defeated 490 - 503. This is good, but still almost 50% of the delegates were in favor of ordaining non-celibate homosexuals. Everybody should realize that this created an unstable compromise that will have to be resolved over time: If loopholes are left wide open for “local solutions” including homosexual blessings (supposedly by God), why can’t a person blessed in this way be a pastor? One also wonders what happens to those pastors who’ve come out as currently living in homosexual relationships. At any rate, there is a breach in the dam: For many delegates, homosexuality is not a sin anymore. To reach this conclusion, Scripture (e.g., Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10) had to be twisted and turned. The new wisdom, allegedly directly from the Holy Spirit, is that the bible is only against homosexuality if it involves exploitation and injustice, but not if it takes place in the context of committed love and partnership. Homosexuals, after all, are said to be made by God the way they are. Here being weak on the doctrine of original sin comes back to haunt the ELCA: If you don’t teach original sin, then you must accept virtually everything that can be traced to “nature” as being “good” or “from God” the way it is.

Clearly, what is overlooked here (among other things) is the fact that God’s moral law, written in man’s heart and revealed in Scripture, does not change according to scientific progress or human experiences, however “spiritual” they may feel. Likewise, it makes no difference if the person committing a sin does so in sincerity, love, and true commitment. The law condemns both “conditions” and actions. “Love” summarizes the law; it does not override the Ten Commandments (Rom. 13:8-10). Likewise, the Gospel also does not abolish the law; it rather forgives sin, which is the breaking of the law (1 John 3:4). If this is not understood anymore, then sinners (homosexuals and others) are no longer called to repentance and forgiveness in Christ. Rather, sin is explained away, excused, and justified; sinners are “affirmed” and encouraged in their being “different.” This attitude certainly is not a form of Christian love; it is, in fact, a betrayal of the sinner.

Now it is true that both opponents and advocates of the homosexual cause point to bible passages supporting their position. This led some to argue: “In this deadlock each ‘person of faith’ must be free to decide for herself. The church ought to remain neutral and not impose onto others the views of some.” This sounds fair enough. Yet let us remember an important fact: God’s Word is always controversial; in fact, it leads us into controversy (Mat. 10:34). Ever since Satan in Paradise asked the question, “Did God really say ...” (Gen. 3:1), there has been wide disagreement on the meaning of God’s Word among those who claimed to be sincere Christians. But this does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid and that there is no one right interpretation. It also does not mean that false teaching ought to be tolerated in the church. After all, God’s honor and man’s salvation are at stake. This is why Luther wrote the Small Catechism: to teach us from God’s Word the correct, certain answer to the persistent, crucial question: “What does this mean?” For it is by God’s Word that we test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1, 6). Had the church adopted a tolerant view toward false interpretations in the past, it would have, humanly speaking, already degenerated into another form of works-righteous paganism: In the 4th century, e.g., sincere Christians disagreed on whether Jesus Christ is the one true God or merely the first creature. Both parties had numerous Scripture passages lined up in their support. Both called Christ “Lord,” but both meant different things. Obviously, only one party was right; the others were wrong. A similar situation emerged after 1517, in the century of the Reformation. Then too the opposing parties all meant to be faithful to Scripture; no one wanted to be a false teacher of God’s Word.

4. Summary

Luther taught that church assemblies like the recent Churchwide Assembly of the ELCA have the duty to reaffirm God's Word both in law and gospel; it has no power to change or set aside God's Word. New challenges to this old Word will arise again and again. In this, our time is no different than Luther's or that of the apostles. The one thing that does not change is God's old law that teaches us how to live and God's old Gospel that teaches us Christ as our one divine-human Savior from all sin. God's Word is as unchanging as God himself. Based on these criteria, was the ELCA's assembly a Lutheran one? It appears that this unfortunately was not the case in the areas we sampled, despite the courageous and commendable opposition of individual laypeople and pastors. In a strange, tragic twist for a Lutheran church, God's law (homosexuality) fared better than God's Gospel (Lord's Supper).

ELCA delegates have been told again and again: "We need not agree in all these issues. In fact, Lutherans are free to disagree, sincerely and lovingly. What is most important is that we all believe in Jesus and trust one another." Prior to the vote on homosexuality this position was even adopted in the form of a recommendation. This is institutional self-preservation and secular tolerance couched in pious language. However, the question is this: Is not teaching God's Word rightly also among the fruits of genuine faith in Jesus (see Mat. 7:15-23)? Put differently: when does disagreement with God's Word become sinful so as to drive out the Holy Spirit? The New Testament is very realistic in its constant warning against false doctrine: Eventually even a little leaven will leaven the whole lump and destroy faith; it ought not to be found among those who, as baptized children of God, lead new lives in the Easter light of Christ's death and resurrection (1 Cor. 5:6-8; Gal. 5:9).

Biblically, we are thus not at all commanded to remain with those who do not agree with what the Scriptures teach and who do not want to change their views and ways; resolutions to this effect cannot be binding. In reality we are to avoid those who teach falsely (Rom. 16:17; Tit. 3:10-11) – both for our own sakes and for their sakes, lest they be further confirmed in their false beliefs. We are to join those who teach what Christ teaches (John 10:27). Repeating God's old Word faithfully, we are to believe and confess the same thing and praise God with one mind and one voice both now and forever more (1 Cor. 1:10; Rom. 15:5-6).

God knows where the ELCA will go from here. As for us, let us give hearty thanks to our God and Savior Jesus Christ who has preserved the truth of his Word among us – without any merit or worthiness in us and despite our ignorance and lukewarm attitude. Let us pray earnestly that he would continue to hallow his name among us so that his Word might always be taught in its truth and purity and we, as the children of God, would lead holy lives according to it.

But let us also pray that the holy Trinity would not utterly forsake our fellow Lutherans of the ELCA but that he would lead those to repentance who need it. May he also provide those with new strength who are engaged in the difficult struggle of confessing the truth of God to their brothers and sisters. Let us reach out to those whom we know in the ELCA: Let us point out to them what's going on in their church. If they do not know the truth, let's show it to them in all love from God's Word and the Small Catechism. If they do know the truth, let's encourage them to "confess the good confession" of Christ (1 Tim. 6:12-13) with us, and to do so boldly and openly (Mat. 10:32-33).