

NB. This is an article written by Dr. Robert Benne who was a voting member of the Virginia Synod at the 2009 Church Wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He is Director of the Roanoke College Center for Religion and Society and has written extensively for many Lutheran publications.

How Did We Come to This?

During last week's biennial Church Wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the church affirmed major policy recommendations to allow for the blessing of same-sex unions (which practice will soon inflate to same-sex marriage) and the rostering of gay and lesbian pastors in partnered relationships. Earlier in the week it also passed by one vote—out of over a thousand total votes cast—a Social Statement on Sexuality that admitted there was no consensus on the moral evaluation of homosexual conduct, and offered no compelling biblical or theological reasons to support the policies it later in fact adopted. The Statement was firm and bold on issues that everyone agreed upon—the moral condemnation of promiscuity, pornography, sexual exploitation, etc.—but indecisive and vague about contested issues—cohabitation, premarital sex, the importance of the nuclear family, and, of course, homosexual conduct. Right before the vote on the Social Statement a totally unexpected tornado hit the Minneapolis Conference Center where we were meeting as well as the huge Central Lutheran Church next door, knocking the cross off one of its towers. Orthodox voting members saw the work of God in the tornado's cross-toppling effects and in the vote that passed with a .666 majority. Revisionists noted that the sun came out after the vote. In response the orthodox quipped that the sun comes out almost every day but rogue tornados are pretty rare!

Those in the orthodox camp warned the assembly not to vote on binding church doctrine, especially if it had no convincing biblical or theological arguments to overturn the moral consensus of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church held throughout the ages and by 99% of the world's Christians. Such action would identify the ELCA with a rapidly declining liberal Protestantism while departing from orthodox teaching and practice. Strong arguments against the Social Statement and policy recommendations were made by pastors and laypersons—bishops were for the most part silent—to no avail. The church left the Great Tradition of moral teaching to identify with the United Church of Christ and the Episcopalians.

How did this come to be? On the one hand, the fact that the largest American Lutheran church body had become the first confessional church to accept homosexual conduct was a traumatic shock to many. There was much anger and anguish. On the other hand, the decision was not at all unexpected by those of us who have fought against the underlying currents operating in the church from its very inception. The fight has been long yet predictable. Liberal Protestantism was the ELCA's destination. Indeed, its presiding Bishop, Mark Hanson—is fast becoming the charismatic leader of liberal Protestantism.

“There is nothing but the Social Gospel,” shouted a voting member at the assembly. But that is certainly not Lutheran doctrine. The various programs of social change taken to heart by the church are human works in God’s left-hand reign, having to do with the Law, not the Gospel. Rather, the real Gospel is clear: the grace of God in Jesus Christ is offered to repentant sinners condemned by the Law and then called to amendment of life by the Spirit. Liberating efforts in the realm of social and political change are possibly effects of the Gospel, but certainly not the Gospel itself.

But the ELCA has accepted the Social Gospel as its working theology even though its constitution has a marvelous statement of the classic Gospel. The liberating movements fueled by militant feminism, multiculturalism, anti-racism, anti-heterosexism, anti-imperialism, and now ecologism have been moved to the center while the classic Gospel and its missional imperatives have been pushed to the periphery. The policies issuing from these liberationist themes are non-negotiable in the ELCA, which is compelling evidence that they are at the center. No one can dislodge the ELCA’s commitment to purge all masculine language about God from its speech and worship, to demur on the biblically normative status of the nuclear family, to refuse to put limits on abortion in its internal policies or to advocate publicly for pro-life policies, to press for left-wing public domestic and foreign policy, to replace evangelism abroad with dialog, to commit to “full inclusion” of gays and lesbians at the expense of church unity, and to buy in fully to the movement against global warming. Though it is dogmatic on these issues it is confused about something as important as the assessment of homosexual conduct. Yet, it acts anyway because of the pressure exerted by those who want to liberate church and society from heterosexism.

But how did the liberal Protestant agenda replace the Christian core? There are many reasons, a goodly number that evangelicals share with Lutherans: a culture moving quickly toward permissive morality; the self-esteem movement leading to cheap grace; lay individualism combined with apathy toward Christian teaching; an obliviousness to church tradition and to the voice of the world church; and, above all, the loss of an authentic principle of authority in the church. This last item I will address in more detail later.

The ELCA has a particular history that has compounded these problems. The mid-80s planning stage of the ELCA was dramatically affected by a group of radicals who pressed liberationist (feminist, black, multiculturalist, gay) legislative initiatives right into the center of the ELCA structures. Among them was a quota system that skews every committee, council, task force, synod assembly, and national assembly toward the “progressive” side. (There are quotas for representing specific groups in all the organized activity of the church. 60% must be lay, 50% must be women, 10% must be people of color or whose language is other than English. The losers, of course, are white male pastors; our Virginia delegation to the assembly, for example, had only one male pastor among its eight elected members.) Further, the prescribed structure

distanced the 65 Bishops from the decision-making of the church. The Bishops have only influence, not power. (Aware of their divisiveness, the Bishops voted 44-14 to require a two thirds majority for the enactment of the Sexuality Task Force's policy recommendations, but were ignored by both the Church Council and the Assembly.) Theologians were given no formal, ongoing, corporate role in setting the direction of the ELCA. They, too, were kept at a distance and actually viewed as one more competing interest group.

The radicals so decisive in the defining moments of the ELCA intended to smash the authority of the influential white male theologians and bishops who had informally kept both the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America on course. The radicals wanted many voices and perspectives, especially those of the "marginalized," put forward in the ongoing deliberations of the ELCA. They were so successful that now after twenty years there is no authoritative biblical or theological guidance in the church. There are only many voices. The 2009 Assembly legitimated those many voices by adapting a "bound-conscience" principle in which anyone claiming a sincerely-held conviction on about any doctrine must be respected. The truth of the Word of God has been reduced to sincerely-held opinion.

What was truly chilling about the Assembly's debates was that the revisionists seemed to quote Jesus and the Bible as knowledgeably and persuasively as the orthodox. Passages reinforcing their respective agendas were selected and then brilliantly woven into their arguments. Both sides seemed to have the Bible on their side. The revisionists "contextualized" and relativized the relevant texts. The orthodox claimed a plain sense reading of Scripture. The Lutheran Confessions were utilized effectively by both sides. **There was no authoritative interpretation conveyed by any agent or agency in the church. The church was and is rudderless.**

Sola Scriptura, a Lutheran principle adopted by evangelicals, did not seem to be sufficient in such circumstances. An authoritative tradition of interpretation of the Bible seemed to be essential. More was needed than the Word alone. Protestants seem to lack such an authoritative tradition so they fight and split. In this situation the option of swimming the Tiber seems all the more tempting

The fall-out of these historic moves by the ELCA is hard to predict, mainly because the Lutheran orthodox have no group of dissenting Bishops around whom to rally. There will be a profusion of different responses by congregations and individuals. Many congregations and individuals will leave the ELCA. Others will bide their time to see what Lutheran CORE (Lutheran Coalition for Renewal) will become as it strives to articulate and then embody the best of Lutheranism. Many will withdraw from involvement in the ELCA and its Synods and live at the local level. Many others will try to live on as if nothing happened. Others will approve of the new direction. But a tectonic shift has taken place, and it wasn't primarily about sex. The ELCA has formally left the Great Tradition for liberal Protestantism.