

IN THE AFTERMATH

Reflections Following the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly

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HOW DO WE LIVE NOW?

I'm writing for those who share with me the conviction that the actions taken by the Assembly on human sexuality constitute a theological, ethical, ecclesiological, and ecumenical disaster of immense proportions. I'm not going to make the case for viewing those actions in that way; that has been done repeatedly and very capably by others in the debates that preceded the Assembly. I am writing for those who are already convinced, whom I will call traditionalists.

The question I want to address is "How do we live now?" Is this the "break-point," the point at which, as one good friend put it in private correspondence, we must judge that this branch of the church has died and withered? What future can traditionalists in the ELCA look forward to besides contempt, irrelevance, and dwindling numbers? I want to address this, moreover, not as a question about organization and strategy, but as a spiritual question, a question about how we are to live our faith in a fallen and erring church.

LUTHER ON CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH

As the clouds have gathered in recent weeks, I have been reminding myself of the fundamentals of the approach I took a few years ago, when I agreed with an assembly action — the adoption of Called to Common Mission — that others were viewing as a "break-point." I often appealed in those days to Luther's exposition of Galatians 6:1-3 in the 1519 Galatians Commentary (Luther's Works 27, 387-394), where Luther offers something like a spirituality of conflict in the church. What he has to say is worth reviewing at some length.

Luther writes that Paul's "those who are spiritual" are those who imitate the Holy Spirit in the face of another's sin. Unlike Satan, the Accuser, the Spirit is the Paraklētos, the helper and advocate. For Christ's sake, he "excuses, extenuates, and completely covers our sins. On the other hand, He magnifies our faith and good works." This is how "spiritual" people deal with those who have gone wrong. Luther goes on to quote Augustine: "Nothing so demonstrates the spiritual man as his treatment of someone else's sin..." Likewise Gregory the Great: "True righteousness has compassion, false righteousness is indignant."

Luther writes that St. Paul is imitating the Spirit in Romans 15:1, when he speaks of the "failings of the weak" where people in his day might have spoken of "heresy and crimes against the Holy Roman Church." Following Paul in Romans 15:1-3, Luther grounds this "bearing with" one another in Christ's "bearing" of our sin. Luther continues this line of

reasoning in his comments on St. Paul's "Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). According to Luther, the Apostle is modeling what he recommends: "If you have fallen, I would call it a temptation rather than a crime on your part. With the same gentleness you too must suppose it to have been a temptation whenever you see someone who has fallen; and you should not castigate your brother's fall with harsh names."

I find myself already called to an examination of conscience here. Have I done justice to, much less magnified, the faith and good works of people in the church whom I believe have gotten this issue wrong? I know of pastors living in "committed same-sex relationships" who are doing what I cannot describe otherwise than as heroic and exemplary ministry in a hard places. What should predominate in my attitude to them, the sin in the relationship or the heroism of the ministry? Should I magnify, make much of, the sin or the faith and good works? Luther seems clear.

More generally, should we jump to describe the assembly's actions as deliberate "heresy and crimes against the Holy Church" or should we regard them as "failings of the weak," a huge mistake by well-meaning but confused Christian brothers and sisters? What does it mean to "put the best construction on my neighbor's actions" (Small Catechism) in this situation? Again, Luther seems to point in a clear direction.

Luther goes on to Galatians 6:2. Those whose burdens we are to bear are both those whose faith is confused and those whose behavior is sinful. "Thus everywhere love finds something to bear, something to do." Now, "to love means to wish from the heart what is good for the other person, or to seek the other person's advantage." If no one fell into error or sin, where would love find its occasion? "... whom are you going to love, whose good are you going to desire, whose good are you going to seek?" It is indeed a flight from love when people "disdain having the uneducated, the useless, the hot-tempered, the foolish, the troublesome and the surly as companions in life..." "They are unwilling, with the bride, to be a lily among thorns (Song 2:2), or with Jerusalem to be situated in the midst of the heather, or with Christ to reign among enemies" (Psalm 110:2).

Luther summarizes: "Consequently, those who in order to become good flee the company of such people are doing nothing else but becoming the worst of all. And yet they do not believe this, because for the sake of love they are fleeing the true duty of love, and for the sake of salvation they are fleeing what is the epitome of salvation. For the church was always best when it was living among the worst people. For in bearing their burdens its love shone with a wonderful sheen..." After all, why did Moses not abandon the stiff-necked Israelites? Why did the prophets not abandon the idolatrous Israelite monarchs?

CONFLICT AND CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Luther then proceeds to apply this line of thought directly to the question of church fellowship, in a passage I will cite at length:

As a result, the separation of the Bohemians [i.e., the followers of Jan Hus] from the Roman Church can by no kind of excuse be defended from having been an impious thing and contrary to all the laws of Christ, because it stands in opposition to love, in which all laws are summed up. For this solitary allegation of theirs, that they defected because of fear of God and conscience, in order not to live among wicked priests and bishops — this is the greatest indictment of all against them. For if the bishops and priests or any persons at all were wicked, and if you were aglow with real love, you would not flee. No, even if you were at the ends of the ocean, you would come running to them and weep, warn, reprove, and do absolutely everything. And if you followed the teaching of the apostle, you would know that it is not benefits but burdens you have to bear. Therefore it is clear that the whole glory of this Bohemian love is mere sham and the light into which an angel of Satan transforms himself (2 Cor 11:14).

We, who are bearing the burdens and the truly intolerable abominations of the Roman Curia — are we too fleeing and seceding on this account? Perish the thought! Perish the thought! To be sure, we censure, we denounce, we plead, we warn; but we do not on this account split the unity of the spirit, nor do we become puffed up against it, since we know that love rises high above all things, not only above injuries suffered in bodily things but also above all the abominations of sins. A love that is able to bear nothing but the benefits done by another is fictitious.

The course of the Lutheran Reformation was broadly consistent with what Luther wrote here. The Lutherans struggled to maintain unity and asked only to be tolerated in preaching the pure word, and to that end they presented their Confession at Augsburg. From their perspective, at any rate, they did not leave; they were kicked out. Even in so polemical a document as the Smalcald Articles, Luther expressed willingness to accept bishops appointed by the Roman Antichrist “for the sake of love and unity” if only the pure preaching of the gospel was permitted. Note that he did not demand that Rome adopt evangelical doctrine, only that such doctrine be allowed.

In his exegesis of Galatians 6:3, Luther understand Paul to be giving a “very beautiful and very strong reason” for his teaching. Here too, it seems necessary to cite at length:

We are all equal, and we are all nothing. Why then does one man puff himself up against the other, and why do we not rather help one another? Furthermore, if there is anything in us, it is not our own, it is a gift of God. But if it is a gift of God, then it is entirely a debt one owes to love, that is, to the law of Christ. And if it is a debt one owes to love, then I must serve others with it not myself. Thus my learning is not my own; it belongs to the unlearned, and is the debt I owe them. My chastity is not my own; it belongs to those who commit sins of the flesh, and I am obligated to serve them through it by offering it to God for them, by sustaining and excusing them, and thus, with my respectability, veiling their shame before God and men, as Paul writes in 1 Cor. 12:23 that those parts of the body that are less honorable are covered by those that are more honorable. Thus my wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed. Thus my wealth belongs to the poor, my righteousness to sinners. For these are the forms of God of which we must empty ourselves, in order that forms of a servant may be in us (Phil. 2:6), because it is with

these qualities that we must stand before God and intervene on behalf of those who do not have them, as though clothed with someone else's garment, not unlike the priest, when, on behalf of those standing about, he sacrifices in a ritual garb that does not belong to him. But even before men we must, with the same love, render them service against their detractors and those who are violent towards them; for this is what Christ did for us. This is that furnace of the Lord in Zion (Is. 31:9), that tender compassion of the Father, who wants to tie us together with such inestimable virtue. By this badge, by this symbol, by this mark, we Christians are distinguished from all nations, in order that we may be God's private property, a priestly race, and a royal priesthood.

Luther presents us with a very different approach to issues of purity, defilement and fellowship than that which became prevalent in the wake of the Reformation, which was all "Get thee out of Babylon" and don't be defiled by going to church with heretics. Luther does not trivialize the difference between true and false teaching, right and sinful actions. False doctrine and sin are to be resisted and admonished. But the wrong of another is not seen as a reason to separate but a reason to draw near. My neighbor's wrong causes me to suffer — it is a burden for me to bear — and my better knowledge or better behavior are gifts given me for the sake precisely of my erring, sinning brother or sister.

I am far from having penetrated, in either my thinking or my practice, the depths that open up in Luther's reflections. And we may legitimately ask whether Luther himself always or even often modeled what he prescribed. But he has at the very least offered us an alternative to many more common ways of thinking about conflict and church fellowship. Personally, I must say, my conscience is caught in what he has written, and it is the background against which I've tried to think about how to live now, in the aftermath of the 2009 Assembly.

A QUESTION OF VOCATION AND DISCIPLESHIP

A few years ago, with such thoughts in the background, I told pastors who opposed CCM, "Until you see a big bad Episcopal bishop bearing down on you with a stick to force you to preach a false gospel, stay where you are and do your job." I now find the same counsel turning around on my own head. It seems to me that the key question is whether we are able to abide in Christ in the midst of the fallen, erring ELCA.

For pastors, that means: "Do these decisions prevent you from preaching the gospel and building up the people of God as you have been called to do?" "Prevent" is not the same as "make more difficult." Being "prevented" is not the same as being treated as a narrow-minded fossil, feeling alienated, and not seeing a bright future. Likewise, all of us as baptized believers are asked: "Do these decisions prevent you from hearing the gospel and being formed as a disciple of Jesus?" Here again, "prevent" is a word with a precise meaning. It is not the same as "make it harder." Being "prevented" is not the same as feeling unsupported and despised. If we can read the Bible we ought to know full well that such difficulties are just the sort of sandpaper God regularly uses to shape his people.

For myself, I cannot see that these decisions prevent me from continuing to do what I have been charged to do as a seminary teacher. If someone in authority were to tell me that I must suppress what I teach about marriage or the law of God because of these actions, then the situation would change. But that has not happened yet, and I do not know that it will ever happen. Likewise, I do not see that these decisions prevent me from hearing the gospel in my local congregation and being formed there as a disciple. Indeed, if I attend to what Luther says, the Assembly actions give me a great if painful opportunity to learn discipleship, to practice love. It seems rather a distraction to speculate about leaving when I have barely started to learn what I could about following Jesus right where I am.

To be sure, individuals have different vocations and different personal breaking-points (which is something different from a break-point as described above). The assembly actions are going to speed up the discernment process for some in the ELCA who have a genuine calling to enter another church. Others are going to find that they simply cannot handle life in this church any longer – they feel too much anger and betrayal, or they’re burnt out, depleted, and can’t find rest in these surroundings. No one should sit in judgment on the decisions faithful people make under these circumstances. I have only one piece of advice about this: if you leave because you love the church to which you’re going, and its ways and teachings, fine and good. But if you leave chiefly because you’re angry at what you’re leaving, you will be nothing but trouble to yourself and to your new church. That’s based not only on my own observations, but on what I hear from Roman Catholic and Orthodox pastors who’ve had dealings with converts. And one other thing: be sure that what you’re falling in love with actually exists on the ground, in typical congregations, and isn’t just a picture you’ve formed in your mind from reading books.

ON NOT BEING THE JUDGE

Most traditional Christians in the ELCA, myself very much included, have from time to time asked ourselves my friend’s question: “Is this the point at which we must judge that this branch of the church has died and withered?” But what does this question mean? The reference to John 15 suggests that the question has to do finally with God’s attitude to the ELCA: is the ELCA a branch of Christ the Vine that brings forth no good fruit, so that God “takes it away” (John 15:2), casts it forth so that it withers and is to be put in the fire and burned (John 15:6)?

If I recall John 15 correctly, there is nothing there about ME serving as vinedresser and deciding which branches are dead and which have hope. The vinedresser is the Father, not I. I do not see how John 15 gives me the possibility of changing positions and becoming the one who judges rather than one who is judged and pruned.

How could it ever be my place to make the judgment that God has rejected a fellowship of his baptized children? That God may indeed pass such judgments, I cannot read the prophets and deny. The holy church will abide on earth forever (Augsburg Confession) but it is nowhere guaranteed that it will forever abide with us. But even the prophets to

whom God's judgments were explicitly revealed – as they have not been to me – continued to live and suffer among the people; they did not leave for greener pastures.

Where I come into John 15 is with the charge to abide in Christ and in his love, and bear fruit that glorifies the Father. And that seems to have a lot to do with obeying Jesus' commandment to love one another. If I can remain where I am and still abide in Christ, still bear fruit that might mercifully be viewed as glorifying the Father, and still be learning to love, then I have plenty with which to occupy myself. And what's at stake is whether I get cast forth from the vine and wither, not whether other people do.

A FUTURE FOR TRADITIONALISTS IN THE ELCA

“Still,” it may be asked, “what is the point of staying on in a denomination that seems now to have committed itself irrevocably to a wrong path? What can traditionalists look forward to besides muttering on the sidelines as we dwindle and fade away?” Much depends, it seems to me, on what sort of success we think Christian witness should look for. Are traditionalists likely to rise up and sweep all before them in a grand triumph of orthodoxy? Doesn't seem likely, though God does strange things. I do recall something in the Bible about mustard-seeds. But are we promised that kind of victory if we're faithful? How about: “I” – as pastor or teacher – “stayed in the ELCA and as a result, in spite of everything, sinful human beings came to know the Lord who died for them and found hope and began to learn love”? How about: “I” — as baptized believer – “stayed in the ELCA and learned hard but important things about being a disciple of Jesus?” Would that be sufficient “point” for staying in the ELCA?

Here is my dream for the future of traditional Christians in the ELCA. Instead of thinking of ourselves primarily as dissenters and opposition, let us ask God to make of us a movement of repentance and renewal, so that the continuing presence of traditionalists in the ELCA will be a blessing and an adornment for the whole church. Let us traditionalists be the ones who live most deeply in the Scriptures, who bring forth the bread of life most richly from the Scriptures, who let themselves be most drastically challenged and remade by the word of God, who live most intensely in prayer, who are able to teach prayer to others. Let us traditionalists be in the forefront of ministry among the poor, the apparently hopeless, the despised; let us be the ones who volunteer to go to the hard places. Let our revisionist brothers and sisters, let homosexual persons in the church, be conscious when they meet us mostly of how much we care for them, how far we are willing to go for them, of the respect and honor with which we treat them, despite our clear disagreement with aspects of their teaching and/or life.

Having written the last paragraph, I have to say that it convicts me down to the ground, which strikes me as a sign that I might be on to something.