

Facing Reality in the ELCA

Remarks Delivered to the South Carolina Synod “Day of Holy Conversation”

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I want to begin by thanking Bishop Yoos for inviting me to speak here today. It is an honor to be present and to address this company, and to do so along with my colleague, Dr. Susan McArver.

I have been asked to speak about, first, my greatest concerns in the wake of the Churchwide Assembly decisions last August, and second, the way forward to faithful ministry in the South Carolina Synod. At least *one* of my greatest concerns is that we move forward with a realistic acknowledgment of our actual situation in the ELCA at the beginning of this second decade of the third millennium.

The ELCA changed last August in more fundamental ways than perhaps we generally realize. We didn't only adopt a social statement and two policy changes. Those actions brought about something much more momentous: they altered the very character of the Christian fellowship embodied in the ELCA and its institutions and practices.

To be blunt: since August, the ELCA is internally in a state of *impaired communion*. Let me be clear what that means. I am not taking the Jeremiah 51 view of the ELCA, as though the word of the Lord to us was: “Flee out of the midst of Babylon, and deliver every man his soul: be not cut off in her iniquity...” (v. 6). Impaired does not mean abolished but diminished, weakened, damaged. There is significant space between *full* communion and *no* communion; the result of the CWA actions is that there is no longer *full* communion, full visible Christian unity, within the ELCA.

Some years ago, in an important essay in ecumenical theology,¹ my colleague Michael Root proposed a sort of practical definition of a church-dividing difference. A difference among Christians is church-dividing, he suggested, when it prevents them from carrying out the mission

¹ Michael Root, “Identity and Difference: The Ecumenical Problem,” in: Bruce Marshall, ed., *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1990). 165-190.

of the gospel together without violation of conscience on someone's part.² When you and I cannot practically do the gospel-business of the church together without one of us yielding on a matter of conscience, then our differences are, in the nature of the case, "church-dividing." In this light, I think we simply have to admit that in August, the ELCA welcomed a church-dividing difference into its own common life, and is now struggling with how to contain it.

This wasn't of course what was supposed to happen. The "official" view was that our differences over sexual morality would be non-divisive, if everyone would just be reasonable and remember that our true unity is "in Christ" and not in moral teaching. Everyone's "bound conscience" would be respected, the sexuality issues would go away, and the ELCA could march off into a glorious future to a rousing chorus of "Lift High the Cross."

But this was never going to work. The official assessment implies that unity "in Christ" is located in some ideal realm, and need never be lived out down on the messy terrain of this world, where people live and make choices and seek for love and affection and identity, where pastors counsel anguished people and children are taught the Ten Commandments. It assumed that we could pursue the mission of the gospel without ever getting involved with questions about what constitutes a good life, without bothering with the way people live beyond, perhaps, exhorting them to have a loving attitude.

In the real world, pastors and other Christians do counsel anguished people wrestling with desire and emotional need, and doing so is not external to the mission of the gospel. In the real world, children are taught what sort of life is good and pleasing to God, and what the meaning of His commandments is. In the real world, preaching the gospel involves proclaiming in public and private what grace it is that God has given us in Christ, what strength God promises us in the struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. And since last August, with respect to a very significant dimension of human life, the ELCA no longer has agreement on how to do such things together. Instead we have acknowledged the legitimacy of several mutually incompatible words that might be spoken to the anguished person seeking counsel, to the child awaiting instruction in the commandments of God, to the inquirer asking what goods God gives us strength in Christ to pursue and what temptations help to resist.

As a traditionalist,³ I have to realize that significant elements of what traditionalists would say about sexuality in those settings is regarded in good faith by other Christians in the ELCA as cruel and destructive. They could not say "Amen" to my counsel and proclamation concerning the matters at issue any more than I could say it to theirs. The ELCA has now said that these differences are to co-exist within our shared institutional framework. And to that extent, which is not at all trivial, we do not have full communion any longer, we can no longer pursue the mission of the gospel together without violating someone's conscience.

² This is my somewhat rough paraphrase. Root's own formulation of a test for consensus between churches is worth citing: "Can they perform together regularly and in a comprehensive range of situations the activities either considers essential to the identity of the church as church without violating either's understanding of the identity of the church?" (181).

³ I use the term "traditionalist" in this context to refer to those who affirm the traditional Christian teaching on the matters at issue in the Churchwide Assembly actions, not to suggest that those who advocate revising that teaching lack all commitment to the Christian tradition.

I know that there are many Lutherans who believe that things should be otherwise. They point to Augsburg Confession, Article VII, and say, “It is enough to agree in the gospel! And we all accept the doctrine of justification by faith! To ask for more is legalism!” But this begs the question of what is involved in an agreement in the gospel. Is the gospel simply a formula about justification, faith, and works? Or is it the point at which the whole rich mystery of God’s redemptive way with humankind comes to a point and intrudes savingly into our lives? The existence of Articles I-VI of the Augsburg Confession suggests the latter view. Can we agree in the gospel without agreeing that “the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the unity of the divine essence and the three persons is true and to be believed without any doubting”? The Augsburg Confession doesn’t think so; see Article I. Can we agree in the gospel without agreeing that the faith that receives justification “is bound to bring forth good fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God”? The Augustana doesn’t think that either; see Article VI. But how is any non-trivial agreement on Article VI possible if we have substantial disagreements about what works God commands?

There is a Reformation slogan that sums up the impossibility here: “What the law demands, the gospel bestows.” The law demands righteousness, the gospel bestows righteousness, and it does so by bringing Christ to us and us to Christ. He is the living fulfillment of the law, the one in whom all that the law requires is fully and unquestionably realized. His righteousness covers our sin, when we become one with him by faith, but at the same time, he lives in us, which means that righteousness dwells in us, alive and triumphant, and we begin to live a new kind of life. But if the gospel bestows what the law demands, then without agreeing substantially on what the law demands, we cannot agree on what the gospel bestows. And pushed to the end, such disagreement will easily turn into disagreement about Jesus Christ and his saving righteousness.

This is, I have to say, something that worries me. During the controversies that accompanied the formation of the ELCA, what had been differences about church and ministry at the level of instinct and attitude got worked out as formulated oppositions of doctrine, setting the stage for the great Lutheran civil war of the ‘90’s over the Lutheran-Episcopal agreement. I fear that our present controversy has an even more divisive potential – that as we continue to debate issues of sexuality, ecclesial communion, and the gospel, we will find ourselves articulating ever more serious differences about the gospel itself, as attitudes and tendencies are brought into the light and stated as explicit beliefs. Clarity is a good thing, but these are sorry circumstances under which to achieve it. And yet it isn’t possible to forbid people on either side to think through their beliefs and try to understand the reasons for their disagreements with other Christians.

In sum, this is our condition: our agreement in the gospel is not only impaired but further imperiled; our ability to carry out the mission of the gospel together has been seriously damaged and diminished. The question before us as a denomination is whether it is possible to endure this impairment without breaking communion altogether, either by public splits or by large numbers of congregations and church going practically into a kind of “internal exile.” I believe that maintaining our communion is going to be quite difficult. Quite contrary, I’m sure, to the intentions of most of the delegates who voted for them, the Assembly actions have guaranteed that our disagreements about sexual morality are going to be central to our denominational life for the foreseeable future. The institutional problem of managing this institutionalized internal rupture is going to engage a great deal of our attention and energy for a long, long time. The deep longing that this all would just go away that seems to animate the broad center of the ELCA pastorate (and with which I fully sympathize) is, I believe, going to be frustrated.

One way to mitigate this outcome would be for those who affirm the Assembly actions, who are the primary power-holders in the ELCA at large, to marginalize the traditionalists and wait them out. Confine respect for “bound conscience” to the congregational level; define it as meaning only that a congregation cannot be compelled to bless same-sex unions or call a pastor who is living in such a union. Make the revisionist position normative at every other level in our ecclesiastical pyramid, so that bishops and synods are denied any option but affirmation. Let instructional materials and denominational literature uniformly promote acceptance of same-sex unions. Proceed in this way, and some congregations and many lay people and pastors will leave; more will opt for grumbling in internal exile; over time many initially resistant congregations will go along with the prevailing winds; the composition of the pastorate will change to reflect these pressures; in a generation, a leaner but more united ELCA will be free to go full steam ahead as a fully “progressive” mainline denomination.

If, in fact, the supporters of the Assembly actions value their existing though impaired communion with those who contest those actions, and wish to maintain it, they will have to be willing to deal with a lot of complication and change. In the long run, I don’t see how it can be done without structural changes in the ELCA, though I am not organizationally gifted enough to envision those changes concretely. But if traditionalists are not simply to be marginalized, if they are not to be driven down to the congregational level and left to twist in the wind, if the parity among the diverse positions of which the Presiding Bishop speaks is to be a reality, then traditionalists are going to have to be granted some institutionally concrete presence in the church beyond the congregational level. And this is going to have to somehow affect candidacy and many other aspects of our polity.

I fear that I have not seen much – indeed I’m not aware of any – energy exerted from the majority side towards the end of maintaining communion with the minority. When proposals were made in Chicago that would have excluded the traditionalist conscience from the entire candidacy process, I did not hear loud voices of supporters of the Assembly actions saying publicly, “No, we don’t want to marginalize our traditionalist sisters and brothers in that way.”⁴ If I have missed someone, I apologize, but voices speaking in that way have certainly been easy to miss.

I hear instead a great deal of scolding about the bad manners and overheated rhetoric of traditionalists. These are certainly real enough, though not universal. I have counseled traditionalists to beware the poisonous affects of anger and resentment, and I will continue to do so. But the demand for civility is a time-honored ploy by the powerful, deliberate or not, to control or exclude the less powerful: “You don’t get to speak unless you speak politely, and we decide what’s polite.” This is a distraction from the far more significant question: *What will the powerful do with their power?* The future of the ELCA will in large measure be determined by the degree to which those who support the Assembly actions are practically committed to retaining fellowship with those who reject them. Traditionalists should be ready to acknowledge and respect such commitment when it appears, and that will require spiritual discipline and self-criticism on our part. *But the traditionalists do not have the power to decide whether space will be provided for them in the ELCA.*

⁴ More recent proposals have retreated from this and would grant Candidacy Committees greater freedom of conscience. But who cannot see that a church in which prospective candidates for the ministry are liable to be told by synodical committees, “Try that Synod over there – they might take you” is a seriously divided church?

This is, as far as I can see, the situation we are in. What can we do, apart from these large issues of ecclesial communion and ecclesiastical structure, to proceed faithfully here in the SC Synod? It depends, I suppose, on what we take the *meaning* of our present disagreements to be. Is the problem simply that those *other* people have got it wrong and are being stubborn about it, or does the very fact that we have this intractable division arising in our midst suggest that we *all* have a problem?

My own view is that we have profound troubles that we cannot escape just by getting homosexuality right – whatever we take “right” to be. For reasons that are too complex and various to admit assigning blame, I believe that the ELCA is suffering from a general malaise along with other so-called mainline denominations. We lack energy. Despite the best of intentions, our message is often pretty thin – too often alternating between a small gospel of therapeutic comfort and a soft legalism of vaguely-imagined service. Jesus figures in our speech too often as either the consoler who makes us feel better about life’s stresses and hardships or the example we ought to be following as we too go out and redeem the world.

There is of course nothing wrong with coping with stress and sorrow or there is certainly nothing wrong with helping those in need. But it seems to me that the New Testament’s proclamation of the Savior says much more and offers much more than we are often able to receive or to express. I can’t help feeling that one factor underlying a great deal of the parish conflict, pastoral burnout, and tepid commitment among us is something as simple as boredom. We can’t quite get access to those treasures of wisdom and knowledge said to be hidden in Christ, that fullness said to dwell in him “bodily” (Col 2:2-3, 9), and so the adventure of faith becomes a routine of religion.

I can’t prove that this diagnosis is accurate. I present it with reluctance. I fear that I may have offended many of you just by saying these things, and I fear even more seeming to discount the labors of good people whose sincerity and hard work I really do respect. My own self-examination by no means exempts me from the malaise I have just described. If it *is* true, things haven’t gotten that way because someone or some group was bad or stupid or didn’t care. These things often creep up on a person or a community like the fabled frog submerged in a pot of water that is slowly heated until the frog slips gradually into a mortal stupor. And it’s a sometimes unpleasant part of a theologian’s job to check the water temperature from time to time.

But if there is *any* truth in this diagnosis certain conclusions follow. We need to start thinking “outside the pot.” We need to *get out* of the pot and plunge into the deep end. We need first of all to *stop taking for granted that we know what the gospel is* and focus together intently on fundamentals – word, prayer, repentance, and sacrifice. We need to learn new ways of reading the Bible that give us access to those treasures of wisdom in Christ, since the ways we’re reading it now evidently do not. If we want to inherit the kingdom we need to lose confidence in ourselves, in our ability to manage and program ministry and mission, even in our so-called Lutheran identity,⁵ and join with the poor in spirit to whom the kingdom has been promised.

⁵ Note that our “Lutheran identity” is not the same as our Lutheran *heritage*. Our Lutheran identity is what we have *done* with our Lutheran heritage, the way in which we have received it. One can have plenty of confidence in the heritage of Lutheranism without having any particular confidence that we have received it fully and without distortion.

I don't know how to do these things concretely; I'm groping in my own life and I certainly can't tell the Synod how to proceed. Furthermore, I don't know how much help can be offered anyway by institutional measures, by programs and initiatives that a synod could put together. Spiritual renewal is notoriously hard to program, and usually starts unpredictably in some unconsidered corner, some Galilee out of which no one expects much good to come.

But it wouldn't hurt for a Synod somewhere to just come out and say: "You know, if we've gotten ourselves in this big a hole, we've probably all missed something important." A Synod-wide Day of Repentance and Prayer would seem to me an eminently *sensible* response to the situation in the ELCA, not in the sense of repenting the Churchwide Assembly actions (however much I, as a traditionalist, would like that in principle) but rather acknowledging before God and one another that whoever is right, we have nonetheless all been found wanting together. And it wouldn't hurt to create spaces, not for endless "dialogue" about recent events, though some of that is undoubtedly necessary, but for testing those deep waters of Scripture, gospel, and prayer into which we need so badly to plunge.

Let me end by repeating a challenge that I have put forth on many occasions in many different settings in recent years, and never found a taker. I came to teach at Southern Seminary in 1988 – literally a lifetime ago for many of my students. In all those years, no one in the ELCA has ever asked me, as a theologian of the church, to come and talk to them about the Lord Jesus Christ. I find that odd, and not a little disturbing. I don't say that the South Carolina Synod needs for *me* to talk to them about Jesus – I'm definitely not angling for more to do. But wouldn't it be lovely if the South Carolina Synod became known in the ELCA for scheduling as many "events" and programs designed solely and specifically, without any other agenda, to focus attention on Jesus Christ as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, as it does for stewardship, church growth, and conflict management. Come, Holy Spirit! And thank you for your patience.