

ELCA Policy Changes – Just the Tip of the Iceberg
By Pastor Donald Allman

Do you know what it is that makes an iceberg so dangerous? The major portion of it is under the surface. The really dangerous part is hidden out of sight. People tend to focus on the part that sticks out of the water, and they miss where the real danger lies.

I believe that same thing happens in looking at the actions of the ELCA Church Wide Assembly (CWA) from last August. The sexuality issues made the headlines and attract all the attention. They are like the tip of the iceberg. The ELCA wants sexuality to be the issue because it is emotionally charged. They can use that emotion to make anyone who is opposed to their actions seem judgmental and unloving. It also keeps us from discussing the more dangerous issues.

Just like with the iceberg, one has to look beneath the surface to see the real danger. I believe that we have let the ELCA define the subject of discussion for too long. Now it is time to raise the issues of real danger to our church. In this paper I will raise what I believe are the issues that we should be focusing on as we discern our future relationship with the ELCA. These issues include Biblical authority, mission, organizational structure, theology, and ecumenical relations.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Biblical authority and Biblical interpretation are central to the divisions in the ELCA. Our confessions state that we “accept the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith and life.” For Orthodox Christians this means that the Bible is **the authority**, not just one authority. Inspired means, “God-Breathed”. God’s Holy Spirit guided the writing of the Bible and it is the Word of truth from God. Some argue that the Bible is the work of the authors and bear the cultural bias of the authors. They disregard traditional understanding of the scriptures and seek to find a new understanding based on their insights and knowledge. In doing so they undercut the authority of God’s Word. If some parts are questioned and discarded then the whole has lost its authority.

Two basic approaches to Biblical interpretation are exegesis and eisegesis. These terms describe the process pastors and theologians use when studying a text of the Bible. In seminary I was taught exegesis as the proper method of Bible study. Exegesis is digging into a text in an attempt to bring out its truth. To do this properly one needs to set aside one’s own bias, as best as one can, and let the text speak to us. We sometimes use Biblical criticism tools to help us understand the way that the original hearers would have received the Word. We compare our findings with 2000 years of interpretation by fellow Christians. Doing this protects us from twisting the scriptures to our biases. In this method one’s experiences in this world are judged by the scriptures. God’s Word is the light shining His truth on us.

Eisegesis, the other approach, starts with ones own beliefs and experiences. One brings these “truths” into the text. If the traditional interpretation of a text does not fit their “truths”, then they need to discover a new interpretation that will fit their beliefs. In this method the Scriptures are judged by ones experience and beliefs. Ones own truth shines into the Scriptures. This is a dangerous practice because our knowledge and understanding are flawed by sin. We can not judge God’s Word. In the first temptation the serpent asked Eve, “Did God really say...”, and the scripture twisting began. Today there is a strong voice asking, “Does the Bible really say...”, with the implication that for 2000 years we have not really understood.

In a culture that has trouble believing in absolute truths, we as God’s children are called to believe in the Bible as truth from God. Even if we find that this Word is counter cultural or politically incorrect we still need to stand on the Word. If there is no absolute truth and no supreme authority, then what will be the basis for life in community? We will go back to the main sin in the book of Judges. A generation rose up that did not know God, and each did what is right in his own eyes. Our society is already showing the destructive results of this way of thinking. Violent crime is increasing and people are showing no conscience, because there is no belief in an absolute truth of right and wrong. Without God’s Word, how does anyone decide what is right and wrong? We would each be left to our own self-centered desires and subject to the will of those strong enough to hold a position of power.

MISSIONS

In the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus gives the disciples and us, the mission for His church. We are to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching all peoples. This needs to be the central function of our congregation, our synod, and our national church body. I believe that the ELCA has replaced this central mission. Over the past few years the ELCA has spent over a million dollars on developing a social statement on human sexuality. During this time funding for missionaries has been cut, churches have closed and the ELCA has declined in membership. Now the ELCA has called for more social studies on genetics and feminism. These studies are not carried out by trained theologians, but by teams that reflect politically correct quotas for balanced gender, race, lay, and clergy. I do not believe that the statements that have been produced are based on Biblical authority nor speak for the majority within the ELCA.

While the church can provide an important voice on social issues, that voice needs to be Biblically based and in line with our Lutheran Confessions. This is the work of theologians. The work of the church needs to be the mission given to us by Christ. This mission of making disciples should receive the priority in the spending of time and resources. Discipleship, teaching and evangelism need to be central in what we are as the church.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The ELCA claims to have three expressions of church. The expressions are congregations, synods, and church wide. The actions of the policy changes and the passing of the sexuality social statement at the Church Wide Assembly, shows clearly that only the Church Wide expression is recognized. The majority of the responses by individuals and congregations were against the passage of the social statement. The conference of bishops asked that any action on changes would require a two-thirds vote. All this was disregarded as the CWA pushed forward. There is no requirement for confirmation of their actions by either synod or congregational vote. This means that the 1,000 delegates to CWA get to make decisions with no checks or balances. In addition they are instructed that they are delegates not representatives, so they can vote their own beliefs disregarding the synods that elected them as delegates. Some special interest groups lobbied the delegates prior to the assembly to influence their votes. An example is Lutherans Concerned who received a grant of \$250,000 from the Arcus Foundation to be used in an effort to change ELCA teaching and policy on marriage and homosexual behavior. Church issues should not be decided by a “political process” with lobbying and outside funding.

Part of the Reformation was in protest to a structure in the church that was top down. As Protestants we believe that authority belongs to all the believers as the church. We have called pastors and bishops for church order, not to subvert the authority of the church. I believe that the majority of the people who seek to attend the CWA are on the extreme sides of the issues. I believe that many attend to advance their own agendas. Therefore I believe that our structure of making important decisions is extremely flawed. I would like to see a requirement of congregational voting to ratify CWA actions.

THEOLOGY

Theology is the study of God. Theology is meant to help us better understand God and His will for our lives. Good theology is grounded in the Scriptures and should be at the foundation of any social statement that the church produces. As the church we should speak God’s Word into the issues of society.

Recent ELCA social efforts have relied too much on emotions, science, and social norms. If we are just repeating what others are saying then our voice is not needed. The unique thing that the church has to offer to the world is the Word of God speaking through the Bible.

ECUMENICAL RELATIONS

Since the CWA policy changes our national bishop has been voicing a call for unity. We need to remember that as the ELCA we are but a minor part of the Lutheran family. We are even a smaller part of the Christian family around the world. With the actions of the CWA we stepped out of unity with the majority of Christians in the world. Lutheran bishops from Ethiopia and Tanzania have sanctioned us for the actions taken. Other church bodies are turning away from relationships with the ELCA. These ecumenical

relationships took decades to build. Bishop Hanson's call to unity within the ELCA is becoming a united front against the majority of Christians around the world. I believe in the oneness of the Body of Christ in the world. I believe in unity among believers. But, that unity needs to be based on agreement with God's Word not on agreement with the actions of one CWA.

CONCLUSION

The process in reaching the policy changes at CWA and the structure that supports this process is far more dangerous than the policies themselves. There is a need for major changes in the ELCA. I do not believe that these changes are possible because the structure itself is preventative of such change. There is also a need to return the ELCA to Orthodoxy. We need a firm stand on Scripture and our Lutheran confessions. We also need to step back into line with Christian tradition. We should continue to pray that this may happen. At the same time, we need to seek the path for our congregation which will allow us to carry out the mission of Christ faithfully. Please be faithful in asking for God's guidance as we make some very important decisions about our future.

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