

## **The ELCA Abandons the Reformation! AN UNLIKELY FORTRESS SLIDES AND CRUMBLES**

*by Dan Hooper*

It is not surprising that Christian churches have a problem with homosexuality. Their negative stance has deep roots in the soil of anti-homosexual sentiments, even though both Scripture and Christian tradition also are grounded in acceptance and permissiveness for same-gender affections.

What is surprising, however, is that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America exhibits such a problem, given its relatively brief existence, the official positions of its predecessor bodies, and its self-avowed doctrines have their very tap roots in the Gospel and in the *Book of Concord*, the 16<sup>th</sup> century confessional documents of the Lutheran Reformation.

**We are a church which is built upon faith in the grace of God.** Theologian Carl Braaten has described Justification by Grace through Faith as the article of faith by which the Church stands or falls. Our teaching about justification centers us in the Gospel, not in the Law, and therefore limits our endorsement of Law to two primary theological uses: to bring human beings to the knowledge of sin, and to order human society. However, Law cannot be a norm or guide for daily living. When the Old Testament proscriptions of homosexual expression are read, for example, they are not to be used as either binding upon or guidance for gay and lesbian Christians. We live under grace.

In some circles ruling out this so-called “Third Use of the Law” would start a complex and unfruitful argument between Lutherans over various aspects of our 450-year-old theological distinctions. Suffice it to say here that in prior controversies, Lutherans have never irrevocably settled a dispute by appeal to the normative Third Use of the law, and never give it preemptive doctrinal stature.

Several examples come to mind. The ordination of women could have been completely ruled out (“precluded”) by an appeal to biblical law, yet the ELCA’s “predecessor church bodies”,

the American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church in America, and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, did not do that. The possibility of divorce, also, could easily be forbidden by scriptural law, and has not been.

But, church bodies must have some norms and rules to provide institutional cohesiveness. As always, it seems a respectable appeal which is made to the unity of the church for the benefit of the Gospel and the glory of God. The Lutheran Reformation, of course, weighed this same concept carefully, because much of what it set out to change or reform caused more immediate disunity than unity. As now, the Catholic Church of the 16th Century had built a body of church law governing conditions for ordained service in the church. But because of the Lutherans’ emphasis upon grace, justification, and our liberty in the Gospel, the Augsburg Confession (Article VII) proclaimed in very simple terms: “It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.”

In this Article the Reformation church politely deflected other criteria which some believed were essential for the unity of the church. In Luther’s day, there were many, and an endless stream of criticism poured down upon the Reformer for the disunity which reform would cause. Yet Article VII has stood the test of time. No Lutheran church body today dares to call its simplicity and Gospel-centeredness irrelevant or inapplicable.

But the events of the last dozen years — from the expulsion of two congregations in San Francisco, to the expulsion of gifted pastors from the ELCA’s clergy roster including Rev. Bradley Schmeling on July 2, 2007 — betray the church’s very confessional heritage. The choice the ELCA has made in its short history to defer theological wisdom and impose legalistic order has had a significant corrosive effect on its theological

integrity and therefore on its missional life.

Yes, there should be good order. But when order *rules* doctrine, and structure oppresses the Gospel, there is more than slight cause for alarm. It is like two very different people with differing intentions and differing personalities, in a car together. The problem arises when the wrong one is behind the steering wheel.

Down through time, thousands of church rules have come and gone. Thanks be to God, most of the more odious rules have gone. In the Western Church, immediately before the Reformation, the most odious rule laid upon the clergy was the requirement of perpetual celibacy. Not surprisingly, those Christians who are ignorant of the history of Christian celibacy are more likely to attempt to resurrect it as a “solution” to the gay/lesbian “problem”. But bringing back a bad old idea does not make it good. If it was odious to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformers, it is no less odious today.

Celibacy is defined as the state of being unmarried, usually with the implication of sexual virginity. In its earliest manifestations from the second century onward, Christian celibacy was the state of *voluntary* renunciation of marriage and family life. It advanced quickly among those believers who enthusiastically yearned for the end times and the return of Jesus Christ. Celibacy has some scriptural foundation, but not much. Although Paul commends it, he is emphatic in his rejection of *any* requirement of it.

But within a few decades, voluntary celibacy came to be regulated, and its adherents were “ordered”—to aid the organization of institutions. This might have served well in an era when the secular structure of the Roman Empire was undergoing upheaval, but it also robbed Christian celibacy of its voluntary character and Christian life of its liberty. The social freedom and religious experimentation of the first Christians who renounced marriage and family was curtailed. Worse, as Orders adopted *rules* of celibacy, it was quickly forgotten that celibacy was considered a *charism*, a spiritual gift of the Holy Spirit—not given to everyone but only to a small minority of people.

Further, we should note that in many discussions of celibacy, the concepts of chastity, fidelity, virginity, purity, and holiness are often confused or mixed in appropriately. And for most of Christian history, the open discussion of human sexuality was wholly suppressed. So the ordering and structuring of celibacy essentially *glossed over* enormous and complex issues.

For much of the first millennium, celibacy was not required of priests or even bishops (cf. 1 Timothy 3:2); apostles and bishops were known to have wives. There is also evidence of women who served as apostles and bishops of the church. But celibacy found a fertile soil in monasticism, not in towns and cities or within parish churches and among “secular” clergy. To this day, Eastern Orthodox tradition permits married men to enter the priesthood and remain married, but limits the office of bishop to those priests who are either monks or widowed. In all this tradition there is little to suggest that sexual abstinence is particularly God-pleasing or necessary for priestly service before the Altar.

In the Western Church, however, regulation took a far different, and meaner direction. Beginning in 3rd Century Spain, clerical celibacy was required, first in local settings and then regional synods, the records of which admit a large dose of misogynistic prejudice and disdain for all forms of intimacy as if they were impure and unholy. Somehow, virginity was thought to be meritorious, and provide an additional dose of saintliness and holiness. St. Augustine, in North Africa, imported anti-sexual asceticism from (heretical) Manicheism into Christianity, and contributed authoritatively to its enforcement.

Nonetheless, centuries passed before the Vatican attempted world-wide adherence to a rule of celibacy at the Lateran Councils in the 12th Century. It was strongly resisted, especially in England, Germany and Moravia right up to the eve of the “Lutheran” Reformation.

Martin Luther began writing against celibacy as early as 1520, in “To the Christian Nobility”:

I advise anyone henceforth being ordained a priest or anything else that he in no wise

vow to the bishop that he will remain celibate. On the contrary, he should tell the bishop that he has no right whatsoever to require such a vow, and that it is a devilish tyranny to make such a demand. But if anyone is compelled to say, or even wants to say, "so far as human frailty permits," as indeed many do, let him frankly interpret these same words in a negative manner to mean "I do not promise chastity." For human frailty does not permit a man to live chastely, but only the strength of angels and the power of heaven. In this way he should keep his conscience free of all vows.

Luther's advised remedy to individuals for the torture of conscience was to disregard the church law. Further, he indicts the church itself (specifically, the pope) in its complicity with sin for setting up a situation where sin is the only choice open to an individual with an ordinary human sexual drive. Referring to the demand of a vow of celibacy, Luther wrote:

The pope has as little power to command this as he has to forbid eating, drinking, the natural movement of the bowels, or growing fat. Therefore, no one is bound to keep it, but the pope is responsible for all the sins which are committed against this ordinance, for all the souls which are lost, and for all the consciences which are confused and tortured because of this ordinance.

What happened next sounds strangely familiar to those who remember the national media attention which erupted in the fall of 1987 when three Lutheran seminary students came out as gay men: Shortly after writing "To the Nobility", Luther felt compelled to return to the issues of celibacy and vows by the circumstances which erupted around him. Three priests from the dioceses of Magdeburg and Meissen decided to marry. One of them, Bartholomew Bernhardt, was his former student/ and now a priest in a village near Wittenberg. Luther's lay colleague, Philip Melanchthon may have saved Bernhardt's life by

writing the defense brief for a commission of canon lawyers whom the Elector Frederick appointed to examine the occurrence.<sup>1</sup>

In 1521, Luther began to write his *Theses on Vows*, basing the theological arguments on justification by faith, and contending that vows which contradict that doctrine are not binding. Monastic life, he believed could lead to a perversion of the Gospel. Late in the year, Luther completed the first edition of *The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*<sup>2</sup> which he developed—as counsel to the monks deserting their monasteries—in five major themes:

they are not commanded by God's word, but run counter to it;

- a. they conflict with faith; if taken as necessary to salvation, they are a denial of Christ and the embracing of work-righteousness (and as such, Luther declared them null and void);
- b. compulsory and perpetual vows are a violation of Christian freedom;
- c. they violate the First Commandment; and
- d. they are contrary to common sense and reason; and because no dispensations from celibacy were allowed, such vows have caused great torture to body and soul.

In his argument that vows actually run counter to the Word of God, Luther expressed his belief that Jesus and Paul did not commend, but instead discouraged, virginity or celibacy, both because it is a matter of choice and because it is falsely used to support the idea of Christian life in a "state of

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<sup>1</sup>. "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows", *The Christian in Society, I, LW 44*, p. 246, n. 6.

Melanchthon advanced the argument that priests could not keep a vow of celibacy, and that canon law actually made exceptions in such cases. Luther's advice to Melanchthon, based on 1 Timothy 4:3, was that celibacy was not binding on Christians. But Luther was still "skeptical about Melanchthon's argument based on the frailty of the flesh."

<sup>2</sup>. "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows", *LW: The Christian in Society, I*, pp. 244-400.

perfection".<sup>3</sup> The vow of celibacy is in any case rooted in the error of works righteousness, rather than in absolute trust and faith in the Gospel alone:

If you obey the gospel, you ought to regard celibacy as a matter of free choice; if you do not hold it as a matter of free choice, you are not obeying the gospel. . . . A vow of chastity, therefore, is diametrically opposed to the gospel.<sup>4</sup>

The reformer continued to develop his thinking and writing against celibacy, in 1523 for example, in the wedding sermon for his good friend Wenceslas Link. Luther himself, under the monastic double vow, broke them in 1525 and married, “without warning”, in the midst of a supper party for friends. In the *Large Catechism* of 1529 he again went after monastic vows of chastity, and yet again in 1530 in his *Exhortation to All Clergy Assembled at Augsburg*.

Of course, the reformers who did marry laid themselves open for criticism that they embraced theological views that favored their own worldly indulgences. But the radical teaching against celibacy and in favor of a priest’s right to have a lawful spouse were not to be a novelty or fad soon to pass. The Schwabach Articles and the so-called Torgau Articles continued this theme. From the antecedent articles written in early 1530 the Wittenberg theologians insisted that two things must change, as conditions necessary to maintain unity and prevent schism:

Bishops must stop requiring vows of celibacy and of the renunciation of evangelical doctrine at ordination; and in the same vein, the pope must give the gospel free course. If these two conditions remain unfulfilled, the supply of clergy will decline; evangelicals will look for other forms of ordination and installation.<sup>5</sup>

The Lutheran confessional books—officially adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America as expressing its true doctrinal position—are stridently and implacably against required celibacy. Articles XXIII and XXVIII of both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology, for example, identify at least a dozen distinct reasons why it is inappropriate for the Christian community.

Celibacy is a charism, given only to a few, and cannot be demanded of those who lack this gift; vows undertaken without the charism do not augment human ability.

- Vows have been improperly extracted from young people unprepared to make a lifelong commitment, and should be relaxed.
- There are legitimate needs for the physical body and its care, including “natural love” and the hunger for relationship, which should not be confused with lust.
- Forced celibacy leads to shameful excesses and disgraceful scandals because of burning passions. There has been terrible alienation of many people because of the severity of the church.
- The church has no right to demand celibacy or forbid marriage and the exercise of natural love. The power of bishops does not include setting requirements contrary to the Gospel which “burden Christendom with the bondage of the law.”
- Requiring celibacy is against the majority of historical precedent in the church.
- The Bible does not require celibacy but upholds marriage.
- The church insists on celibacy not from solid theological ground, but uses theological language to conceal its real domination and demand for obedience to its authority. In fact, the requirement of celibacy is theologically flawed and in error.
- The church has no business attempting to break up loving relationships of long standing.
- The penalties of the church have been shameful, and have upheld and reinforced unjust civil penalties.
- Vows are always to be voluntary. Requiring celibacy is against Christian freedom and has

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<sup>3</sup>. *Ibid*, pp. 261f.

<sup>4</sup>. *Ibid*, p. 262.

<sup>5</sup>. Maurer, p 59; cf. p. 63-65.

burdened the consciences of many.

- Neither celibacy nor a vow of celibacy merits justification, nor is the life under such a vow a “state of perfection.”

It goes almost without saying that there are striking parallels to virtually every one of these arguments in the experience of gay and lesbian people. Yes, Luther was attempting to release priests from so-called chastity for the *heterosexually*-married life. And yes, he had no understanding of homosexuality or sexual orientation as they are now understood. But Luther and the Reformers examined the broad range of issues which the institutional church militantly tried to sweep aside imperially. They correctly understood not only the fundamental nature of human sexuality but also the need for intimate affective relationships. And even more important, they understood the relationship of humanity to the redeeming and liberating Gospel itself. As the church today struggles to reassess homosexuality, and in some corners dares to suggest that loving relationships between members of the same gender are good and “godly”, it is daring nothing more radical (and nothing more roundly condemned at the time) than the Reformation movement dared in rejecting required celibacy and in demanding the right of priests to enjoy the conjugal life.

**The “Cure.”** What would Luther have recommended, then, had he understood the deeply rooted sexual orientation of some people toward the same-sex, rather than the “opposite” sex? We can only speculate. But certainly not celibacy! We know that, instead of celibacy, he recommended what has been called The Cure. He saw Christian *heterosexual* marriage as a “cure” for fornication and for the sordid practices which apparently took place inside monastery walls.

The strange emergence of “ex-gay” ministries in the last several decades is actually nothing new. The leaders of these ministries use very similar language, believing that through prayer and therapy to help lesbians and gay men learn appropriate gender roles such as applying make-up and changing the motor oil in the car, these women and men will be “cured” of homosexuality.

This “cure” idea served as a *de facto* Lutheran “position” about homosexuality for centuries, until a fuller portrait of human experience came to light in our times. Until quite recently, it would be customary for a Lutheran pastor to counsel any young parishioner, who might ever-so-secretly confess to homosexual “inclinations”, that he or she *get married—take the cure*.

Perhaps this works for a few. But in my counseling experience, the “cure” actually caused untold misery for those who entered heterosexual marriages. The “cure” multiplied their personal agony into suffering and pain for spouse and children. To pretense and dishonesty were added indiscretion and infidelity. And to them attached fear, loss of self-esteem and bitterness.

For lesbians and gay men who came to a discernment of their sexual orientation late—after already entering a heterosexual marriage—the marital vow was just as impossible and dishonest as the vow of chastity of young people in medieval monasteries. The “cure” simply does not work for most people. It is far worse than the condition of being homosexual and coming to accept oneself honestly as gay or lesbian—and also unconditionally loved by God our creator for the sake of Christ.

**What alternatives, then, are there for a Christian woman or man?** Another core issue in the Reformation was Luther’s concern for the conscience of the individual believer. Conscience is mentioned nearly forty times in the Augsburg Confession. Appeals to or reliance upon conscience heavily season nearly every Reformation document. Both the doctrinal errors and the foolish regulations of the 16th century church trampled heavily upon the believer’s conscience. To abide by these regulations was unconscionable. To be misled about grace and faith, repentance and justification would endanger the soul’s salvation; and *that* was also unconscionable.

It would be easy to suggest that Luther’s contempt for the fornication in the monasteries and his remarks which seem to imply his rejection of homosexual expression would entirely close discussion of the subject. But his pastoral concern

for the believer's conscience clearly is more embracing than his expression of contempt. How were priests, for example, *actually to live* if the regulations of the church say they must be celibate, and the faulty theology of the church taught that virginity earns one merit in the eyes of God, or that the celibate state is the very essence of the godly life and Christian discipleship?

Luther at least believed sincerely that he had the "cure" for the monastic fornication which invariably resulted from impossible vows and inhuman requirements of virginal chastity. But if we put that "cure" into perspective and see it also as being equally impossible and inhuman for gay and lesbian people, then what real alternatives are there for a Christian woman or man who is affectionally and sexually orientated toward her or his own gender—and especially for those in the professional Christian ministry?

If the institutional church is in the business of caring for its clergy and their honest needs in order to free them for the work of the Gospel (as, for example, the provision for a pension plan), it cannot legitimately sweep aside the genuine emotional, affective, human and sexual needs of even a minority of its professional ministers.

Ever since the Reformation Lutheran churches have had one model for their clergy's private lives: heterosexual marriage. But the summary expulsion of everyone who cannot fit that model (pastors who have divorced come to mind) does not make the complex problems and needs of those clergy and lay professionals go away; it only reveals the flaws in the model. So Philip Melanchthon wrote in the *Apology*:

We have explained why we cannot conscientiously agree with our opponents in their defense of the pontifical law of perpetual celibacy. It conflicts with divine and natural law; it disagrees even with the canons; it is superstitious and full of danger; finally, the whole thing is a fraud. The real purpose of the law is not religion but domination, for which religion is just a wicked pretext. No sane man [*sic*] can argue with these cogent facts.

**Then what about the regulation of clergy and the unity of the church?** But can a modern church institution such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America run itself on the 450-year old guidance of the Augsburg Confession? It is easy to argue that no church body of 5 million members could simply de-regulate its clergy and gut its professional standards to satisfy the simplicity of Article VII. But that argument doesn't hold, either. Even five centuries ago, the Roman Catholic Church was a far larger institution than the ELCA today, and it was run and regulated by a far grander bureaucracy. Even more to the point, the Church still held secular power through its tight relationship with the Holy Roman Empire, so that its canon law was upheld by secular law and the police power of the state—a powerful privilege it had held and enhanced since the days of Augustine. No, Luther and Melanchthon knew that what they proposed in Article VII flew in the face of significant institutional issues and legal reasoning.

The marriage of priests is a good case in point, since it was by this time not permissible for a priest to marry under canon law, and was also illegal under public laws.

Luther came to believe that not one sentence of canon law was worthwhile! The Reformation clearly meant to break the secular power as well as the sacred power of the Church. And in the generation after the Augsburg Confession, the churches of Germany did have very real concerns of church order to re-shape, absent the control of the Roman church. Yet Luther maintained that every Christian congregation had the right to call its own teachers and pastors who would teach and preach the Gospel correctly, i.e., not laying unconscionable burdens upon the faithful.

Clearly, it was not the Reformation's intent to remove a Roman hierarchy and canon law and replace them with a "Lutheran" institutional apparatus—but to free the Gospel from human fetters and structures and restore the freedom of conscience of individual believers and of the local expression of the church in its congregations.

So, while the ELCA founding documents give lip service to the Confessional writings and the

Holy Scriptures, its current rules are a palpable departure from the Reformers' insights and intentions. Its current professional policies regarding lesbian and gay people, embedded in the documents *Vision and Expectations* and *Guidelines for Discipline*, are unmistakably in violation of Reformation principles and confessional teachings.

In fact, if the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America wants to enforce a complete uniformity among its clergy, etc., it finds itself going in a direction away from the Reformation and away from the Gospel. If it would take its founding Reformation seriously, it would move instead in the direction of local latitude and local determination for the sake of the Gospel—allowing a more congregational focus on mission rather than a national focus on the institution. (We are well aware that the 2005 ELCA churchwide Assembly declined to allow a “local option” for ordaining non-celibate homosexuals to the clergy. Was that decision reached by voting members on the basis of theological clarity or emotional antipathy to homosexuality?)

It is not inappropriate to keep this question open in the public forum. If a local Lutheran congregation has already passed the point of merely welcoming the gay and lesbian faithful into membership, and is willing to accept an honest and faithfully partnered gay or lesbian pastor as their leader, then what—in the Gospel or the Confessions—is there to prevent it? Do the Gospel and Confessions *preclude* anyone, or any class of human beings from the grace of God?

### **Can we hold the ELCA to *Theological* Issues?**

Of course, it is further readily apparent that, from 1988 onward, the ELCA does not want to discuss the core theological issues relating to homosexuality or sexual orientation. All sides which offered criticism of the ELCA's “Sexuality Study” documents see the same flaw in them. But this is especially true where theological insights might impact the church's disciplinary machinery. In the mid-1990s, then-bishop Philip Hougen of the Iowa Synod entered a motion in the disciplinary hearing against Pastor Steve Sabin that theological discussion be excluded.

The same course was taken early on in the proceedings against St. Francis and First United congregations in 1990 for calling and ordaining of Pastors Ruth Frost, Jeff Johnson and Phyllis Zillhart. It did not matter to the ELCA *why* three congregations would extend letters of call and ordain three candidates who are not on the ELCA's clergy roster. It only mattered *that they violated the constitutional requirements* in taking those steps.

The church hierarchy has guaranteed juridical consistency until now: In 2007, the ELCA's Committee on Appeals, in the case of Pastor Brad Schmeling, declined even to speak to him or his congregation, St. John's in Atlanta, but made its abrupt determination to remove him from the ELCA's clergy roster based entirely on its reading of the transcript of his disciplinary hearing and the *rules* of the ELCA.

But surely, the hierarchy would argue, we have a right to make distinctions between church order and church doctrine, so that we may enforce the one while debating the other.

Well, actually, no! Things are upside down when such compartmentalizing is permitted to happen. Again, the Lutheran Reformation set the tone here. From the earliest days of Luther's reforming writings, it is clear that the problem with the Church was theological, that the failure of the institutional church to remedy its own theological errors was also theological, and that all attempts to juridically stifle theological dissent and reforming voices was also theological. To know if church order is itself in error, that order must be examined in the light of the clear and true teaching of the Gospel and the Confessions.

On October 17, 1517, for example, Martin Luther wrote to the “Most Reverend Father in Christ and Most Illustrious Lord”, Archbishop Albrecht with exceeding deference, in order to warn the bishop that he will have to answer for the errors being taught in his name. Luther takes upon himself to teach the bishop:

[I]t is the first and the sole duty of all bishops that the people should learn the Gospel and the love of Christ, for Christ never taught that indulgences should be

preached. How great then is the horror, how great the peril of a bishop, if he permits the Gospel to be kept quiet . . .

Yet we have an institution which for the last eighteen years has insisted that church rules will prevail—even to the extent of employing lawyers to deflect theological discussion. So ELCA attorneys have invented a *de facto* new “Third Use of the Law”—enforced compliance with unarticulated fundamentalist theology—which attempts to “trump” all expressions of the Gospel. And as it appears that there are serious theological and confessional problems with the church order they are trying to enforce, then those problems and theology are summarily “precluded” from the process.

At this point, it should at least be set out for discussion the obvious disconnect between theology and rubric: Neither *Vision and Expectations* nor *Guidelines for Discipline* offer any rationale for their anti-homosexual provisions. It is possible that the authors supposed the rationale was self-evident. Let us for the sake of discussion suppose that there is an underlying and unarticulated rationale, for example, that any and all sexual expression between persons of the same gender is morally wrong. If that were the underlying view, however, these documents had to remain silent because there is no ELCA teaching or theological document which could be referenced in support of such a view. Yet, absent any supporting sexuality study or “social statement,” the ELCA Church Council promulgated these documents in 1990 on its own authority, and continues to attempt their enforcement against lesbian and gay people. It should not be lost on us that prior generations of well-meaning Lutherans and other Christians in this nation *precluded* both women and persons of color from ordained ministry and professional service in the church without express theological support. When open discussion finally took place, the supposed self-evident reasons for the preclusion simply evaporated.

We have not mentioned here at all the recent emergence of right-wing dissent groups such as the Word Alone Network, a loose confederacy of 234 congregations. (Whatever happened to faith and grace?) Apparently its existence so concerns the hierarchy that they are willing to alienate the very people for whom the Gospel is proclaimed in order to embrace the people who believe they hold its copyright! It is especially ironic that this Network, in its loud complaints about the 1998 Lutheran-Episcopal agreement “Called to Common Mission” actually cites the same Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: “And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere...” Is not *Vision and Expectations* a “human tradition”? Must it be enforced in order to preserve the unity of the ELCA?

But the Gospel will not be boxed, controlled or limited! It is the Good News of God’s reconciling work in Christ Jesus, not the bad news of alienation and expulsion for the sake of any guidelines or institutional order! The Gospel will be heard. And those who attempt to stifle it, whether they are bishops or councils, denominational officers, theologians or disciplinary panels, will be held accountable.

If the ELCA is not built upon justification by grace, it will fall. It is always regrettable when a church body makes so grievous an error as we continue to witness in case after case in the ELCA. By avoiding dialogue and reconciliation, by silencing conscience and dissent, and by resorting to attorneys and legal language, it has still greased its own slippery slope in the fall from grace.

But it is shocking to me that a Lutheran church—built upon the very Gospel and Confessions which brought new light to God’s grace—should so easily and so willingly slide and crumble.

