

Opinion, originally published in *The Light of Christ*, April 1999

The ELCA: A New Lutheran Orthodoxy?

by Dan Hooper

It is the habit of religious orthodoxy to come to a point of such “perfect agreement with itself” as to value its own consistency and pure perfection as if it were equivalent to revelation or truth. Indeed, as an achievement, it becomes so impressive and awesome as to be easily confused with the work of God Almighty. In this climate, there is no room—because there is no reason—or controversy. There is nothing left to be controverted.

As a recent e-mail quipped about the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod:

Don’t ask any questions, just do as you’re told.
Good Lutherans, like Jell-O, are made from a mold.

But in recent years, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has positioned itself to become the new Lutheran “Orthodoxy,” in which not doctrine but structure, procedure, constitution and bylaws have supplanted the Bible as the very ground of faith. The ELCA continues to drive its lesbian and gay pastors out of the ministry—without ever saying that being homosexual is a grave moral offense, indeed, while saying that gay and lesbian people are welcome in the ELCA! But pastors who break the so-called “celibacy” rule are defrocked, and congregations who call them to serve are removed!

At what price does the ELCA maintain its granite-like hardness and impenetrability? There is always danger here, trouble under the glass-like polished surface of perfect agreement and orthodoxy. It is quite an accomplishment, as no doubt was the original Lutheran Formula of Concord in 1580. But, from that century on, Lutheran orthodoxy continued to build itself institutionally, to put flesh upon the bones of Reformation insight until it had become a fat and staid corpus, or as the late theologian William Lazareth once said, “a bloody Head with a flabby body.”

Of course today’s Lutheran Orthodoxy is a complex but consistent system into which the consenting adult must fit him or herself. But also, much more dangerous, it is quite an accomplishment, perhaps an impressive edifice of doctrine, bylaw and policy, an opus or work which is worthy of admiration. A work of righteousness which is swelled with institutional pride.

Does it never occur to the modern docents and curators of this orthodoxy that this work has become an institutional “good work,” which excludes and separates the whole body from grace? Really now, how is this any different from the grandly elaborate rabbinic tradition or Pharisaic orthodoxy in full bloom in the First Century, except in detail of content? Jesus’ almost savage condemnation of the Judaism of his time is grounded in his rejection of the smug, self-satisfied certainty of *an entire system*, which had placed its own corporate good work not *on* the altar of God as a fragrant offering, but *in front of* the altar of God as an intermediary, an impregnable locked gate, and thus a stumbling block to true faith.

Our Lord did not die nor rise again to be Lord of a grand edifice of rules and bylaws, but to free the human spirit and all humanity from the shackles it is so proud to have forged. Friends, let us pray for the ELCA.