

Second Talk

What Dragons Are We Confronting Today?

Or

Challenges We Face as Confessional Lutherans

We are engaged, I believe, in a fierce struggle for the soul of Lutheranism as a confessing movement within the church catholic, in continuity with the original intention of the Reformation as expressed in the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Book of Concord* as a whole. We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities in high places that are stronger and more numerous than we.

The title for this talk was given to me, “What Dragons Are We confronting Today?” I have re-phrased the title to read: “Challenges We Face as Confessional Lutherans.” They mean the same thing, but I am no St. George on a white steed with the ability to slay the dragon. I am only a theologian with a few ideas about the spiritual, moral, and theological crises in Lutheranism today.

The Church Struggle

James Davison Hunter wrote a much publicized book entitled, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. It dealt with the controversial issues of family, art, education, law, and politics. His analysis of the *Kulturkampf*, the cultural wars, now being waged between two parties that he called “progressives” and “orthodox” was written from the perspective of a sociologist. We will be talking about the *Kirchenkampf*, the church struggle, being waged not merely between liberals and conservatives, that’s too simplistic,

not merely between progressives and orthodox, not merely between revisionists and traditionalists, but from a theological perspective, the struggle going on in the church is between divine and anti-divine forces that grapple for the soul of the church, working anonymously behind the backs of our visible synods and assemblies and seminaries and social statements. I have gained the distinct impression that there are no bad guys in this fight. Those whom I consider opponents, the liberals, progressives, and revisionists, are not bad guys. And we are not the good guys. Many of them have been long-time friends and colleagues, nice guys whose camaraderie we have enjoyed over a bottle of beer or glass of wine. They all claim that God is on their side. They do their dirty work with a good conscience, so it seems. They also seem to be very persuasive and influential, oozing with the unctuous piety and moralistic fervor of such presiding bishops as Herbert Chilstrom and Mark Hanson. They never put something forward with a warning that what you are about to hear or read is a bunch of heresy or plain bull shit. We are doing battle over an agenda that has to do with the basics of the Bible and the core principles of our creeds and confessions. These have a profound bearing on what we believe about the Triune God, the nature of sin as the deepest dimension of the human predicament, the divinity of Christ and his atoning work, salvation through Christ alone, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit through the Church, true preaching of the Word as law and gospel and faithful administration of the sacraments, the divine institution of the holy ministry signified by the sacramental character of ordination, in accordance with Article XIII of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, the ecumenical care and concern for the oneness of the church, and the Great Commission of our Lord to go with the gospel to all the nations, to teach and to baptize so that people from other relig-

ions may come to believe in Christ and become members of his church. We are not dealing with a little wrinkle to iron out in the church. It's not all about sex, so that if we were to get that right, everything would be okay. Many folks in the church are asleep while their church is being taken hostage by a belief system incompatible with the orthodox faith of the Christian Church. Many good folks who have some inkling that this is going on do not like the struggle metaphor, preferring instead the policy of appeasement and accommodation for the sake of unity, peace, and harmony. They are worried about possible schism, losing congregations and members, and diminishing finances. The difficult thing is that the dragons come spouting traditional Lutheran slogans and catch phrases that deceive folks into thinking that the church is in good hands and that the changes proposed are true to the Scriptures and the traditions of the Lutheran Church. So we can have pastors living with same-sex partners because, hey, we just changed our minds, like we did about slavery, dancing, women's ordination, biblical inerrancy, and episcopacy. No big deal. Get used to it. It's called progress.

In 2005 I wrote an open letter to our presiding bishop Mark Hanson and asked him whether it concerned him that many of our finest young theologians are leaving the ELCA to join the Roman Catholic Church or one of the Orthodox Churches. I asked him whether he could account for this trend. From talking to each of the theologians, I knew that what Mark Hanson and his administration stood for was partly responsible for driving them out of the ELCA. I did not agree with them but I understood that their leaving was an indictment of the ELCA. When I thought of doing the same thing, I looked around and saw that all the churches are corrupt in one way or another, including the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

Whatever you may think about that statement, these young theologians who left the ELCA became convinced that it had become an illegitimate church. The application of the historical critical method had robbed the Bible of its authority. The *sola scriptura* principle in classical Lutheranism has given way to post-modern reader-response hermeneutics that Mark Hanson hails as the genius of Lutheranism. In the ELCA we have rival hermeneutical approaches to the Bible. We can rejoice in our Lutheran freedom to interpret the Bible without anyone breathing down our neck.

The Collapse Of Authority

With the collapse of biblical authority there followed the loss of dogmatic authority. In the Lutheran seminaries every theologian went his own way. Diversity became the golden calf in the church and its institutions. There is no longer any binding authority, not the authority of the Bible and not the authority of church tradition. The only authority is the politically correct ideology that manipulates the collective thoughts and experiences of the people, funneled into the pseudo-democratic egalitarian system in control of synod assemblies that vote their non-binding opinions on every subject under the sun. The wonderful thing about the ELCA “Social Statement on Human Sexuality” that will be voted on in August is that everyone is assured that all pastors, congregations, and synods will be free to keep and act on their own “conscience-bound beliefs,” because there is no consensus in the church. And since there is no consensus, the Task Force admits that it has nothing to teach on the subject. There are no authorities in the church to which it can appeal, having decreed that the Bible is null and void on the subject of homosexuality and that church tradition has been wrong and must be overturned.

When the Bible falls victim to historical relativism and reader-response hermeneutics and the church's dogmas have been dissolved in the hermeneutics of suspicion, guess what is left. Only the interests of each individual's pure subjectivity, allowing the church to be invaded and overwhelmed by the regnant isms of the day.

I was involved in seminary education for 35 years teaching the history of doctrine, dogmatics, systematics and ethics. My observation is that the seminaries became part of the problem and had nothing to teach the church that would prevent it from capitulating to the dominant ethos of American religion and culture. When the culture sneezes the church says, "*Gesundheit*," and the seminaries chime in. A case in point is how the Lutheran seminary professors offered their ringing endorsement of the 2005 "Report and Recommendations from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality," written by two professors at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Ralph Klein and Barbara Rossing.

As I said in my first lecture, when the ELCA puts forth any statement, it always frames it by assuring the church public that it is Lutheran, so Lutheran that it insists on it in every paragraph. But it never admits the truth that its working theology is a far cry from the theology of the Lutheran Confessions, historical documents which are saluted from time to time merely as monuments of its classical heritage. Although they are officially subscribed, they are not taught or necessarily believed, and where they are believed and confessed, they have no binding character. Who would there be to insure that, when even the ELCA presiding bishop and president of the Lutheran World Federation has

never said or written anything to indicate that he has read or knows the Lutheran Confessions, except for a few slogans and shibboleths.

The Catholic Substance Of Lutheranism

Classical Lutheranism with its confessional foundations always retained a special relation to Catholicism, even when it was most polemical. The polemical fireworks tended to send off a lot of smoke to becloud so much that it held in common with the Roman Catholic Church. There were differences, yes, but they shared a common heritage theologically and ecclesiologically. The Roman Catholic Church was still the mother church, and the Lutheran church was a daughter that had left home or rather, was kicked out, but it never forgot where it came from and how much they both shared and drank from the same wells. Lutheranism lived off the catholic substance in its own church life. Its liturgical worship remained close to the Roman mass. Its confessions reaffirmed the same dogmatic truths that Catholics accepted from the ancient ecumenical councils, and the Lutheran confessors claimed to be teaching nothing new. The Lutherans defined their doctrines by rejecting the same old heresies as the Catholics, and in the 17th century medieval scholasticism along with Aristotle were welcomed back into the curriculum of Lutheran theological schools. Even Lutheran pietism that I grew up with retained the dogmatic foundations of orthodoxy, even though now into its third generation there is little left of either the piety or the orthodoxy. I am talking about the ELCA -- third generation pietists generally become liberals and orthodox dogmas are supplanted by what George Lindbeck aptly calls "experiential expressivism."

I had my encounter with theology as “experiential expressivism” at LSTC when the First Quarter Program included an assignment for each student to write his or her own theology out of their personal experience. I thought it was so stupid. What the students needed was something else, to learn the beauty and the truth of the Great Tradition that animated the missionaries and the martyrs and the saints who have gone before and gave us inspiring examples to follow. Instead we were asking students to eat the swill out of their own troughs.

The ELCA, and I am sure it’s the same in the ELCIC, Lutheranism has become just another version of liberal Protestantism as it has undergone a progressive alienation from the catholic and orthodox elements inscribed in its origins. There has been a gradual slippage of the foundations in my lifetime, and its pace has rapidly accelerated during the last twenty years since the ELCA was organized. Once Lutheranism loses its biblical and dogmatic base, it becomes open to whatever the culture serves up as au courant. Nobody wants to be left behind, so we appropriate every agenda that is proving fashionable in the other liberal Protestant churches. They copy each other in three respects. 1) They are all politically correct by the standards of the day. 2) They all assume forms of spirituality that groove with the culture, at times even nourished by revivals of paganism. Here I am thinking of the “Re-Imagining Conferences” held by radical feminists, worshipping the goddess Sophia rather than the God of the Bible. Many representatives from mainline Protestant denominations, including Lutheran women, attend those conferences. 3) All the liberal Protestant denominations zealously champion works of love in pursuit of social justice.

Now, some of these causes may be good and worthy of the church's support, but the fact is that these agendas all together have led the church astray, away from its proper business of promoting the unique and universal mission of the gospel and teaching the doctrines that make people wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. We are being led away from the meaning of being church in the sense of the Reformation with its evangelical and catholic and orthodox constituent elements.

The Lutheran Drift Toward Liberal Protestantism

For many years in my teaching career I believed that it was possible and necessary to make a case that Lutheranism is basically different from various forms of modern Protestantism. I knew that I did not believe what the leading professors of modern Protestant theology were teaching their students, theologians like Gordon Kaufman, Schubert Ogden, Thomas Altizer, Paul van Buren, James Gustafson, Sallie McFague, Peter Hodgson, Langdon Gilkey, John Cobb, and scores of others. But then I awakened from my dogmatic slumbers and realized that the teaching of theology in our Lutheran seminaries is not categorically different and that Lutheran theology was being melted down into an indistinguishable Protestant lump. Now we are reaping the whirlwind. What is going on in our church body is like unto the others. I did not want to believe that and kept telling myself it is not too late to salvage a kind of Lutheranism with a difference. I wanted to believe what I once read in a book by Winthrop Hudson, at the time I started teaching Lutheran theology in 1961. In his book, *American Protestantism*, he wrote: "The final prospect for a vigorous renewal of Protestant life and witness rests with Lutheran churches. . . .Among the assets immediately at hand among the Lutherans are a con-

fessional tradition, a surviving liturgical structure, and a sense of community.”¹ Thirty years later Mark Noll of Notre Dame University reiterated Hudson’s point, saying: “The starting point of Lutheran thought, to its credit, is, in George Lindbeck’s words, ‘neither biblicistic nor experientialist, and certainly not individualistic, but dogmatic.’”² He added that what Lutheran theologians “share with their confidence in dogma could bring welcome refreshment to the American church.”³ Mark Noll must have given this as a commencement address to massage the Lutheran ego. He wrote these words when he was teaching at Wheaton College, so perhaps elements he observed in Lutheranism looked pretty good to him from that venue. At least now I bet you he would like to have those words back and write them off as a brain cramp.

Does anyone need to tell Hudson and Noll that Lutherans have caught up to the Protestant parade, or should I say charade. If nothing else the Lutheran debate on homosexuality will convince them that Lutherans in America have lost their confidence in Scripture and dogma so to be able to revitalize the declining mainline denominations in Protestantism. Lutherans are simply going downstream with the rest. The confessional dogmatics of yesterday have given way to the progressivist agendas of today -- therapeutic religion, multicultural ideology, inclusivity quotas, new age spirituality, entertainment evangelism, lowest common denominator ecumenism, pantheistic eco-mysticism,

¹ Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 176.

² Mark Noll, “Ethnic, American, or Lutheran? Dilemma for a Historic Confession in a New World,” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin*, Gettysburg, 71:1 (Winter, 1991), 31.

³ Ibid.

radical post-Christian feminism, and a host of other politically correct concerns. I said it's not all about sex. It's about the loss of confessional dogmatics which Lutherans used to have in spades. That's been lost at the seminaries and is certainly absent from what the bishops write to their pastors and congregations. The catalog of the church's publishing house proves that it has moved away from printing books of orthodox writers. The struggle between those who are loyal to the Lutheran Confessions and those who seek accommodation to American culture has been won by the accommodationists from the top down. Immigrant Lutherans harbored a deep anxiety about not making it on American soil. Many of them, we don't yet know whether it is the majority or not, have been willing to sell their birthright, their charter convictions, for a pot of liberal Protestant pottage, to be relevant to the American culture of neopagan religion.

The Culture Of American Religion

What do I mean by neopagan religion -- the religion that is becoming increasingly dominant in the pulpits, pews, and pines of the Protestant denominations? American religion has provided a happy home for the alien god of Gnosticism. Gnosticism is the hallmark of religious experience emanating from the self and completely at odds with the incarnational gospel and trinitarian dogma of the biblical-Christian faith. Here I wish to cite some things that an American Jew has written about this neopagan American religion. The author is Harold Bloom and his book is entitled, *American Religion*. Bloom writes, "the American religion, for its two centuries of existence, seems to me irretrievably Gnostic."⁴ Bloom observes that America is a very religious nation, but its driving im-

⁴ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 49.

pulses are more Gnostic than Judeo-Christian. Gnosticism was the ancient form of pagan religion that the early church fathers had to fight tooth and nail for the survival of biblical Christianity. The word “gnosticism” comes from the Greek word “gnosis,” which means “knowledge.” The knowledge in question is the secret mystery of life that arises from within the self. Gnosticism never died out; it went underground during the Middle Ages and was kept alive in the neo-Manichaean sects like the Catharii and Albigenses. Bloom’s thesis is that America is “an obsessed society wholly in the grip of a dominant Gnosticism.”⁵ According to Bloom, “Gnosticism. . .is now, and always has been, the hidden religion of the United States, the American Religion proper.”⁶ “The God of the American Religion is an experiential God, so radically within our own being as to become a virtual identity with what is most authentic (oldest and best) in the self.”⁷ “Ancient Gnosticism was an elite religion; the oddity of our American Gnosis is that it is a mass phenomenon. There are tens of millions of Americans whose obsessive idea of spiritual freedom violates the normative basis of historic Christianity, though they are incapable of realizing how little they share of what was once considered Christian doctrine.”⁸

Thousands of these Gnostics are welcomed into our churches at the front door and become members without benefit of serious catecheses. Gallup polls indicate that American believers are religious in a general sense with scarcely any correlation to the spe-

⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

⁷ Ibid., p. 259.

⁸ Ibid., p. 263.

cific beliefs of historic Christianity. They become members of the church without becoming Christian, baptized without believing in the New Testament sense. Sociological studies show that the majority of members are “lay liberals” who have no clear understanding of what Christianity is or why they are Christian. They hold vague beliefs that Christianity has to do with believing in God, following Jesus, and obeying the Golden Rule. If asked, they will say they prefer Christianity to other religions but their preference is not based on any truth claims. At bottom they are pluralists, believing that all religions teach pretty much the same thing.

Gnosticism And Sexuality

These “lay liberals” will be in the majority at the next church-wide assembly of the ELCA. Their gnostic feelings will be celebrated and brought to expression. Like the Gnostics of old they do not believe that the physical gender differences have any moral significance. They believe that what males or females do with their sexual organs is a matter of *adiaphora*. Just like the Gnostics of old. We learn about a Gnostic sect in the writings of St. Irenaeus. They were the Carpocratians, followers of Carpocrates, a second century Christian gnostic. Like other Gnostics he taught that the physical body is a mass of evil matter, so what you do with it doesn't matter. The Carpocratians indulged themselves in all manner of free sex, including homosexual acts. What the heck, it's only the physical body. Gnostics were dualists. They believed that the material world was created by the evil Old Testament God and the spiritual world is the realm of the New Testament God. “Give to the flesh the things of the flesh and to the spirit the things of the spirit.” Didn't the apostle Paul say, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of

God”? The Carpocratians believed that the good God doesn’t care what you do with what the evil God created. (I Cor. 15: 15) But, to the contrary, Paul said, “The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.” (I Cor. 6: 19) Irenaeus refuted the Gnostic heresy with a strong affirmation of the incarnation, quoting John 1: 14: “The Word became flesh.” Therefore, it matters what you do in the flesh. “You glorify God in your body,” Paul said. (I Cor. 6: 20) He also said, “The body is. . .for the Lord.” I Cor. 6: 13)

The ELCA “Social Statement on Human Sexuality” is not based on the Bible or the orthodox Christian tradition. Herbert Chilstrom is dead wrong when he writes, “It looks to Scripture and the traditions of the Lutheran church for guidance in this important area of our lives.”⁹ That is not true. It’s best claim to being Lutheran is that it frames the quintessential Lutheran heresy, namely, antinomianism. And, to drive home my point again, antinomianism is the perennial product of gnosticism. That’s what we are up against. I am absolutely positive that is what we are facing.

Of course, it is hard to grab hold of this slippery fish. Gnosticism does not present itself as a tangible visible quiddity. We can only name its demons, and try to exorcise each one with arguments from Scripture, the ancient fathers, the doctors of the church, the ecumenical creeds, the Reformation Confessions, and the few contemporary theologians who think and write within an orthodox framework and eschew all heresies. We know who these orthodox theologians are, because heretics reek with the odor of a skunk.

⁹ Herbert Chilstrom, “An Assessment of “The Statement on Human Sexuality & Recommendations on Ministry Policy.”

The Isms That Challenge The Christian Faith

I have made a list of names of some of the demons or dragons that emanate from the spirit of gnosticism that we are fighting. Again, I have to repeat, it's not all about sex. These other manifestations of gnosticism raised their ugly heads in the Protestant churches and in the ELCA long before they became obsessed with sexuality.

1. The first is the challenge of radical theological feminism and its attack on the Triune name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If you have ever read Mary Daly's book, *Beyond God the Father*, you will have had a taste of Gnosticism. You will be convinced. Better yet, read Elaine Pagel's, *The Gnostic Gospels*, and you will learn about the alternative goddess Sophia who has replaced God the Father in feminist spirituality.

2. The second is the challenge of the pluralistic theory of religion and its attack on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the one and only way of salvation. The loss of this belief in the churches is the main reason they no longer send missionaries to the non-Christian world to preach the gospel and to plant the church.

3. The third is the challenge of post-modern epistemology that relativizes the authority of the Bible. The collapse of biblical authority began with the Enlightenment's use of the historical critical method to undercut the *sola scriptura* principle. However, the use of the historical method in biblical interpretation need not result in the loss of the Bible's authority. To be sure, it has happened in Protestantism but not in Catholic theology. The canonical method of biblical interpretation as applied by Brevard Childs or Richard Hays accentuates rather than diminishes the authority of the Bible. And the statement

produced by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,”¹⁰ is a brilliant example of how the Bible retains its authority in tandem with a full acceptance of the historical critical method. If the ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality would have adopted this approach, it would have spared itself a lot of mis-interpretation of the Bible.

4. The fourth challenge is the cult of egalitarianism that produces life in the church resembling George Orwell’s Oceania, where all are equal but some are more equal than others. It is a system ripe for bureaucratic manipulation of people’s wants and interests. A church whose highest authority is an assembly the voting members of which are selected by a quota system has no legitimate authority. It is a set up for the power-brokers *à la* 1984.

5. The fifth is the challenge of new age mysticism that seeps into the church through the experimental liturgies and entertaining worship. Worship becomes all about us, our warm feelings, our spiritual experiences, our relationships to God and the world around us. Hymns that exemplify an ascending spirituality, from us to God, contradict the downward movement of God’s *agapé*-love, the descending spirituality of the sacramental gifts of grace. Again, gnosticism has taken control of a lot of contemporary worship, when it’s all about us, and God is lost in the noisy clamor of our casual conversations and familiarity with sacred things.

¹⁰ Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Origins* 23, no. 29 (January 6, 1994).

6. The sixth is the challenge of political ideologies that seduce church leaders by making them want to count for something, to be relevant to what is going on in the world, and to influence the powers-that-be, the political parties and policies. The church of Christ and its peculiar identity and mission are then caught in the crossfire between the right-wing politics of the conservatives and the left-wing politics of the liberals. The church has lost its public prestige and power precisely by trying to be relevant to the world and playing the game of power-politics. The politicizing of the church has made it a victim of the culture wars between progressives and conservatives. If Lutherans would have followed the wisdom of their two kingdoms doctrine, they might have transcended the polarizing partisanship of American politics. The upshot is that no one cares what the church has to say to the world when it passes one stupid resolution after the other, because the church has lost its moral authority to speak on any issue.

7. Seven is a sacred number. I am sure there is a seventh dragon that I could name, but I am going to let you fill in the blank. You can think of one. What would you add?

Thank you for listening.

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