

An Open Letter to Bishop Herbert W. Chilstrom

August 1, 2009

The Rev. Herbert W. Chilstrom, Bishop
1211 Pine Pointe Curve
St. Peter, MN 56082

Dear Bishop Chilstrom:

Your Open Letter response (dated July 21, 2009) to the LutheranCORE Open Letter on the ELCA Social Statement and Ministry Recommendations was forwarded to me. You invite a response to it, stating that you are “open to seeing things from a perspective that may not have occurred to me.” I feel I must accept your invitation, because it is I who was asked by LutheranCORE to assemble a small group of the ELCA’s brightest and best theologians to write a critique of the documents that will be debated and voted on at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August, 2009, in Minneapolis. Moreover, all of your criticisms of the CORE Letter are at the same time objections to doctrinal positions I have taught as a Lutheran theologian for over half a century. Your perspective and my perspective are so far apart that I am not sure it will be possible to reach any degree of mutual understanding. An outside critic reading what you wrote and what I am writing in this Open Letter might have a hard time believing that we belong to same church and affirm the same teachings of the Christian faith.

However, I think I do partly understand where you are coming from. Like you I was raised in the context of Lutheran pietism. There was not that much difference between Norwegian and Swedish Lutheran pietism. Both branches of American Lutheran pietism supported the LBI movement, to which you made a significant contribution. I never went to the LBI, but I was reared on something similar, namely, the biblical pietism of Norwegian Lutheran missionaries in Madagascar, many of whom attended the LBI. We not only read the Bible every day, but memorized lengthy passages and earned nice little gold stars for reciting them. I got enough of them to fill the firmament. I write about my bringing up in Madagascar in my soon to be published memoirs, entitled PROPTER CHRISTUM -- Memoirs of a Lutheran Theologian. (Eerdmans Publishing Company). I mention this because, although our backgrounds in Scandinavian pietism are similar, we each took a different turn along the way on our respective theological journeys. I went to Luther Seminary and you attended Augustana Seminary, both of which were not well equipped to point us well beyond the awakening theology of late nineteenth century pietism. As I looked down the road I realized that I would eventually need to make a decision at a crossroads, where one choice leads to the left and the other to the right. By left and right I do not have in mind what these words convey in the current American political lexicon. Most people would regard me on the “left” in that context. Turning left, theologically speaking, means to affirm the theology and methodology of liberal Protes-

tantism; turning right means to reclaim the Great Tradition of historic Christianity prior to the Reformation, including the ancient Church Fathers and Medieval Doctors of the Church. I observed that many of my generation who came out of pietism veered toward liberal protestantism. What they held in common was a religious orientation defined by feelings and personal experiences. Subjectivity decides what is true. The ELCA Social Statement talks about the “bound conscience” as determinative on ethical questions -- pure subjectivism. A few of my generation, some classmates, made the longer journey into a study of the ancient traditions which shaped the development of catholic orthodoxy, which I believe our Lutheran Confessors affirmed in a positive way. Pietist theologians were not much interested in the Church Fathers, or the Lutheran Confessions for that matter. They did have the *Small Catechism*, but that was about all.

Your Open Letter refers to the theological method you use in judging matters theological and ecclesial. They are “reason” and “experience” -- your words. They trump Scripture and Tradition. Scripture and Tradition must pass the test of your reason and experience, not the other way around. Such a priority is the essence of liberal protestant theology as I have encountered it. Karl Barth identified liberal Protestantism as a heresy. I believe he was right about that.

In my judgment most of the theologians and bishops of the ELCA today are deeply embedded in the thought patterns of liberal Protestantism, even while pretending that using a few Lutheran slogans offers any immunity from such a fate. You have probably noticed that more than a hundred of so-called teaching theologians of the ELCA have signed a statement that agrees substantially with your views. I would not draw much comfort from that. (I do not see anything in your letter to differentiate your thinking or that of the teaching theologians from any of a dozen liberal Protestants I could cite who speak or write on the same topics.) Yes, reason and experience are in command. Whose reason and experience? Not the Church’s, as defined by millennia of teaching by the fathers, martyrs, saints, doctors, evangelists, and missionaries, down through the centuries and across all cultures, but yours and those with whom you agree during the last 20 years of American culture-conforming Christianity. I do not believe you can quote a single major Lutheran theologian who agrees with your views prior to the birth of the ELCA twenty years ago. Meanwhile, many in the ELCA rejoice that finally Lutheranism is making it on the big stage of American religion, like the other mainline Protestant denominations.

You quote a few statements I wrote in *Christian Dogmatics* about the biblical canon and the “canon within the canon.” “The ultimate authority of Christian dogmatics is not the biblical canon as such, but the gospel of Jesus Christ to which the Scriptures bear witness -- the ‘canon within the canon.’” “Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Scriptures, the source and scope of its authority.” I was trying to express a Lutheran understanding of Scripture, in contrast to the biblical literalism of Protestant fundamentalism. But in no way does it lead to the view of the Bible in liberal Protestantism. You seem puzzled by the reference in the CORE Letter to the “Word of God.” What does it mean? You are right that the Word of God can mean one of three things, the incarnate Word, the written Word, or the proclaimed Word. In this case, the context makes clear that it means the

written Word of God, the Bible. I do not believe that the other two meanings of the Word of God diminish by a single iota the authority of the written Word of God.

My understanding of Scripture as Word of God is very different from Gerhard Ebeling's, whom you quote. Ebeling was not a confessional Lutheran. His role in the controversy surrounding Bultmann's demythologizing proposal made clear his opposition to the confessional Lutherans, such as, Edmund Schlink, Peter Brunner, Ernst Kinder, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and many others. None of them could agree with Ebeling that "the Word of God is solely that which proclaims and communicates the will of God as revealed in the crucified Christ." Like so many German theologians from Schleiermacher to von Harnack to Bultmann, Ebeling devaluated the Old Testament as co-equal with the New Testament in revealing the Word of God through the Bible as a whole. Luther would not do that. He was a Professor of the Old Testament and believed that it communicates the Word of God. For Luther the Ten Commandments were the Word of God. The Law was the Word of God, not only the Gospel. To reduce everything in the Bible to the "crucified Christ" is an example of that "gospel reductionism" that is plaguing the ELCA and many of its theologians. The word for such an error is "antinomianism," condemned as such in the *Formula of Concord*.

No doubt you remember very well the two "Call to Faithfulness" conferences held at St. Olaf College in 1990 and 1992, the latter at which you spoke. Three Lutheran journals sponsored the conferences, *Dialog*, *Lutheran Quarterly*, and *Lutheran Forum*. Already alarms were going off that the ELCA was moving in the direction of liberal Protestantism on many fronts. One thousand people attended the first conference and eight hundred the second, so we were not alone in detecting early signs of trouble in the ELCA. Although the theologians addressing the two conferences held different views amongst themselves on ecclesiology and ecumenism, almost all agreed that the commitment of the ELCA to teach according to the Lutheran Confessions was becoming nominal at best. Even the name of the Holy Trinity was up for grabs in some circles.

During those two conferences I do not recall that one word was spoken about sexuality or homosexuality. The controversy over sexuality arose later. In the last ten years it has become the all-consuming issue in the ELCA, arising not from the people at the grassroots but driven by the leadership at many levels. It should be clear that the theologians who signed the CORE Letter (around 60 of them) hold the same views concerning the slide of the ELCA toward liberal Protestantism as those journal theologians who issued the "call to faithfulness" in 1990 and 1992. That call went unheeded. It is clear that what ails the ELCA, in our view, is not all about sexuality. It is about the underlying pervasive theological condition that gave rise to the possibility that a Lutheran denomination could devote more than a decade's worth of its time, money, and energy to an issue that has always been deemed beyond consideration by all orthodox (small "o") churches from the first century until now. Only a few North American liberal Protestant denominations made the issue of sexuality their *cause célèbre*, starting approximately one generation ago. This is only further convincing evidence that the ELCA has bought into the kind of theological methodology (reasoning) that has always characterized liberal Protestantism. You make clear what that is. Of the four principles of a sound theological method -- Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience -- you assign to reason

and experience the place of pre-eminence. Luther called “reason” the whore of Babylon. And in the name of “experience” every crime and heresy known to humankind have been committed. So we have to ask, “whose “reason” and whose “experience” should we trust? Not mine, all by myself. Not the “reason” and “experience” of late-North American Christians who have been marinated in the culture of what Pope John XXIII called a “culture of death and decadence.” The Germans have a word for the kind of ecclesial phenomenon that results from elevating “reason and experience” at the expense of “Scripture and Tradition” -- “*Kulturprotestantismus*.”

I was rather stunned by the anti-Catholic sentiments you express in your Open Letter, which I can only guess must arise from deep-seated Protestant prejudice. When the ELCA is falling off a cliff into heterodoxies and heresies of its own, it seems rather disingenuous to worry about some positions and practices that Lutherans have traditionally found objectionable in Roman Catholicism. If this is not the pot calling the kettle black, what is? Maybe its more a case of seeing the speck in the other’s eye while ignoring the log in one’s own. Astonishingly, you utter not a word of criticism of anything going on in the ELCA, except against those who are faithful to the long-standing tradition of Lutheran ethics on homosexual practices. Helmut Thielicke, a Lutheran theologian, spelled this out in his book, *The Ethics of Sex*, which I still regard as better than anything any other Lutheran has ever written on the subject. If one does not agree with him, one should produce better arguments than appealing to “reason” and “experience,” as though those are the only warrants available for the approval of the ordination of women. When I approved the ordination of women, which I did early on, I did not do so on the basis of *my* “reason” and “experience.” There are better biblical and theological arguments.

You seem to agree with the liberal Protestants who are calling for “a new reformation.” Historical providence gave us one event called “the reformation,” but judging from what is happening to Lutheranism in the Scandinavian countries and North America, it is not turning out so well. The “new reformation” of Serene Jones, Cornel West, and Gary Dorrien (I witnessed Bill Moyer’s program too) is nothing but a repristination of the old “social gospel movement” that withered under the criticism of the neo-orthodox theologians (Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others). H. Richard Niebuhr summed up the preaching of the liberal Protestants quite well: “A God without wrath brought people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministry of a Christ without the cross.” That is still the God of liberal Protestantism, some of whose brightest and most eloquent spokespersons happen to be the very professors of Union Theological Seminary that you cite. It was their collective thinking that you find so “riveting.” If you have read their writings, as I have, you will have a clearer idea of what they mean by a “new reformation,” rather than learning of it merely from a program edited for TV. Their idea of the “offense of the gospel” is not what the apostle Paul had in mind. Nor do they mean the same thing as the New Testament as a whole when they talk about “the crucifixion and resurrection.” For them these words are metaphors that refer to the kind of social praxis they are calling for in our historical period rather than to the salvific occurrence of what God has already accomplished through the once-for-all death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It has always been the tactic of liberal Protestant theology to co-opt the

language of the Bible and the Christian tradition and pour utterly different meanings into them.

I have not responded to all the points of criticism you raise in your Open Letter. I am sorry that you deem it important to pray for the passage of a Social Statement that is a theological embarrassment to anyone or any church that claims to be faithful to the Lutheran Confessions. Why not face the truth: the members of the Task Force who drafted the statements now before the church lacked the theological competence for the assignment. God may well answer your prayer, however, by sending the ELCA into another Babylon, into exile from all that Jesus prayed for in his High Priestly Prayer in John 17.

In 2005 I wrote an Open Letter to Bishop Mark Hanson, which contained many of the things I have written in this letter to you, as the former presiding bishop of the ELCA. Nothing in the ELCA has changed for the better in the meantime. That is why I have felt compelled to write this letter. My fondest hope would be that I have completely misunderstood your position on theology and ethics, but to me it seems to resemble the theological errors of liberal Protestantism that I believe are inimical to the truth and mission of Christ's gospel in our time.

I am forwarding to you a few recent things I have written that might help to provide a more adequate theological frame for the assertions advanced in this letter.

Sincerely,

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