

A Vision of Building an Evangelical, Confessional Lutheran Future in Canada

The web site of the WordAlone Network in the U.S. (<http://www.wordalone.org/>) carries the bold proclamation of “Building an evangelical, confessional Lutheran future in America”. Similarly, the vision that I see for orthodox Lutherans in Canada is one of “Building an evangelical, confessional Lutheran future in Canada”. Right up front I want to emphatically declare that I cannot see such a future being built under the umbrella of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC).

For orthodox Lutherans in the ELCIC to find a way forward amidst the chaos and unrest in the ELCIC four assumptions need to be understood and acknowledged:

- 1) ***The same-sex blessing issue is only a “symptom” [1] of a deeper issue that is dividing our church. A far deeper problem is the effort by some (‘revisionists’) [2] to achieve a radical theological makeover of the ELCIC [3-6], at the heart of which is the issue of the authority of Scripture [7-8].*** According to Jesus Seminar scholar Marcus Borg, “The church in North America today, especially the Protestant church, is deeply divided and the single most divisive issue is the Bible. Whether the Bible is to be seen as a divine product, the inerrant and infallible words of God, or whether it is to be seen as a human product, a product of these ancient communities”. That pretty well summarizes the nature of what is at the heart of the two incompatible theologies at work in the ELCIC. The revisionist approach so emphasizes the human nature of Scripture as to virtually exclude divine revelation from the Biblical message. The extent of the radical theological shift occurring within the ELCIC is evident when former ELCIC national bishop Raymond Schultz not only declares that he does not find Borg to be a revisionist, but, more astonishingly, declares that, “His (Borg’s) own confession of faith, clearly declared in his books, puts him squarely within mainline Christian thinking and believing”. One presumes that the former bishop is saying that such “mainline Christian thinking and believing” is squarely present within the ELCIC. In *Living the Questions*, a DVD study series promoted by a mission church in the B.C. Synod of the ELCIC [9], Borg declares that, “The difference between you and Jesus is a difference in degree but not a difference in kind”! Rev. David Barnhart [10] makes the observation that, “Only a few years ago, you could have walked into most any mainline church in the country and found at least some semblance of orthodoxy coming from the pulpit. Today, however, the very essence of the Christian faith is being challenged in ways not seen before. This new theology is being embraced by nearly all of the mainline churches via their pulpits, curriculum, tapes and seminars. And it is being taught in nearly all mainline seminaries.”
- 2) ***Despite calls by the revisionists to “celebrate diversity” [11], it is not possible for the two incompatible theologies within the ELCIC to co-exist in the same house*** (Mark 3:25: “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand”). Despite what one hears from the revisionists about the importance of the ELCIC being an inclusive and welcoming church, which “celebrates diversity”, the harsh reality of the hollowness of such talk recently struck home for seven members of Faith Lutheran, Kelowna who were excommunicated from their church basically for standing firm against the radical theological makeover of the ELCIC. Nowhere in Scripture can one find encouragement to stay in the presence of false teachers who attack and undermine one’s faith, but rather, according to John 10:4-5, we are told: “*When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him*

because they do not recognize a stranger's voice". As well, according to a treatise written by Martin Luther in 1523 [12], a Christian congregation "not only has the right and power but also the duty – on pain of losing the salvation of its souls and in accordance with the promise made to Christ in baptism – to avoid, to flee, to depose, and to withdraw" from authorities "that teach and rule contrary to God and his word". For those sitting comfortably in their pews hoping this will all just blow away, I have this question: Do you care what kind of Lutheran church body you pass on to your children and grandchildren?

- 3) ***Time is not on the side of the orthodox believers.*** The longer this theological struggle in the ELCIC drags on the weaker the orthodox side becomes. Patiently waiting for who knows what will not help the orthodox believers. Waiting is not moving the orthodox vision forward or keeping their constituency unified. Your ranks are weakening day by day with many quietly slipping away and a few publicly declaring why they have left [13].
- 4) ***The troubles in the ELCIC, a case of competing incompatible theologies [14,15], can never be resolved through political conventions.*** There is a *de facto* split in the ELCIC. The ELCIC, a divided church, can not be saved and restored to unity by an ongoing effort of trying to defeat this or that motion at the next synodical or national convention [16]. The revisionist forces have indicated that they will continue to promote their cause until they succeed no matter what the consequence [17]. It is not a case of "if" such motions will pass, but a case of "when". With a plurality of voting pastors at its synod conventions, the reality already in the Eastern Synod is that the revisionists there are in a position to pass whatever motions they choose. Despite the title of his book, "It's Time to End Church Splits", Francis Frangipane writes (page 127): "Another occasion when a split might become necessary occurs when the leaders of a denomination fall away from the faith and seek to spread apostasy into their denomination. If senior church leaders deny the deity of Christ or find no problem ordaining and endorsing homosexuals, or if they teach that all religions lead to God, this is a denomination that has turned its back on biblical Christianity. For a pastor to withdraw his congregation from that denomination is not sin, but a noble responsibility."

In his "Way Forward" for the Synod of Alberta and the Territories [18], Bishop Ron Mayan declared that the "operative word" was "together". I also proscribe to the importance of doing things "together" but have a different understanding of what that means. The bishop hopes that he can hold the Synod of Alberta and the Territories "together". I don't believe that is possible in the long run given the deep theological divide. My understanding of "together" is that as much as possible let's keep the orthodox believers in a given congregation "together" and that orthodox congregations choosing to leave the ELCIC try to stay "together" with other orthodox congregations who do the same. ***As orthodox believers, let's do what we can to avoid fragmenting ourselves both within a congregation and between congregations.***

Recently a segment of Anglican Essentials, an organization within the Anglican Church of Canada hoping to bring its church back to its historical orthodox position, has determined it has had enough – "now convinced there is no solution for orthodox Canadian Anglicans within the established structures". On November 22-23 a new ecclesiastical Anglican body in Canada was created [19] to provide a "lifeboat" for orthodox Anglicans who believe that they cannot remain in the Anglican Church of Canada [20]. For The Rt. Rev. Donald Harvey, retired Anglican Church of Canada bishop who has since left the Anglican Church of Canada, the time has come for "not just talking any more but taking action". Bishop Harvey's message to orthodox Anglicans in Canada is "when you are ready, there is something prepared for you". Prior to the last two ELCIC National

Conventions several congregations declared that if “that motion” passes at National Convention, we are leaving the ELCIC. Well “that motion” was narrowly defeated at this summer’s National Convention by only 19 votes (220 votes to 181). If “that motion” had passed, where would those congregations have gone? In my view, the Canadian Association of Lutheran Congregations (CALC) represents that “lifeboat” for orthodox Lutherans in the ELCIC and, like Bishop Harvey, the message is, “when you are ready, there is something prepared for you”. CALC was birthed out of the ELCIC in the early 1990s by lay and clergy uncomfortable with liberal theological trends in the ELCIC that were already evident at that time, and its original purpose was to offer congregations and clergy “a new home” [21]. As orthodox Lutherans we are fortunate and blessed that we do not need to build a “lifeboat” which would entail, for example, developing a new structure and constitution – a very time-consuming process – as one already exists through CALC. CALC provides a means to hold “together” those orthodox congregations who say enough; it’s time to leave the ELCIC and get on with our ministry. CALC provides an answer to those who ask, “If we leave the ELCIC, where can we go?” CALC is a place for orthodox congregations to hang their confessional hats and say, “It is Here that We Stand and stay, alongside these neighbours in the faith”.

In my view, the Canadian Association of Lutheran Congregations (CALC) is the “lifeboat” where the remnant of orthodox Lutherans within the ELCIC can joyfully assemble to work “together”, along with other orthodox Lutheran groups in Canada, to “Build an evangelical, confessional Lutheran future in Canada”.

Ron Voss
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Note: Ron is a former member of the ELCIC [16] and attends St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, Cochrane, Alberta which recently left the ELCIC to join CALC [22].

Endnotes:

- 1) For example, see the *Here We Stand* “Confessional Declaration”:
<http://www.herewestand.ca/declaration.html>
- 2) Rev. Peter Mikelic, a member of the ELCIC’s National Church Council, writing in the *Anglican Journal*, “Reforming church needed after close vote on same-sex blessings”:
<http://www.anglicanjournal.com/opinion/concerning-lutherans/032/article/reforming-church-needed-after-close-vote-on-same-sex-blessings/>
- 3) Rev. Dr. Lothar Schwabe, “Did We Preach A False Gospel?”, posted at Solid Ground web site, October 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-didwepreachafalsegospel.html>
- 4) Rev. Dr. Lothar Schwabe, “Lutherans and Revisionist Theology”, posted at Solid Ground web site, August 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-revtheology.htm>
- 5) Rev. Dr. Lothar Schwabe, “What are the Differences between Traditional Theology and Revisionist Theology?”, posted at Solid Ground web site, May 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-differences.htm>
- 6) Rev. Dr. Lothar Schwabe, “Conflict in ELCIC Congregations Concerning Two Theologies – A Situation Analysis”, posted at Solid Ground web site, February 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-conflict.htm>

- 7) Lutheran CORE, "A Lutheran Statement on the Authority and Interpretation of Scripture In the Church", <http://www.commonconfession.net/PDFs/StatementScripture.pdf>
- 8) David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "The Authority of Scripture", <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/articles/full.asp?id=13%7C18%7C399> [Note: This article is an extract from a sermon given by Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) in 1962 showing that the drift away from the authority of Scripture began long ago!]
- 9) Ron Voss, "Is This Where the Lutheran Church is Heading?", posted at Solid Ground web site, April 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-isthiswhere.htm>
- 10) Rev. David R. Barnhart, "Does Jesus Need to be Saved?", Volume 22, Midwinter 2007, Issue 1 of *The Vine and Branches*. <http://www.thevineandbranches.org/newsletter-article-Midwinter2007.htm>
- 11) Ron Voss, "Celebrating Diversity?", posted at Solid Ground web site, June 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-diversity.htm>
- 12) Martin Luther (1523), "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture", <http://www.concordtx.org/hpapers/luthjdg.htm>
- 13) The flight from the ELCIC has been going on for many years, for example, see pages 2-3 of December 2004 issue of *The Forum* newsletter wherein Rev. Doug Kranz, pastor at St. John's, Waterloo, explained why he made the difficult decision to resign from his church and the ELCIC prior to the 2004 Eastern Synod Convention: <http://www.albertasynod.ca/FCKeditor2FC1/UserFiles/File/Forum/Forum%20December%202004.pdf>
- 14) Pastor Ed Skutshek, "Fear Takes On Flesh in the ELCIC", posted at Solid Ground web site, November 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/Fear%20Takes%20on%20Flesh%20in%20the%20ELCIC.pdf>
- 15) Pastor Scott Grorud, "Why can't we all just get along?", in WordAlone's newsletter *Network News*, September-October 2007, page 5: <http://www.wordalone.org/newsletters/2007/SepOct07.pdf>
- 16) Ron Voss, "Why I Am Leaving the ELCIC", posted at Solid Ground web site, September 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-why.htm>
- 17) "A Church at the Tipping Point?", posted at Solid Ground web site, June 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-tipping.htm>
- 18) Bishop Ron Mayan's Communiqué to ABT Synod, "A Way Forward in the ABT synod after the National Convention", posted at the Solid Ground web site April 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-wayforward.htm>
- 19) "Anglican Church offshoot launched", *National Post*, November 23, 2007. <http://www.canada.com:80/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=edcc8a09-290a-4b61-90c2-76d7afd08b05&k=38367>
- 20) "Network announces pivotal conference", posted at the web site of the Anglican Network in Canada (one of two complementary arms of Anglican Essentials Canada): http://www.anglicannetwork.ca/pivotal_conference_112207.htm
- 21) From "History of CALC" posted at the CALC web site: <http://www.calc.ca/history.html>
- 22) "Alberta Congregation Votes to Leave the ELCIC", posted at Solid Ground web site, September 2007: <http://www.solid-ground.ca/a-stpeters.html>