

God, Christ, and Biblical Authority in the ELCA Today

Mark C. Chavez

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is experiencing a severe, tragic crisis with spiritual, theological, organizational, and financial dimensions. I ask for your prayers for all of us in the ELCA. It is a very difficult time for the ELCA, so your prayers are much appreciated. It has been most reassuring to hear from so many Christians in other churches here in the United States and from around the world who are keeping us in their prayers. The damage being done to the ELCA harms the whole body of Christ.

The ELCA's crisis is in part due to the fallout from the 2009 ELCA churchwide assembly's approval of a social statement on sexuality and ministry policy recommendations. Both documents were shaped more by culture than by Scripture. The crisis, however, was brewing years before the ELCA's first day of existence on January 1, 1988. The 2009 churchwide assembly was the tragic terminus of a trajectory that had been set decades earlier. On the surface it may look like the ELCA is divided by disagreement over sexual morality. The disagreement is far deeper.

Biblical authority is at the heart of the disagreement. The ELCA confession of faith states that it "accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life."¹ In practice Scripture is often not "the authoritative source and norm" in the ELCA. When human authorities supplant Scripture in doctrine and practice, divine authority—that of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit—gets called into question or even lost. Cutting to the chase and using blunt, biblical language, much of the ELCA has devolved and degenerated into idolatry.

I will discuss some key factors that set up the ELCA for the present crisis before its inception, some of the warning signs of an impending crisis in the ELCA's short history, and the current status of God, Christ, and biblical authority in the ELCA in the wake of the Minneapolis churchwide

¹ *Constitution, Bylaws and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chapter 2, Confession of Faith, 2.03.*

assembly. Some factors for the crisis were internal to the predecessor churches that formed the ELCA and internal to the ELCA. At least one key factor, however, that led the ELCA along a path toward idolatry was external and should be mentioned up front. Deeply embedded in North American culture and thinking is a worldview that completely opposes the biblical worldview. It is the underlying assumption or belief that there are no absolute truths. That widespread belief in North America puts all Christian churches at risk.

Before proceeding, I have two caveats. First, many ELCA members and churches are firmly opposed to the course chosen by the ELCA churchwide organization last year. Perhaps half or more of the ELCA's members have more in common with orthodox Christians in other churches—Lutheran, Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox—than with ELCA members and leaders who believe the ELCA is on the right course. Not all leaders in the ELCA churchwide organization, synods, and seminaries believe the ELCA is on the right course. There are a few, unfortunately only a few, who know the ELCA has taken the wrong course. I use "ELCA" in a shorthand way to mean just those who sincerely believe the Holy Spirit is leading the ELCA on the right course. Second, the three Lutheran churches that formed the ELCA were likely headed for the same crisis now facing the ELCA, even if they had not merged in 1988. The formation of the ELCA accelerated the movement toward idolatry. It did not cause or set the course.

I. The Crisis Predates the ELCA's Formation

Hindsight is 20/20. Looking back, there were many signs that the ELCA would start off on the wrong course in 1988. Perhaps the clearest sign occurred in 1984. The founding documents and structural organization for the ELCA were formed and drafted by the Commission for the New Lutheran Church (CNLC), a group of seventy Lutheran leaders with proportional representation from the three merging churches—the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC).

In February 1984, the CNLC was considering the confession of faith in the draft constitution for the new church. The draft confession at that time read in part, "On the basis of sacred Scriptures, the Church's creeds and the Lutheran confessional writings, we confess our faith in the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Elwyn Ewald, an AELC lay CNLC member,

moved to amend the end of the phrase to read, "we confess our faith in the triune God," thereby deleting "Father, Son and Holy Spirit."²

Not surprisingly, there was a lively discussion in the CNLC about the proposed amendment. What might have been a surprise, at least for most people in the pews and pulpits of the three merging churches at the time, was the closeness of the vote on the amendment. God's revealed, proper name—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—was affirmed by a margin of just three votes. The amendment to remove this name from the confession of faith was supported by thirty CNLC members and opposed by thirty-three.

Even if all seventy members had been present and voted, and assuming there had been an additional seven votes affirming God's proper name, a 30-40 vote on the amendment should have been disturbing, to say the least. It was reason enough to call a halt to the formation of a new Lutheran church. The foundations for the new Lutheran church were deeply flawed and the course or trajectory that led to idolatry was already set well in place. Rather than being bound by Scripture's revelation of God's proper name and publicly confessing it, some Lutheran leaders intentionally wanted to avoid confessing it.

The 1984 CNLC vote was an indication of the number of clergy and lay leaders in the ELCA's predecessor churches who approached Scripture in a way in which humans place themselves in authority over Scripture, rather than submitting to Scripture's authority over all matters of faith and life. As sinners we all refuse to submit to Scripture's authority over us, but the closeness of the CNLC vote was an indication of an approach to Scripture used by a disturbing number of clergy and theologians in the ELCA's predecessor churches. The 1984 CNLC vote was also an indication of the number of Lutheran leaders who either approached Scripture and tradition with a radical feminist critique or were persuaded by the radical feminist critique that Christians ought to avoid addressing God by his proper name and confessing this name.

The CNLC vote in 1984 was not an isolated event or a freak aberration unrepresentative of what some Lutherans believed and practiced at the time. Consider this pastoral statement from the ELCA Conference of Bishops in 1989, one year into the ELCA's new life: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is the only doctrinally acceptable way for a person to be baptized into the body of Christ." The

² Edgar R. Trexler, *Anatomy of a Merger: People, Dynamics, and Decisions That Shaped the ELCA* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 60.

bishops admonished pastors to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit because some were using other wording when they baptized. Some had started doing it well before the merger. Perhaps the most commonly used wording was "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier." Some pastors were using words like "Mother, Friend, and Comforter." Some seminary professors and pastors believed that it was not only legitimate and proper to avoid using "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," but proper to be creative in using other wording.

Let us realize how audacious it is to think that we can choose a name for God. How would we like it if someone refused to call us by our proper name, gave us a different name, addressed us by that name, and always introduced us to others by that name? Even Jacob, perhaps the most manipulative figure in the Bible, who almost always responded to God's unconditional promises to him with a conditional promise—"If you will be with me . . . , then I'll give you a tenth of all that I have" (Gen 28:20-22)—did not have the audacity to name God. At the end of his all-night wrestling match with God, Jacob politely asked, "Please tell me your name" (Gen 32:29).

The early signs of trouble in the ELCA were noticed by some people. One year after the bishops issued their pastoral statement about Baptism, about one thousand ELCA members—pastors, theologians, and laypersons—met at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, in June 1990. They attended a gathering entitled "Call to Faithfulness," which was sponsored by the three independent Lutheran theological journals affiliated with the ELCA: *Lutheran Forum*, *Lutheran Quarterly*, and *Dialog*.

Among the people who met were representatives of all the biblical, confessional, evangelical groups in the ELCA—pietists, charismatics, and low-church Lutherans on one side, and high-church evangelical catholics on the other side, with people from every position in between. All of the prominent confessional theologians in the ELCA were present. (I think there were some LCMS members present too.)

With the exception of two of the speakers, Herbert Chilstrom, first presiding bishop of the ELCA, and Larry Rasmussen, from Union Seminary in New York, almost all of the other speakers, workshop leaders, and participants agreed that the Word of God was being silenced in the ELCA. Sexuality was identified as a symptom, but most of the attention was on other symptoms—the naming of God, separating law from gospel, and other troubling signs. Two years into the life of the new church, some knew the ELCA was in crisis.

II. God and Christ in the New ELCA Hymnal

Given the CNLC vote in 1984, no one should be surprised that years later the ELCA's new hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), printed an option to avoid invoking God's proper name at the beginning of the Communion service by providing these words: "Blessed be the holy Trinity, one God, who forgives all our sin, whose mercy endures forever." Nor should one be surprised that compared with the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW), the number of prayers addressed to God the Father are far fewer in ELW. The new hymnal also reflects an intentional effort to avoid using masculine pronouns with reference to God. The text of the Apostles' Creed was changed so that Christ Jesus is no longer "His only Son" but "God's only Son."

Avoiding masculine pronouns is also evident in the Psalms in ELW. The tinkering with the text of the Psalms is one of the clearest examples of humans placing themselves in authority over Scripture. The texts of various Psalms in ELW are new, but they are not new translations from the Hebrew text. Rather, the starting point was the psalm texts used in LBW. Those texts were problematic to begin with because they were taken from the Episcopal Church's proposed texts in 1977 for the forthcoming 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. The Episcopalians had tinkered with the wording, especially phrases that apparently were perceived to be too harsh or militaristic. They had also started to avoid using masculine pronouns in some places.

The ELW architects eliminated more masculine pronouns. A couple of examples will suffice. Verse 2 of Psalm 23 in ELW reads, "*The LORD* makes me lie down in green pastures *and leads* me beside still waters" (emphasis added). "He" was completely removed from the verse. Verse 3 in ELW reads: "*You* restore my soul, O LORD, and guide me along right pathways *for your name's sake*" (emphasis added). The ELW architects changed this verse from the third person to the second person to avoid using the masculine pronoun.

As my colleague Erma Wolf has noted, one result of removing masculine pronouns from the Psalms is that it obscures the christological connections in the Psalms.³ She notes this in the rewording of Psalm 80 in ELW, a psalm that pleads for God to save his people. Verse 17 of the ELW text reads, "Let your hand be upon the *one* of your right hand, the *one* you have made so strong for yourself" (emphasis added). The LBW text reads

³ See Erma Wolf, "Proposed Changes in the Psalms," <http://www.lutherancore.org/papers/changes-psalms.shtml>.

"Let your hand be upon the *man* of your right hand, the *son of man* you have made so strong for yourself" (emphasis added). The clear christological reference in "the son of man" is lost in *ELW*.

Psalm 24 in both *ELW* and *LBW* is perhaps most indicative of Wolf's observation. Here are verses 2-5 in *ELW*:

For *the LORD* has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD, and who may stand in God's holy place? *Those* of innocent hands and purity of heart, who do not swear on God's being, nor do *they* pledge by what is false. *They* shall receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of *their* salvation. (emphasis added)

Here are those verses in *LBW*:

For *it is he who* founded it upon the seas and made it firm upon the rivers of the deep. Who can ascend the hill of the LORD, and who can stand in *his* holy place? *Those* who have clean hands and a pure heart, who have not pledged themselves to falsehood, nor sworn by what is a fraud. *They* shall receive a blessing from the LORD and a just reward from the God of *their* salvation. (emphasis added)

To be fair to the *ELW* architects, some of the revisions they made to the *LBW* text move the text closer to the Hebrew text. In their aversion to masculine pronouns, however, they preserved one of the most significant and unfortunate revisions that the Episcopalians had made and which had been imported into *LBW*. They changed verses 4-5 from third-person singular (as in the Hebrew text and most English translations) to third-person plural. In answer to the question posed in verse 3, from the Christian point of view, only one is worthy to stand in the holy place—Jesus Christ. The *LBW* and *ELW* texts not only obscure the christological reference, but actually deny that Christ alone is worthy to stand in the holy place.

III. Biblical Authority:

Just One of Many Authorities and Not Even the First

The willingness to tinker with psalm texts reflects the larger crisis of biblical authority in the ELCA. In 1999 the Church in Society office of the ELCA churchwide organization developed a new resource for ELCA congregations. It was a study booklet entitled "Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues." It is still available on the ELCA

website.⁴ A parallel resource, "Talking Together as Christians about Homosexuality," was also made available at the time but is no longer available online.

The Church in Society resources advocated this basic method for discussing tough social issues:

Let's assume we have gathered together to talk about a social issue in our lives or world today, and do so in light of our faith. Scripture is the source and norm for our faith and life, but that doesn't necessarily mean that our conversation *begins* with Scripture. We first need to get a clearer sense of (1) how different people experience the issue and (2) a better understanding of the issue, how it came about, and what's at stake in it. This will take some time—if we do some deep listening and talking with one another, and are open to learning from the shared wisdom the participants bring to the discussion. After we have spent some time on this, we are ready to try (3) to discern together how our faith—as shaped by Scripture, theology, traditions, and practices of the Church—speaks to us regarding this issue, and how we experience and understand it today. Depending on the purpose of the conversation, this may lead us to consider (4) what to do in relation to the issue.⁵

In amplifying on the starting point, experience, the resource states, "Our conversation needs to be grounded in how people experience the issue—the actual human points of contact. Our immediate emotional reactions or associations with an issue are important."⁶ In this method, the discussion is grounded in the worst possible place—sinful human experience.

In amplifying on the third step, discernment, the resource states:

Here we turn to Scripture, to the traditions and teachings the Church has confessed and lived out through the ages, as well as to other forms of witness to the faith, such as traditions within denominations or those of particular congregations. *The temptation is to turn to one particular passage in Scripture that seems to relate to the issue at hand, and to use that as a "proof text" for a position arrived at on other grounds.* In some cases, there are clear scriptural stances, for example, in opposition to killing, adultery, or unjust treatment of the poor (even though there may be differences in how particular situations are dealt with). *But often Scripture is less than clear about how people of faith should respond to issues today.* That's why we need

⁴ See <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Faithful-Journey-Resources/Discussion-and-Study-Aides/Talking-Together-as-Christians-about-Tough-Social-Issues.aspx>.

⁵ "Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues," 11.

⁶ "Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues," 14.

to talk together with one another. What we hear and how we interpret what we hear from Scripture is incomplete, partial, and affected by our own experience and understandings. Our own vested interests can get in the way.⁷

On that same page in a pull-out box are these words: "Our world is significantly different from that of biblical times." That bold assertion is highly debatable. On the basis of Scripture and reason, I would argue that, in the context of social issues and ethics, it is false. Our world is more like biblical times than not.

For instance, a few years ago we intentionally invited speakers on opposite sides of the homosexuality issue to address the WordAlone Network annual convention. We invited four ELCA theologians, two biblical theologians and two systematic theologians, to speak on the first day. The two in favor of approving of homosexual behavior made the argument that our world is much different because the ancient world did not know about homosexual orientation and life-long same-sex sexual relationships. The next day psychologists Warren Throckmorton and Simon Rosser made their presentations. Dr. Rosser, who spoke in favor of homosexual behavior, was the Director of the HIV/STI Intervention and Prevention Studies at the Program in Human Sexuality, University of Minnesota Medical School in Minneapolis. At the beginning of his PowerPoint presentation, Dr. Rosser documented that in fact the ancient world did know about homosexual orientation and life-long same-sex sexual relationships. Not knowing what the two ELCA theologians had said the day before, he completely undercut one of their main points.

For now, I simply note how the ELCA resource calls into question the trustworthiness of the Bible as the authoritative source and norm for all of faith and life. The ELCA's method in such resources conflicts with key Lutheran teachings about biblical authority. Scripture is not the authority that stands over all other authorities. It is just one of many and can be discounted by the other authorities. Personal experience is given primacy. Scripture is also lumped with tradition, including traditions of local churches, in such a way that tradition appears to be on the same plane as Scripture.

A few years after the 1999 resources were produced, the ELCA sexuality task force appointed after the 2001 churchwide assembly suggested in its studies that Scripture is not clear about homosexuality.

⁷ "Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues," 15 (emphasis added).

The task force reported that biblical scholars are divided on the interpretation of scriptural passages about homosexuality. The clear implication was that if the scholars cannot reach agreement, then the Bible must not be clear.

It is easy to find scholars in North America who are divided on the issue of homosexuality, but even within North America most Christian biblical scholars still believe that Scripture is clear not only about homosexual behavior but about all sexual behavior. This is even more the case among the rest of the Christian churches around the world. The vast majority of biblical scholars today (as well as all Christians) still hear God speaking a clear word in Scripture—no one should even think about having a sexual relationship outside of the lifelong marriage of one man and one woman. Whether our sexual inclinations are homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual, all of us have failed to keep the commandment not to have sex outside of marriage. The problem with the Bible is not that it is unclear, but that it is all too clear and none of us can stand it. Even though the ELCA has prided itself on its ecumenical relations with churches here in North America and around the world, when it deals with sexuality the ELCA is decidedly un-ecumenical in disregarding what most churches believe and teach.

Ironically, the denial of the clarity of Scripture and the placing of Scripture alongside tradition were essentially no different than the Roman Catholic positions over against Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. Also ironic is that the primacy of personal experience was essentially no different than the assertions of Luther's opponents on the opposite side, the enthusiasts.

IV. The Authority of Personal Experience in the ELCA

Personal experience carries a lot of weight. Church Innovations, a research and consulting firm for churches led by Patrick Keifert and Pat Taylor Ellison, developed a method for dealing with tough social issues that intentionally starts with Scripture. A few years ago, my Southwestern Minnesota Synod had Church Innovations lead pastors in an all-day training event to help us talk about homosexuality and help us talk about it with our congregations. Throughout the day, we moved between whole-group sessions and small-group sessions. At the start of each session we began by listening to a reading from Scripture and then discussing the passage.

At the end of the day we met as a whole one last time. Ellison asked for feedback from our small groups. One pastor said that beginning with Scripture each time was helpful and led to good discussion, but all

discussion stopped as soon as someone shared an emotional personal experience. Ellison responded that they had received the same feedback in their training sessions with other groups. Keifert, who was sitting next to me, turned and said, "Yes, personal experience trumps Scripture every time."

The same dynamic played out at ELCA churchwide assemblies the past several years. A media relations expert told us that the voting members who spoke at the 2005 and 2007 churchwide assemblies in opposition to the approval of homosexual behavior would have won a formal debate hands down. They spoke articulately on the basis of Scripture and reason. Many of the speakers in favor of homosexual behavior focused their remarks on emotional, personal experiences. The media relations expert said the personal experience stories were probably more persuasive for undecided voting members at the assemblies.

In practice, individual personal experience is the ultimate authority in the ELCA, all the more so now that the ELCA officially teaches that there must be respect for the "bound conscience." The sexuality task force's novel definition of the bound conscience approved by the 2009 churchwide assembly is very revealing: "The task force understands the term 'bound conscience' to describe the situation of those who hold a particular position because they are convinced of it by *particular understandings of Scripture and tradition*."⁸

The sexuality task force quoted Luther's statement at the Diet of Worms in support of its definition of the "bound conscience": "Unless I am persuaded by the testimony of Scripture and by clear reason . . . I am conquered by the Scripture passages I have adduced and my conscience is captive to the words of God."⁹ Notice however the subtle shift from Luther's statement and the new ELCA teaching. Luther's conscience was captive to the word of God—an external word, as Luther always emphasized. In the ELCA's new teaching the "bound conscience" is tied to "particular understandings" of God's word.

Our particular understandings or personal interpretations of God's word are notoriously slippery, deceptive, and untrustworthy. They can

⁸ Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality, February 19, 2009, lines 406–408 (emphasis added).

⁹ "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," 41, footnote 26. This document is available at <http://www.elca.org/~media/Files/What%20We%20Believe/Social%20Issues/sexuality/Human%20Sexuality%20Social%20Statement.pdf>.

easily be an internal word shaped by our personal experience or personal desires rather than the external word of God. Luther cited the importance of the "testimony of Scripture" and "clear reason" precisely because he was aware of the danger of his conscience being captive to an internal word rather than the external word of God.

My first encounter with personal experience being made the ultimate norm was in my last year of confirmation class in the late 1960s in northern California. My confirmation pastor, an LCA pastor, told us in one of our sessions that we were free to do whatever we wanted if we were convinced in our minds that it was okay with God. We were only a two-hour drive from Haight-Ashbury and much of our class was already doing whatever we wanted! I could not believe what I had heard, so I asked my pastor, "Do you mean that if I think it is okay with God for me to kill someone, I may kill that person?" My pastor said, "Yes." Again, this is another indication of how deeply embedded the crisis was that had begun in the predecessor churches of the ELCA.

V. Law is Separated from Gospel

The other significant way in which the ELCA has undermined biblical authority is by violating one of the most important Lutheran teachings about God's word. Lutherans have taught that it is important to distinguish law and gospel, but they should not be separated. In the early 1990s, however, I heard an ELCA pastor separate law from gospel when he said to other pastors, "As Lutherans the only thing we need to agree upon is the gospel. We can disagree on social issues and ethics." His assertion is embedded in the ELCA's new social statement on sexuality:

In our Christian freedom, we therefore seek responsible actions that serve others and do so with humility and deep respect for the conscience-bound beliefs of others. *We understand that, in this discernment about ethics and church practice, faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about the meaning of Scripture and about what constitutes responsible action. We further believe that this church, on the basis of "the bound conscience," will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to live out its mission and ministry in the world.*¹⁰

Footnote 26 in that section is very important:

The Apostle Paul testifies to conscience as the unconditional moral responsibility of the individual before God (Romans 2:15-16). In the face of different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action, the concept of "the conscience" becomes pivotal. *When the clear word of God's*

¹⁰ "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," 19 (emphasis added).

saving action by grace through faith is at stake, Christian conscience becomes as adamant as Paul, who opposed those who insisted upon circumcision. (Galatians 1:8). In the same way Luther announced at his trial for heresy, "Unless I am persuaded by the testimony of Scripture and by clear reason . . . I am conquered by the Scripture passages I have adduced and my conscience is captive to the words of God. I neither can nor desire to recant anything, when to do so against conscience would be neither safe nor wholesome" (WA 7:838; Luther's Works 32:112). However, when the question is about morality or church practice, the Pauline and Lutheran witness is less adamant and believes we may be called to respect the bound conscience of the neighbor. That is, if salvation is not at stake in a particular question, Christians are free to give priority to the neighbor's well-being and will protect the conscience of the neighbor who may well view the same question in such a way as to affect faith itself. . . . This social statement draws upon this rich understanding of the role of conscience and calls upon this church, when in disagreement concerning matters around which salvation is not at stake, including human sexuality, to bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), honor the conscience and seek the well-being of the neighbor.¹¹

Every time I read those assertions in the ELCA social statement, I am shocked. They certainly cannot be reconciled with our Lord's own words in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, in which he speaks the law as clearly and as forcefully as anywhere else in the Bible: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17). Nor can the ELCA's teaching be reconciled with Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

The ELCA teaching pits Christ against his words in the Bible and God the Father against his word. When we as sinners separate law from gospel, we will fashion a god who just happens to approve of our sinful inclinations.

¹¹ "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," 41, footnote 26 (emphasis added).

VI. The Underlying Belief That There Are No Absolute Truths

The ELCA's course is similar to the course taken by other churches, most notably and tragically the United Church of Christ and The Episcopal Church here in the United States. The course that leads to idolatry can be seen primarily in churches in the global north, but not exclusively. The ELCA and mainline Protestant denominations, however, are not the only churches at risk of being in a crisis over biblical authority. At least one key factor puts all churches in North America at risk—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, non-denominational, and all the rest. Some churches are better able to withstand the risk than others, but no church is completely immune.

Not that many years ago most people used to believe that there are absolute truths. Somewhere along the way in the past thirty to forty years there was a fundamental shift. A recent Barna Group study confirms what many have observed: "Only one-third (34%) [of adults in America] believe in absolute moral truth."¹² The denial of absolute truth is a denial of the biblical worldview. The Bible confesses and reveals from beginning to end that there is absolute truth and locates truth in the most radical way in one man: Jesus Christ. Our Lord said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The Barna Group has documented in other studies that most Americans, even most Christians, do not hold to a biblical worldview. Lutherans are no exception, and we do not appear to be significantly different than mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics in our overall beliefs.

Here are two instances of the denial of absolute truth. An ELCA news release in March 2005 quoted Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson when he first publicly commented on the sexuality task force proposals for the 2005 churchwide assembly at a meeting of the ELCA Bishops:

Hanson said: Two "hermeneutics" or paradigms are at work among the members of the ELCA that make agreement difficult on scriptural and theological matters. The Rev. Craig L. Nesson, academic dean and professor of contextual theology, Wartburg Theological Seminary . . . writes that there is a "traditional approach" and a "contextual approach" in interpreting Scripture, both of which are valid and irreconcilable, Hanson told the bishops. Similarly, Dr. Marcus J. Borg, Department of Philosophy, Oregon State University, Corvallis, writes that there are two irreconcilable "paradigms" in which Christians differ in their understandings of the Christian tradition and their interpretation of Scripture, creeds and the confessions, he

¹² "Barna Studies the Research, Offers a Year-in-Review Perspective," Dec 2009, www.barna.org.

said. Hanson said he's heard people with different understandings of Scripture and theology seeking to find a place for their views in the sexuality recommendations. "Do we expect a resolution to provide a bridge between two extremes?" Hanson asked the bishops. "We Lutherans have come to say that *when something is 'paradoxical' that we're going to live in the paradox at the foot of the cross and not force ourselves to decide it with a vote.*"¹³

If both approaches, traditional and contextual, are valid, then the conclusions reached by each approach must be true. If it is true for some Christians that all sexual relationships outside of the lifelong marriage of one man and one woman are sinful, then it is true for other Christians that not all sexual relationships outside of marriage of one man and one woman are sinful.

A second example of the denial of absolute truth was seen when Bishop Margaret Payne of the New England Synod of the ELCA (and chair of the sexuality task force from 2002–2005) expressed her support for opposing points of view in her synod after the 2005 churchwide assembly. That assembly had affirmed the 1993 statement by the ELCA Conference of Bishops, which said in part:

There is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of a homosexual relationship. We, therefore, do not approve such a ceremony as an official action of this church's ministry. Nevertheless, we express trust in and will continue dialogue with those pastors and congregations who are in ministry with gay and lesbian persons, and affirm their desire to explore the best ways to provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister.¹⁴

Bishop Payne wrote in early 2006 about the synod's guidelines for blessing people in same-sex sexual relationships:

After I was elected bishop, according to my interpretation of the 1993 statement from the Conference of Bishops and after consultation with representatives of the Churchwide expression of the ELCA, I made it known that I believed it possible to regard officiating at a ceremony of civil union, and prayerful support of those couples, as appropriate pastoral care that

¹³ ELCA News Service, March 11, 2005, "ELCA Bishops Hear Concerns, Surplus News from Presiding Bishop," 05-042-JB (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Conference of Bishops, October 5–8, 1993, "Blessing of Homosexual Relationships," CB93.10.25.

did not necessitate discipline for the pastor as long as these guidelines were observed.¹⁵

Bishop Payne, with support from churchwide leaders, had for years interpreted the 1993 Bishops' statement as support for two opposing beliefs and practices. She also wrote in her letter:

Pastors in this synod differ in their beliefs about the appropriateness of using the term "blessing" and they differ in their opinions about whether or not it is appropriate to preside at civil-unions or blessings. As long as a pastor is a responsible and responsive leader and a faithful pastor of the church, makes decisions in a collaborative fashion, and observes the policies of the ELCA, I trust and support that pastor's discretion to make the appropriate pastoral decision in each situation. There are pastors in this synod who are not willing to preside at any form of same-sex blessing and I support them fully in that decision.¹⁶

The New England Synod Council approved a statement in December 2006 entitled "Guidance for Pastors and Congregations of the New England Synod, ELCA Regarding the Blessing of Unions of Same Sex Couples." The statement offered supportive guidance for pastors and congregations who wanted to bless same-sex unions. In a May 2007 letter to synod rostered leaders, the New England Synod Council clarified the intent of the December 2006 statement:

This Guidance Statement was written to respond to congregations and pastors who have requested such guidance from their Synod. Bishop Payne has stated repeatedly and publicly that she and the Synod Council fully support those congregations and pastors who, for reasons of conscience or in the exercise of pastoral discretion, choose not to offer such Blessings. . . . We fully honor and respect those whose views regarding the appropriate pastoral care for gay and lesbian people differ from those expressed in this statement.¹⁷

The New England Synod's repeated declaration of support for pastors and churches that wanted to bless same-sex sexual relationships and those who did not illustrates the denial of absolute moral truths. This is now the official teaching for the entire ELCA in the new social statement on sexuality:

¹⁵ "Statement on Sexuality Issues in the New England Synod of the ELCA," January 26, 2006 (emphasis added).

¹⁶ "Statement on Sexuality Issues in the New England Synod of the ELCA," January 26, 2006.

¹⁷ Letter from New England Synod Council to rostered leaders, May 2007.

Thus, we recognize that this church's deliberations related to human sexuality do not threaten the center of our faith, but rather require our best moral discernment and practical wisdom in the worldly realm. We also understand that in this realm faithful people can and will come to different conclusions about what constitutes responsible action. Therefore, this social statement seeks to assist this church in discerning what best serves the neighbor in the complexity of human relationships and social needs in the midst of daily life.¹⁸

The assumption that there are no absolute truths puts all churches at risk. With the exception of orthodox religious traditions (Christian, Muslim, and Jewish), it is a given throughout our culture that there are no absolute truths. Churches and denominations may officially teach that there are absolute truths, but many of their members deny it. The Barna studies confirm how erosive this factor is in shaping the beliefs of Americans. In this regard our Lutheran churches in North America, the Roman Catholic Church, and mainline Protestant churches are all in the same boat. For example, consider how many Roman Catholic politicians waffle on the morality of abortion.

VII. Conclusion: Idolatry in the ELCA

In conclusion, as Lutherans we should call a thing what it is: idolatry is running loose in the ELCA. Instead of carving metal and wood or sculpting stone to make gods, the ELCA is using paper, ink, and the worldwide web. One way or another, we sinners will make the god we think we need or want and turn away from the living God.

The most extreme example of this in the ELCA is Ebenezer Lutheran Church in San Francisco, California (see herchurch.org). This ELCA church worships a goddess of its own making and will even sell you rosary beads to help you worship its goddess. It is a gross example and surely destructive, but the subtlety of the other forms of idolatry is more pervasive and more destructive. Intentionally not confessing God's proper name is to confess some other god. Changing the words in the Psalms, pitting Christ against the Bible, separating law and gospel, and questioning the clarity of the Bible are all subtle forms of fashioning a god that suits us.

There is one other form of idolatry evident in the ELCA: church unity, both at the churchwide level and at the congregational level. Idolatry at the

¹⁸ "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust," 10, last paragraph in Section II.

churchwide level was evident in the first of the recommendations from the sexuality task force approved by the 2005 churchwide assembly:

Because the God-given mission and communion we share is at least as important as the issues about which faithful conscience-bound Lutherans find themselves so decisively at odds, the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality recommends that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of our disagreements.¹⁹

The constant mantra in the ELCA is that we can agree to disagree, but still be one in Christ and have unity in the ELCA. When the unity of the denomination takes precedence over confession of the truth of God's word, we have turned the denomination into an idol.

The congregational form of idolatry is also evident. Most ELCA congregations did not participate in any substantial way in the process that led to the 2009 churchwide assembly decisions. Many did not know about the decisions until after the assembly. Some pastors (and church councils who did know about the decisions) were reluctant to start a discussion in their congregations because of concern that it would threaten the unity of the congregation. Many congregations are still reluctant to deal with the crisis in the ELCA for the same reason. My guess is that making the unity of the local congregation the ultimate priority is a form of idolatry that is not unique to the ELCA. Either way, when denominational unity or congregational unity takes precedence, God, Christ, and biblical authority get shoved aside. Lord, save us from ourselves!