

DOES THE ELCA TEACH ANOTHER GOSPEL?

Rev. Cary G. Larson

March 2010

“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” Galatians 1:8 (NIV)

For many years, learned people, clergy and lay, have warned that the ELCA is in dangerous theological waters. It has been increasingly clear in recent months that not only is the ELCA in dangerous waters but is also a sinking ship as it relates to the true expression of Christ's church.

Perhaps nothing is clearer than in the ELCA understanding of salvation. For many leaders of the ELCA have deviated from the biblical understand of salvation and practice what is know as Universalism, that is, a theological doctrine that all human beings will eventually be saved. Many have come to know this as the “Big God” theology where all roads lead to God with or without Jesus Christ. Popular secular icons such as Oprah Winfrey have even proclaimed this theology.

The reality is that the ELCA is not the church the average Lutheran person in the pew thinks it is. For many, the church is what they see every Sunday and what they participate in during the week in church related activities. However, in giving dollars to the ELCA by way of benevolences is actually promoting a non-Lutheran and even a non-Christian understanding of salvation and the role of Christ's church in this world.

Within the official ELCA web pages there is a presentation of what the ELCA confesses. Titled, “What We Believe”, there is presented here the official position of the ELCA concerning salvation. In these pages the authors, who speak for the ELCA while not exactly state an official statement such as “We believe”, quotes extensively from the liberal theologian Carl Braaten, *“The Christian hope for salvation, whether for the believing few or the unbelieving many, is grounded in the person and meaning of Christ alone, not in the potential of the world's religions to save, nor in the moral seriousness of humanists and people of good will, not even in the good works of pious Christians and church people.... There is a universalist thrust in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's theology. How else can we read passages such as 'for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1 Cor 15:22)?”*

Later they quote Braaten again, saying that as ELCA Lutherans we believe as truth, *“If Jesus is the Lord and Savior, he is the universal Lord and Savior, not merely my personal Lord and Savior. Because Jesus is the unique and universal Savior, **there is a large hope for salvation, not only for me and others with the proper credentials of believing and belonging to the church, but for all people whenever or wherever they might have lived and no matter how religious or irreligious they may have proved to be themselves.**”*

Truthfully, the words are a little unclear on the subject of salvation on these pages. The average reader may find it difficult to determine what exactly is the official teaching of the ELCA. It is true that God the Father indeed sent Christ Jesus, the Son of God into

the world to save the entire world (John 3:16) but the traditional understanding within Lutheranism and for the majority of Christendom is that salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone and through faith in him and that the denial of God's salvation through Jesus is unbelief and this is the un-forgiven sin (Matt. 12:31-32). Not only is this found in various places in the New Testament gospels and epistles this confession is also accurately reflected in the Lutheran understanding of salvation found in the Book of Concord.

Stephen Bouman, Executive Director for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission was invited to speak about outreach at the 2009 SE MN Synod Fall Theological Conference in La Crosse, Wisconsin. In his three-part address concerning ELCA outreach, Bouman, who was the former bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod, talked about various examples of outreach and presented the host of opportunities where ELCA leaders can reach out to believers of other religions and non-believers, **not necessarily to convert but to develop relationships as the end goal.**

In the final session, he was using again various examples in his experience as bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod, including the events that unfolded immediately and shortly after the fateful day of 9/11. He commented about praying with other religious leaders, the inspiring narrative of the advancement of literally anointed firefighters going up "Jacob's ladder" of the stairways of the doomed Trade Center Towers. Bouman also commented that outreach has a cost including being rebuked by other Christians. He shared that a woman within the Metropolitan New York Synod accused him of being a Universalist because of his statements days shortly after 9/11, where he said that those who jumped out of the burning Trade Center Towers were jumping "toward home". Bouman concluded, "Technically, maybe she's right." And then he added "**But I want it both ways!**", meaning salvation through Jesus Christ and salvation apart from Jesus Christ.

The bottomline is that the ELCA is being recognized as a universalistic church because of statements like that on the ELCA official web site and public comments by upper ELCA leadership. Even the Christian Universalist Association, "an interdenominational organization connecting churches, ministries, and individuals who believe in Christian Universalism" states on their own web site,

"Meanwhile, there has been a trend toward universalist beliefs in several other denominations and traditions that have not historically taught universal salvation. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is one of the best examples of this, because Martin Luther himself never embraced Universalism, but the ELCA today is one of the major Lutheran denominations and some of its ministers openly teach the salvation of all -- although this is not an official teaching of the church."

This should alarm the average traditional Lutheran who attends any ELCA church in the country and provides just cause to reevaluate their giving practices. Clearly, with the three examples provided as evidence, the ELCA has embraced universalism in practice. While not appearing as official teachings, the practices of universalism is accepted within ELCA by its leaders, perhaps the majority of pastors and is clearly taught in its

seminaries. Again this understanding of salvation apart from Jesus Christ is not supported by Holy Scripture and thus not by the Lutheran confessions.

It is clear that within the model ELCA constitution, which most congregations adopted, states the expectation to support the ELCA in all expressions. It is not a gross assumption, however, that when congregations adopted this constitution it was with the understanding that the ELCA, as expressed as synod and church wide, would also follow the ELCA constitution in its practice as well.

Members of ELCA congregations are invited to ask their pastors a clear and simple question, "Is there salvation apart from Jesus Christ?" The answer should be equally clear and simple, "No, as per the Holy Scriptures." If any other answer is received, further questions are warranted to determine what exactly does the pastor believe and if these beliefs are in keeping with what the Bible boldly proclaims and as amplified in the Lutheran confessions.

Gone are the times when we can just assume that when we speak of salvation that we all are saying that God saves those who believe in Jesus Christ alone. In 1 Thessalonians 5:21, we find Paul commanding Christians to "test everything". Paul writes specifically to prophecy, which in our times is seen in the revealed word of God in scripture, and in proper preaching. Paul commands us to examine the Scriptures every day to see what the leadership of the ELCA, or anyone else for that matter, is saying about Christ Jesus is true. If it is not, it must be rejected.