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A god who never take offense



Now, if [the Marcionites' god] is susceptible of no feeling of rivalry, or anger, or damage, or injury, as one who refrains from exercising judicial power, I cannot tell how any system of discipline — and that, too, a plenary one — can be consistent in him. For how is it possible that he should issue commands, if he does not mean to execute them; or forbid sins, if he intends not to punish them, but rather to decline the functions of the judge, as being a stranger to all notions of severity and judicial chastisement? For why does he forbid the commission of that which he punishes not when perpetrated? . . . Again, he plainly judges evil by not willing it, and condemns it by prohibiting it; while, on the other hand, he acquits it by not avenging it, and lets it go free by not punishing it. What a prevaricator of truth is such a god! What a dissembler with his own decision! Afraid to condemn what he really condemns, afraid to hate what he does not love, permitting that to be done which he does not allow, choosing to indicate what he dislikes rather than deeply examine it! This will turn out an imaginary goodness, a phantom of discipline, perfunctory in duty, careless in sin. Listen, ye sinners; and ye who have not yet come to this, hear, that you may attain to such a pass! A better god has been discovered, who never takes offence, is never angry, never inflicts punishment, who has prepared no fire in hell, no gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness! He is purely and simply good. He indeed forbids all delinquency, but only in word. He is in you, if you are willing to pay him homage, for the sake of appearances, that you may seem to honor God; for your fear he does not want. And so satisfied are the Marcionites with such pretences, that they have no fear of their god at all. — Tertulian, *Against Marcion*, Book I, Chapters 26-27 [*Ante-Nicene Fathers* 3:292]

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Same view, two reviews — the latest ELCA sexuality study guide



We have two reviews of *Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality — Lutheran Studies on Sexuality: Journey Together Faithfully, Part Three*. The 147-page study, including an English/Spanish CD guide, reached most ELCA pastors in time for Christmas. Once again, an ELCA guide makes use of invented situational scenarios to encourage discussion and conversation. How useful imaginary realities are is debatable. Our first reviewer, Bruce Foster, finds some silliness in the study as a result, and also points out the “emendations” of

St. Paul. Our second reviewer, Ron Marshall, describes the fallacious use to which Martin Luther is put, something Pr. Foster notes as well, while also providing a thorough background for a Luther quotation that puts its use by the study guide into sharper question. — *the editor*

Love of neighbor by Bruce Foster

■ If the new study guide just issued as part of the latest project to craft a statement on sexuality for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is any indication, the denomination, like the Chinese curse puts it, is in for “interesting times.” The question that the study guide claims to seek to answer is: “How can we, as sexual beings, best understand what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves and thus fulfill God’s law (of love)?”

Am I the only person who thinks that the answer to this question is so patently obvious that even to ask it, let alone write a 147-page study guide about it, is to raise all kinds of suspicions?

What is the most loving thing Christians can do for their neighbor?

Share the Gospel, so that faith might arise through the work of the Holy Spirit. And then, under the power of the Spirit, the New Testament commands concerning sexuality in the teaching of Jesus and Paul — summed up in the phrase, “chastity in singleness and fidelity in marriage” — become not an onerous limitation, but a joy and a delight.

Madonna albums

Suspicions are further raised when the authors use, as an example of good sexual ethical reasoning, Martin Luther’s unfortunate remarks on what a wife of an impotent man should do. This was not Luther at his best. The authors seem completely unaware that it was just this kind of casuistry that led Luther to his ultimate PR nightmare, his advice to Philip of Hesse to commit bigamy.

The study is filled with such silliness. Moreover, since it is impossible for Lutherans to be hip, the study guide’s foray into pop culture is funny. In one vignette they describe a 10th grade girl struggling with her sexual identity. She “loves” listening to her mother’s vintage Madonna

“albums” because she admires the “strong self-confident female sexuality” Madonna projects. When I shared this with some actual 10th graders, they all rolled their eyes at the thought that any teenager would ever listen to Madonna, even in an “album” format. The author of that vignette is a living embodiment of *1985* by Bowling for Soup. If you do not know that cultural reference, you should not be discussing the interaction of pop culture and teens.

Economical sex

David Tiede’s Galatians commentary and discussion guide is a futile attempt to turn Paul’s take-no-prisoners-search-and-destroy epistle into a basis for a Lutheran “nice” theology. Along the way he tries to convince us that Paul’s white hot Galatian invective is an expression of “alarm rather than anger.” Against almost all modern translations (including the *Hermeneia* series, cited as a resource by the guide), is it possible Paul did not say that the Galatian “judaizers” ought to castrate themselves?

The study becomes a Rorschach test for ELCA mantras. In the section on “Sexuality and Economic Justice,” participants are asked to consider the way that differing economic situations shape an individual’s perception of sexual values. While the vignettes do touch actual situations, the study ignores the much more significant relationship between sexuality and economics. It is not that differing economic situations produce differing sexual ethics, as the guide implies. Rather, it is that abandonment of traditional Christian ethical norms correlates strongly with declining economic situations. Unmarried mothers are apt to be poor; married mothers tend to be better off. God is not mocked, sorry to say, not even when it comes to money.

Emended relevance

Finally, no better commentary on the spin of the document can be offered than comparing the “emended” quote from Paul with the full quotation and two other parallel passages.

Study guide version: (Gal 5:6) “In Christ Jesus . . . the only thing that counts is faith working through

love.”

New International Version (NIV): “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

Two NIV parallels sharpen what the study guide has dulled:

Gal. 6:15: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.”

1 Cor. 7:19: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”

As the study guide inadvertently illustrates, an “emended” Gal. 5:6 has little if any relevance in answering whether traditional Christian ethical norms should be jettisoned. The unemended St. Paul and the two parallel passages reinforce the traditional assertion.

There is a simple answer to the question made so vexing by the study guide. Preach the Gospel — so a new creation may come forth and then, let us examine the commands of God.

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Getting off on the wrong foot by Ron Marshall

■ The new ELCA study, *Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk About Human Sexuality*, gets off on the wrong foot in two ways.

First, its method is to look at extreme cases of sexual behavior (beginning with an imagined case of teenage oral sex) and then try to find the solid middle ground on human sexual morality from assessments of those many fringe cases.

This is obviously backward. The extreme edges may never guide one reliably on to a solid

middle ground on moral issues. Any parent knows that. Our moral core has to be established first so that the extreme cases can then be put into perspective later. That’s the old adage about exceptions proving the rule. This chestnut, however, is missing from this study.

This backward method, however, is apparently justified in this study by the way it fosters open and frank discussion. But I think it only breeds confusion.

And secondly, this study maligns Martin Luther. The study guide takes his advice on “secret marriage” (*LW* 36:103-104) and uses it to authorize “flexibility” and “creativity” in moral deliberation.

Winging it with Luther

This is the notorious case found in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520) where an impotent man tricks a sexually healthy woman into marriage, and then will not release her from her vows when his impotence is discovered right after marrying.

To resolve this mess for the poor, bewildered wife, Luther advises sex with some other mutually agreed upon partner, if her husband refuses a divorce. That way she could stay married and also bear children. If the rascally husband won’t go along with this proposal, then Luther advises the wife to flee the marriage and take on another husband in another country so she can follow the Biblical command to be fruitful and multiply.

The ELCA study makes hay out of Luther’s advice. It says that his “flexible approach” and “creativity” allowed him to dodge the scriptural commandment against adultery and avoid “applying some list of moral prescriptions” to settle the case. One gets the impression we too should feel free to wing it as he did — all for the sake of meeting people’s sexual needs, whatever they are. (Do you detect a not so hidden agenda at this juncture in the study?)

Blithe ignorance

But two other matters in this pathetic case regarding Luther’s advice are blithely ignored in the study. First, Luther had critics in his own time who did just what this ELCA study is doing. He called them “topsy-turvy liars.” (*LW* 45.20) He

never intended his advice to become a sort of moral principle, and he had to say so. To make it “flexible” and “creative” is to upend his words. But this study makes no mention of the critical reaction Luther’s advice generated at the time, nor does it even consider Luther’s follow-up response in his 1522 treatise on marriage. There he notes the peculiarity of the “secret marriage” case and castigates the unjustifiable use that was being made of it.

By not telling the whole story, isn’t this study being willfully unfair? If so, what kind of a moral example is that?

The second problem is academic, but crucial. Abdel Wentz and Helmut Lehman, editors of the treatise on *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, thought it necessary offer an extensive footnote on the case, consisting of a six-part warning against using “secret marriage” as any kind of generalized moral or ethical instruction. (LW 36.105, n.184) Their warning and the extensive reasoning behind it was completely ignored by the

study guide, which clearly defies Luther’s own intentions and reveals much about how, in fact, this ELCA study guide uses Luther.

Pickwickian use

So why wasn’t this warning heeded? If it is a faulty warning, not deserving of recognition, why not explain that? Note carefully that the study has dozens of background materials appended to it. You would think a page or so, or a note or two, could have been devoted to this case on “secret marriage” and the Pickwickian use the authors made of it, so that what the guide says could be better understood.

But as it stands, this use of Luther’s advice is a disgrace to the study itself and casts suspicion on everything else it says. *Caveat lector*.

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Good death, sad death



The call came at 7:30 one recent morning that my father-in-law, The Rev. Dr. Richard W. Solberg, had been taken to our local hospital after suffering what turned out to be a massive cerebral hemorrhage. We had known that one day this call would come, ever since moving Dad and Mom here to our community three years ago. But one is never prepared. After getting the difficult news from the doctor, I stayed with Dad in the emergency room while my wife went to her mother, hoping to bring her back to the hospital. I prayed with him, sang to him, spoke what I could remember of the liturgy for the *Commendation of the Dying*. Within a few minutes he was gone.

He was a remarkable man, by any standard. After his brief stint in parish ministry in the 1940’s, he spent most of his life in academics, first as a history professor at Augustana College (Sioux Falls) and then as academic dean at Thiel College, finally serving as higher education director for the Lutheran Church in America. Along the way he wrote several books, the best-known of which is

probably *Lutheran Higher Education in North America*, the definitive history of that endeavor across synodical lines.

Forum introduction

In retirement in California, he served a couple of congregations as interim pastor and wrote some more books. He was a man of incredible grace, wisdom, intelligence, wit, and culture. It was he who first introduced me to *Forum Letter*. This was back in the days when I was a United Methodist, contemplating becoming a Lutheran. “There’s no better way to understand what’s happening among Lutherans,” he said, as he presented me with a gift subscription to the *Forum* package.

I was both his son-in-law and his pastor, the roles so intertwined it has sometimes been difficult to know how to navigate. His request was that I officiate at his funeral, and I was honored to do so, but of course it was not easy. The loving support of my wife and her siblings, and the kindness and the prayers of so very many people

provided the strength. We sang wonderful hymns (*Now Thank We All Our God* — his only written request; *O Day Full of Grace*, *Beautiful Savior*, and more). We prayed, laughed, and wept, and I preached about the Good Shepherd. I think he would have liked it. I know he would have liked seeing all his children and the majority of his grandchildren all sitting in church together.

Deeper gifts of love

Dad gave us so many gifts, not the least of which, at least immediately, was the remarkably complete set of instructions: who to notify, all the information about insurance, pensions, etc. — right down to the phone number of the local Social Security office. This was a man who taped to the back of every piece of art hanging on his wall and many pieces of furniture a description of what it was, where and when it was acquired, what it meant. More than once we have commented on how much we really must do before we die.

But the deeper gift in the long run is his steadfast faithfulness and his love for his wife and all his family. I loved him as if he were my own father. I can hardly imagine life without him.

In the days after a funeral, one must face the more mundane tasks. We've moved my mother-in-law to a smaller place, with more help available for her. I've been cleaning out their apartment, hauling some stuff to a temporary storage facility, some to the thrift store, adding boxes to my garage to be sorted through "when there's time." They have to stand in line behind the boxes left from my own parents, who have been dead for several years. Some of those boxes contain the stuff from my grandparents that my parents

never got around to sorting.

The process, of course, is at once lonely, wistful, and healing. One's mind wanders in so many directions. How did he manage to be so organized? Why didn't I ever think to ask him about (fill in the blank). Is there anything that can be done with used hearing aids? Does every man in the world have the same assortment of things in his top dresser drawer?

I try to pray Morning and Evening Prayer each day, but in the time following Dad's death that was a little spotty; too many comings and goings, and a very disrupted schedule. But two weeks after his death, I sat in the nearly-empty apartment by myself late in the afternoon and prayed the vespers portion of the "Office of the Dead" contained in Philip Pfatteicher's *The Daily Prayer of the Church*. It was a calming time, and I especially was touched by the words of the concluding collect:

Eternal Lord God, you hold all souls in life. We beseech you to shed forth upon your whole Church in paradise and on earth the bright beams of your light and heavenly comfort; and grant that we, following the good example of those who have loved and served you here and are now at rest, may at last enter with them into the fullness of your unending joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

— by Richard O Johnson, associate editor

Spinning wheel



Secular politicians could take a lesson on the fine art of spinning from the folks advocating for change in the church's view of homosexuality.

We commented once before on their brilliant stroke of repeating *ad nauseum* that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America demands a "vow of celibacy" of homosexuals who want to

be pastors ("Controlling Chastity," *FL* July, 2004). Of course, as we explained, the ELCA demands no such thing of anyone. But say something often enough, and get the secular media to pick it up, and soon everyone thinks it's true.

A recent statement from Lutherans Concerned/North America provides another good example.

Emily Eastwood, the LC/NA executive

director, is quite unhappy that the disciplinary hearing of Pr. Bradley Schmeling of Atlanta is to take place in closed session (“The Atlanta Situation,” *FL* November, 2006). “Although Bradley preferred that the disciplinary proceeding be held in open hearing,” she explained, “Bishop Warren [of the Southeast Synod] has elected to close the proceedings.” The bishop, she goes on to lament, has “an absolute veto over whether the hearing is open or closed.”

Default setting

Well . . . that’s one way to put it, we suppose.

In fact, however, the ELCA constitution (Paragraph 20.13) specifies that, in the case of an individual pastor accused of misconduct, the hearing shall not be open to the public — “unless both the accusers and the accused agree to a public hearing.” In essence, this means “closed” is a “default setting” for such a hearing. It is only open to the public if both parties agree that this should happen. (Accusations against a congregation, on the other hand, normally take place in an open hearing.)

Why does the constitution make that provision? No doubt because in many cases of accused misconduct, there are details which might come out which could violate the privacy of, or prove embarrassing to, persons other than the accused. The provision is a reasonable effort to protect the privacy of everyone involved.

Vociferously exposed

Why might an accused want the proceedings to be open? Only one reason we can think of: to give maximum opportunity for media exposure. In Pr. Schmeling’s case, there doesn’t seem to be any question that he is “guilty” in the sense of having violated the expectations the church has of its pastors; he has freely admitted it, both to the bishop and to the public. Consequently, an open hearing primarily would have the effect of once again giving the advocates for change an opportunity to make their case in a very vociferous way.

Why might the bishop decide not to agree to the request for an open hearing? Certainly one reason is that he understands the intention of the accused to make this a media event, and he be-

lieves that would not be good for the church — and perhaps not good for the accused, either. Even mean old disciplinarian law-and-order bishops often have a pastoral heart buried somewhere within them, and from all we hear about Bp. Warren, he’s a fine pastor.

Indeed, the bishop may know a number of other pastoral reasons why the hearing should not be open — reasons having to do with protecting the privacy of persons who may be involved in some way in the case. If that is true, of course the bishop is not really at liberty to spell out those reasons, since doing so would already violate that privacy.

The fact of the matter is that the bishop is under absolutely no constitutional or moral obligation to agree to a public hearing. Again, the default mode here is “closed procedure.”

Right of the accused

The burden of proof for why it should be otherwise is on the side that wants the hearing open. What we get from Pr. Schmeling’s allies, however, is histrionic and misleading language about the bishop’s intransigence, and his malicious and secretive intentions. We would admit that the bishop’s declining to agree to an open hearing in effect determines that the hearing will be closed.

But it sounds so much more sinister to say he has an “absolute veto” and that he has “elected to close the proceedings” — without noting that the accused has the same “veto” should he desire a closed hearing.

As we said, it’s all about spin, painting the accused pastor as nobly wanting to take a stand in the open, only to be callously disregarded by a reactionary bishop who wants to run a Kafkaesque-like trial behind closed doors.

Golly, come to think of it, they might get more media mileage out of that than they ever would from an open hearing. And since the bishop quite rightly maintains silence about the whole affair, the *spinmeisters* can pretty much say with impunity whatever they like. — *by Richard O. Johnson, associate editor*

Confusing sides on style and substance

by Peter Speckhard



The two “sides” of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod are pretty easy to distinguish, most of the time.

One is all about contemporary worship, *Ablaze!*, Evangelical style, and corporate-casual attire, and they are best represented by the newsletter called *JesusFirst* (www.jesusfirst.net).

And in the other corner — battered and bruised by two consecutive election victories by President Gerald Kieschnick — stands the pure doctrine, half-Eastern Orthodox, traditional/liturgical worship group, best represented by the newsletter called *Consensus* (www.consensus.lutheran.org).

Most LCMS pastors get both newsletters for free and periodically agree and disagree with both. At least I do. But sometimes the two newsletters seem to forget which side they’re on, which confuses the fans in the stands.

Pepless board in a box

Here is an example. In the November *JesusFirst*, Pr. Bruce Cameron, one of the *JesusFirst* “Publication Team,” toys with the idea of developing, in a none-too-subtle uppercut at the *Consensus* folks, “A Theology of Tone of Voice.” He elaborates, “It would be based on the contention that even correct assertions, presented in a cold or loveless manner, could become not merely a correct message presented badly, but actually a false message; that the way we say things could overpower the surface correctness of our words.”

(The *Consensus* people, by the way, would never stoop to a term like “Publication Team.” They would use a boring old “Editorial Board” or some other pepless, inside-the-box, non-forward-looking moniker.)

Meaning in saying

News flash — such a concept has already been developed and is fully operational, but for the other side, those loveless-toned guys who couldn’t furrow their brows any deeper than they already are, lest they shatter their own monocles. One of

the central arguments of *Consensus* is that tone and content, style and substance are not neatly distinguishable, that the way we say things actually affects the meaning of what is said.

JesusFirst has generally been at its most dogmatic in asserting the contrary — that style is strictly *adiaphora* and distinct from substance. If, for example, the lyrics are orthodox, the song must be fine.

But if a factually true statement like “Jesus loves you” can mean something false when delivered with a snarl and a glare, then maybe, just perhaps, some equally true statement, like “This is the body of Christ, given for you,” may take on a totally different and unedifying meaning when accompanied by light rock music while spoken by a casually-clad “distribution team,” this as the “power-point presentation team” shows clouds and what-not.

Could a pop-culture-wannabe way of saying things overpower the surface correctness of an order of Divine Service? Are style and substance entirely separable?

Feinting direction

This is one of the main things the whole fight has been about for decades now. And now *JesusFirst* at least feints in the direction of switching sides entirely on the issue. Which side is which? How will we be able to follow the action?

No doubt the next issue of *Consensus* will offer a blistering counter-attack dealing with the dangers of confusing style and substance, and everything will fall back into a recognizable place, the two sides merely having circled each other in the ring.

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Omnium gatherum

Chirpy clerks ● The “Christmas wars” are over for another year. I have to say, I don’t care whether a store clerk may or may not say “Merry Christmas” to me. I’m kind of a grumpy shopper anyway. In my perfect world, clerks will speak when spoken to, when you can find one; I tend to irritability when they chirp out of turn. But if stores would wait until at least three hours after Halloween before putting up decorations in recognition of a religious day they cannot name, I would be well pleased. Beyond that, I don’t much give a hoot. I’d rather see Christmas observances retreat altogether to the church than watch the continuing desecration of anyone’s religious observances by commercial means.

Zoos ● Kansas City’s Swope Park Zoo has a large Australian exhibit. When we visit, the first creature the nine-year-old daughter wants to see every time is the kookaburra. So that’s the first place we went with a visiting Australian friend some while back. We asked if Australian zoos had North American exhibits. He was mystified by the question. “What,” he sniffed, “would we put in them?” Excuse me? How about something that doesn’t have a pouch, for starters? Something with buffalo roaming and deer and antelope playing? He’d never seen any of those. The guy lives in Brisbane and likely doesn’t get out too much. Australians — I’ll concede, this is probably an understandable point of national pride — just can’t imagine any animals weirder than their own.

Eat your broccoli ● Fellow complains that saying we pray because we are told to pray “sounds more like ‘eat your broccoli.’” (“Prayer and the grass lizard,” *FL* December 2006). Well, to say it shortly, sure. That’s right. Eat your broccoli. It’s good for you.

Name your own ● In the order for Confession and Forgiveness in the new *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* hymnal there are two options for the invocation. One is traditional: “In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” And then there is this one: “Blessed be the Holy Trinity + one God, who forgives all our sin, whose mercy endures forever. Amen.” In a parish using only the second option, it is possible to now worship without ever once hearing “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” I cannot think this is good.

What God does ● Reported from an ELCA Global Mission Event: “The central mission of the church is to bring about the reign of God in the world.” Uh, no, actually God will do that. But we can hope the church will find reason to go along with it.

Recommended ● *On the Church & Society Report* was launched in September by Ray Keating, a weekly columnist for *Newsday* in New York and a past contributor to *Forum Letter*. I’m happy to recommend it. For a sample issue send an e-mail to <ChurchandSociety@aol.com>.

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