

Book of Faith Problems...

One may have noticed many advertisements for study sessions on the *Lutheran Book of Faith Initiatives* throughout the NC Synod ELCA in recent months. There will be a workshop on the initiative at this year's NC Synod annual meeting in Hickory at the end of May. These are advertised as Bible studies. This should be taken by the Orthodox Christian with a grain of salt. Firstly, the ELCA website continually refers to the Bible, not as the Bible, but as our "Book of Faith." Not unique, but ours at least. We would not want to offend anyone who might have their own "book of faith." This should cause the faithful Christian to have "ears behind their ears," because this follows the liberal church tendency to define the Bible as a time bound instrument, preoccupied with an archaic, usually privileged, theory about the workings of God in history. This life situation may or may not apply to people in contemporary culture. One's group or class is the best determiner of the application not the church or its accepted canon of scripture.¹

The ELCA is awash in such a reinterpretation of theology and Biblical hermeneutics (method of interpretation). Secondly, the *Book of Faith Initiative* is based upon the ELCA's Augsburg *Lutheran Study Bible*,² which has some disturbing attributes. The predominant (and perhaps only) hermeneutic in the Augsburg Bible is Historical Literary Criticism which is the tendency to use redaction (the idea that a book or books were not written by the author to whom they are normally attributed but by multiple authors with ulterior motives) as a means of undermining the manifest content of the text borders at places on Marcionite heresy³. This type of Biblical criticism has been taught in ELCA

¹ For instance the following from the webpage of Ebenezer Lutheran Church [ELCA] in San Francisco: **We are a diverse community**, standing firmly within the Christian tradition in order to re-image the divine by claiming her feminine persona in the aology[sic], liturgy, church structure, art, language, practices, leadership, and acts of justice. Challenging the church's restricted language of the past, we pay special attention to images and metaphors that attempt to embrace divine fullness and that offer a witness of holy nurture and inclusive justice, both to the church and to the world. (<http://www.herchurch.org/>)

² Please note that Concordia Publishing House of the LCMS Missouri Synod has a Lutheran study Bible as well. What is said above has nothing to do with that publisher or individual Bible.

³ Marcion was a 1st Century theologian that taught that Jesus was a separate God from the Hebrew YHWH the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible was a lower hateful God. The law was

seminaries for thirty years and is the very cause of this relativistic teaching in the first place. The Augsburg Bible insists upon the use of Higher Criticism terms such as CE (Common Era) to replace AD (*anno domini* - year of our Lord) and BCE (Before Common Era) to replace BC (Before Christ). These terms are preferred by the cultural relativism which surrounds us to be non-offensive to people who are not Christians. In the introduction, it is stated that the Bible is expressly for Lutherans, not non-Christians so the insistence on these relativist terms is nothing if not an intentional slap in the face of the very folks who would read it. Not a strong outing for Augsburg.

More alarmingly, here is what the first edition had to say as commentary on the Great Commission in a note at Matthew 28:19-20. No, this is not an error. This is what it says:

“Jesus now sends the disciples to make disciples of all nations. That does not mean make everyone disciples. Most people who are helped by Jesus and believe in him never become disciples. Jesus includes in salvation people who do not believe in him or even know about him.⁴” Because of complaints, this commentary was removed from the second printing, but there are more ideas like it lurking in the shadows of the commentary—or lack thereof. The Bible has questionable or no commentary on what are usually termed the proof texts against sexual uncleanness: Leviticus 18: 22,

Leviticus 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Rom 1:24-27 Rom 6:19-22, Gal 5:19-21; 6:7-9, Col 3:5-10, Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-6, 1 Tim 1:9-11

The commentary on 1 Corinthians 6: 9 the Augsburg Fortress study Bible notes that "all modern Bible versions mistranslate" the Greek words commonly translated "sodomite" and "homosexual." The AF Bible says that the terms used refer not to homosexuality, but to a lack of self-control and violence. And then it notes, "Neither term applies to homosexuality or the lives of gay and lesbian people." It continues: Ancient Christian writers listed specific vices to illustrate a more general evil. Two terms in the vice list have been mistranslated from the Greek in all modern versions, and this has caused needless pain in the church: *malos* ("soft," that is, lacking self-control) and *arsenokoites*

this hate filled God's way and had nothing to do with the sweetness and love of the true God Jesus.

⁴ p. 1658; Augsburg Fortress Lutheran Study Bible

(literally, “one who beds a male”). Both terms are specific examples of injustice, the topic of the vice list in 6:9-11. The “soft” person (here translated: “male prostitute”) takes more than his or her due. The *arsenokoites* (translated as “sodomite”) rapes and shames other males to increase his reputation for power. The issue here is violence. Neither term pertains to homosexuality or to the lives of gay and lesbian people.⁵ *Malos* does mean “soft” in Greek and was the term used for the passive partner from the time of the ancient Greeks like Plato who uses the term in his dialogue *The Symposium*. I do agree that St. Paul was using it in a derogatory fashion but the word did not have that original meaning in Greek. The Augsburg commentator is inventing history to fit his /her own ideas advocacy for sexual immorality. Again the word *arsenokoites* seems to be an amalgamated word specially used by St. Paul. It is a grouping of two words *arsen*—man and *koites*—well, that’s where we get the English word “Coitus.” “Man coitus.” I believe that, unlike ELCA Biblical commentators, speaks for itself.

Oddly, the ELCA Bible has no commentary on Romans 1: 27

Perhaps, more alarmingly the ELCA Bible confuses Luther’s clear teaching on law and Gospel. For example, the margin notes at 1Timothy 1:10 ask: “What is ‘the law’? Here ‘law’ refers to the Jewish Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) or to additional Jewish laws based on the Torah.” Other comments: “Paul called the law ‘holy and just and good’ (Rom. 7:12, 16), but also taught that Christians ‘have died to the law’ (Rom. 7:4, 6) and are ‘free from the law of sin and death’ (Rom. 8:2). As God’s child, Martin Luther understood himself to be free from the law. As Lutherans, we understand ourselves to be free as well.”

This is extremely misleading as the quote from the following of Luther’s sermons shows conclusively:

Consequently, we must now learn to distinguish between the two parts which are called the law and the gospel, which is something that we are

⁵ p. 1881 Augsburg Fortress Study Bible

always teaching. The law brings us before the judgment seat, for it demands that we must be good and love out of a pure heart and a good conscience. Its purpose is to make us exercise ourselves in this; so far it must go and then stop. But when it comes and demands that you settle accounts and pay what it requires, there it cancels itself. For even if you have performed what it requires, this still will not stand before God, since before him there will still be much which is lacking and failing, which you have not done and which you do not even realize you have not done. Where will you turn then? The law keeps harrying you and accusing you through your own conscience, which testifies against you, and absolutely demanding the judgment upon you. Then you must simply despair and there is no help or counsel for you unless you know that you can flee from the judgment seat to the mercy seat.⁶

Toward the end of his life, Luther was embroiled in a controversy against Johannes Agricola, a famous antinomian heretic [from two Greek words *ἀντί*, "against" + *νόμος*, "law"]. Antinomianism denies that we are obligated to follow rules, conventions, ethics, and laws and that salvation comes only through love or the fact that you are favored by God. The following is taken from Luther's work *Wider die Antinomer (Against the Antinomians)* where Luther makes completely clear his opposition to a pusillanimous Biblical interpretation that would confuse or obfuscate law and Gospel:

Therefore I ask you, dear Doctor, to keep to the pure doctrine as you have always done. Preach that sinners must be roused to repentance not only by the sweet grace and suffering of Christ, by the message that he died for us, but also by the terrors of the law. For they are wrong in maintaining that one must follow only one method of preaching repentance, namely, to point to Christ's suffering on our behalf, claiming as they do that Christendom might otherwise become confused and be at a loss to know which is the true and only way. No, one must preach in all sorts of

⁶ Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 51 : Sermons I*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999, c1959 (Luther's Works 51), S. 51:279

ways—God’s threats, his promises, his punishment, his help, and anything else—in order that we may be brought to repentance, that is, to a knowledge of sin and the law through the use of all the examples in the Scriptures. This is in accord with all the prophets and the apostles and St. Paul, who writes in Romans 2 [:4]: “Do you not know that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”⁷

As has been shown, the ELCA study Bible intentionally obfuscates Holy Scripture on at least two fronts, human sexuality, and law and Gospel distinction. Again, the *Book of Faith* initiatives currently being held across the NC synod (especially as they are based upon the ELCA study Bible) should be undertaken with skepticism by those who take the Bible seriously as norm, authority, and canon.

--Written on the day honoring the memory of Dietrich Bonhöffer, 9 April, 2010, Pr. Loyd Ginn

⁷ Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): *Luther's Works, Vol. 47 : The Christian in Society IV*. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999, c1971 (Luther's Works 47), S. 47:111