

A Doctrine of the Bible

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Lecture 4: The Bible and Renewal of the Church

10 a.m. Sunday, September 20, 2015

HOPING VS. PROCLAIMING

I would like to begin this lecture by lingering a bit with something I said in last Sunday's Coffee Hour presentation on joining the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). I said in that lecture that I hope that the kind of same-gender marriages the ELCA speaks of are in fact God-pleasing and will be thought to be so one day by the whole church on earth.

I do indeed hope for this. My heart goes out to same-gender people who have fallen in love and mean to be true to one another for the rest of their lives, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until they are parted by death.

And yet, I feel that I cannot proclaim that such same-gender marriages are God-pleasing, nor can I perform such marriages as a pastor in Christ's church. Why? Because the weight of Biblical evidence is against such marriages as I read the Bible. I am constrained by the Bible, by the literal text of the Bible. I feel that an honest reading of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation forbids me to affirm and to do same-gender marriages. As I have said, the Bible is not a rule book but a world, and in that world, we find no encouragement for same-gender sex or marriage.

But now I want to linger a bit with the qualifying phrase I used above: the weight of Biblical evidence is against such marriages as I read the Bible. What I want to do now is to acknowledge that I might be wrong in how I read the Bible. I do not think so. And I am supported by two thousand years of church history, as well as the near-universal reading of the church to this very day. And yet, there is an impulse of love behind the hopes of people about same-gender marriage, and love is never to be dismissed or belittled.

Let me make a bit of a digression and then return to this matter of *hoping* that same-gender sex and marriage might be God-pleasing. This digression concerns hope for "universal salvation through Jesus Christ." In his book *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, Fr. Richard John Neuhaus distinguishes between what we can *hope for* versus what we can *proclaim* about the salvation of the whole world through Jesus Christ.¹ Fr. Neuhaus makes a strong case that it is possible for a Christian to hope that all of humanity will be saved through Jesus, even Judas.

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *Death on a Friday Afternoon*, second chapter "Judge Not." (Basic Books, 2000).

Fr. Neuhaus admits that this is controversial. He notes that Aquinas argued that one can only *hope* for that which one believes can be attained.² This is what distinguishes “hope” from “desire.” Christians should certainly *desire* the salvation of all humanity through Jesus, but can we *hope* for such universal salvation? If I understand the argument right, that depends on whether one believes that universal salvation through Jesus is possible.

However that might be, it is a step still farther to *proclaim* universal salvation through Jesus Christ. That is a step that the church holds back from. As much as we might want to proclaim that doctrine, we cannot. As I see it, the Biblical evidence is too complex and too rich to pin things down to affirming universal salvation through Jesus. We might *desire* such salvation, but we ought not to *proclaim* it.

Now, let’s return to the subject of same-gender marriage of the kind the ELCA affirms: “publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.” I am suggesting that we might indeed *hope* that such relationships are God-pleasing. And if “hoping” is wrong, then at least we can *desire* that such relationships might be God-pleasing. Sympathy for others could well lead us to hope that in the end same-gender marriage is God-pleasing.

What I am trying to get at now is the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible in our modern world.

In a previous lecture, I spoke of the classic doctrine of the Inspiration of Scripture, describing the Bible as the very “discourse of the Holy Spirit.” I spoke of the Holy Spirit too when I described the Bible as a “Spirit-crafted text,” divinely crafted to serve as God’s instrument for proclaiming the Gospel through the continuing generations and centuries of the Church.

That is to speak of the work of the Holy Spirit in the *past* — in the writing, collecting, editing, and assembling of the final canonical form of the Bible.

Now I am shifting the discussion a bit to the *present* work of the Holy Spirit to lead the church into what I call a “deeper apprehension of the literal text of the Bible.”

I want to be open to the possibility of the Holy Spirit leading the church into deeper apprehension of the Bible, so that someday, we all might see things in the Bible that at present we do not see. I do not think this likely when it comes to same-gender marriage. But, by way of comparison, there was a time when no one in the church felt it likely that the Bible would ever permit the ordination of women. Most of the church feels that that is an implausible reading of the Bible to this very day. Still, it seems at least theoretically possible to me that the Holy Spirit can open our eyes to see new things in the Bible that change or lead us to reconsider our present understanding.

We can never depart from the literal text of the Bible, but we might come to understand that literal text more deeply. I think that that is one of the consequences of the rule that “Holy Scripture interprets and illumines itself.” This

² Ibid, page 46.

is a never-ending task. As a pastor I feel that I must lead according to my present understanding of the literal text. I cannot lead according to what might *someday* be the reading. But it feels disrespectful to the Holy Spirit to rule out the possibility that what many people hope for might actually be the reading the Spirit will lead us into someday.

On the other hand, please notice the emphasis I place on the “literal canonical text.” It can never be right to simply toss the Bible to the wind, as if we simply do not care what the Bible says. The Bible is the fundamental and forever gift of God for the reform and renewal of the church.

Let’s do a thought experiment: Suppose the Catholic Church and the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church were to suddenly change their teaching and to say that same-gender marriage is okay after all. Would that decide the matter? Next weekend I get to be with Pope Francis at his visit to Ground Zero. I am one of the ecumenical guests. Suppose Pope Francis were to suddenly announce that same-gender marriage is okay. Would that settle the matter?

Well, it would certainly go a long ways to settling the matter. The reason for that is that Papal pronouncements are hardly ever sudden or lightweight, but rather have the weight of many minds, many prayers, many researches, and many, many discussions behind them. So, if the Catholic Church and the Missouri Synod were to announce that same-gender marriage is okay, that would be a powerful argument in favor of such marriages.

And yet, it would not be decisive! It would all depend upon the Biblical arguments.

I do not see how a Lutheran can say anything different. Martin Luther renewed and reformed the church by way of careful attention to what the Bible actually says. And for him, it just did not matter if the whole Catholic Church on earth felt that selling indulgences in a works righteous way was fine and dandy. For Luther, it all depended in the end on the teaching of the Bible.

Later in this lecture I mean to speak of the Bible as one of the classic instruments of the Holy Spirit for maintaining the apostolic continuity of the Church. The Bible is one of four such means of apostolic continuity, along with the Creeds, the liturgy, and the office of Bishop. But the Bible is not simply one of the four. Rather, the Bible is the foundation of the other three. The Bishop, for example, uses the Bible in his labors to maintain purity of preaching across the land. And the Creeds and the Liturgy cannot contradict the Bible. If they do, then they need reform. This is what I mean when I say that the Bible is the foundational and forever gift of the Holy Spirit for the reform and renewal of the church.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Now, I want to locate the Doctrine of the Bible within the Doctrine of the Church. The Bible has its own important role to play in the overall Doctrine of the Church. I mean now to give an outline of the Doctrine of the Church, aiming

toward the position of the Bible in that Doctrine. So, we have a kind of tree of thought, in which the Bible occupies ones of the chief branches.

Let me begin with The Nature of the Church, then move on to The Mission of the Church. Then I wish to speak of The Traditional Predicates of the Church. The Bible has its location within this topic. If I were to continue the Doctrine of the Church I would need to speak of the continuity between Israel and the Church. Also I would need to speak of the Church as the Community of the Holy Spirit. But I do not plan to go that far. I simply want to reach the location of the Bible in the Doctrine of the Church and rest there.

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

✠ For Lutherans, the Church is the liturgical gathering around God’s Word. God’s Word is at the heart of the very existence of the Church, as Lutherans understand it. And so, let me lift up again something from last Sunday’s Coffee Hour presentation on the NALC. This is Article 7 in the Augsburg Confession:

It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.

Again, the emphasis here upon a gospel that is “purely preached” raises up the possibility of “pseudo Gospel.” That is, it acknowledges that there can be versions of the Gospel that sound good and might even be quite popular, and yet, sad to say, they are not real, they are not true. But from our Lutheran point of view, that is a disaster. For us, the Church is the gathering around the pure gospel. A false vision of the gospel threatens the very existence of the church.

- ✠ I bet you remember the old rhyme about “This is the church, this is the steeple, open the door and see all the people.” Well, as you know, the church is not the church building, nor the steeple, nor even the people inside. I mean, if our whole congregation got on the 4-train and headed up to Yankee Stadium to see the game, we would not constitute the “church.” We are only the church when we are gathered around the gospel as it is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to our Lord’s instruction.
- ✠ Let me suggest a couple other notions about the nature of the church — notions that are strong and noble, but do not go to the heart of the matter — at least from a Lutheran point of view.
- ✠ One of those notions points to the presence of ancient institutions. Especially I am thinking of the office of bishop. Some people think that “Where the bishop is, there is the church.” I have a lot of respect for this notion, but in the end, I feel that a Lutheran must withhold somewhat from this notion. Why? Because,

as the early Lutheran Reformers put it, “Popes and Councils can err.” And how do we know when they err? They err when they are contrary to the Bible.

- ✦ Let me mention another notion about the nature of the church. Some people think that the church is a “community of love.” Well, in a way, this must be true, because Jesus stands at the heart of the church, and he is this world’s great Man of love. And yet, the word “love” is a slippery word. In fact, there is danger in that word “love” depending on how it is defined. For a Christian, I think we should seek earnestly for what is called the “Christological content of love.” That is, we should seek to grow in love that is like the love of Christ. And this brings us back to the role of the Word of God as being the center of the church. We should not want just any kind of love, but rather that love that we learn about in the Bible.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

- ✦ Next, let us speak of the “Mission of the Church.” I bet you have heard me say this before: The mission of the church is nailed down by dominical command. That is, we are not free to vote on the mission of the church. It is simply given to us by Jesus, the Lord of the church. We read of that in what is called “The Great Commission,” from Matthew 28:

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20, RSV)

The church is a pragmatic society. It has a goal, and it must be restless if it is neglecting its goal. The mission of the church is to win souls to Christ and to teach them the faith of the church.

That means that it is not the mission of the church to transform the world according to somebody’s notion of peace or justice or beauty. These things are good things, but they are not the church’s mission. They might be the mission of governments and social service agencies and volunteer organizations, and individual Christians. But the church has its own mission. And if the church neglects its mission, no one else is going to do it for the church. If the church is not trying to win souls to Christ and teach them the faith of the church, the world is not going to do it for us.

THE TRADITIONAL PREDICATES OF THE CHURCH

Next, let’s speak of the what are called the “traditional predicates” of the church. There are four of them. We speak of them in the Creed. The church is

“one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” This is what the Church is supposed to be: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

Each of these traditional predicates is important and probably worthy of a lecture in itself. For now, I am going to skip on by the first three and focus on the fourth predicate: apostolic. The church is, and must be, apostolic. That means that our modern church, here in the 21st century, must somehow be the same church as that of the apostles.

You know the children’s game of “pass on the secret.” A secret is whispered in the ear of one person in a circle, who passes on that secret to the next person, and on and on, until at the end the secret is revealed — sometimes with funny departures from the original. In the process of transmission, the message becomes distorted.

Well, here we are, two thousand years and many miles away from the apostles. If our understanding of the Gospel is somehow the same understanding as that of the apostles, that is a miracle. Indeed, it is a miracle. It is a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

Now, at last, we are approaching the Bible. The Holy Spirit seems to use four classical instruments for maintaining the continuity of the Gospel through the ages, all the way back to the apostles. Those four instruments are the Bible, the Creeds, the Liturgy, and the Bishop.

Here is where the Bible fits in the overall Doctrine of the Church: The Bible is the foundational instrument of God for us for maintaining continuity with the apostles. Creeds, Liturgy, Bishops, Popes, Powers and Principalities, things present, and things to come — they should all strive to be true to the Bible, lest we lose our way, lest we break continuity with the apostles and with the Lord of the apostles, even Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.