

# A Tale of Two Bibles

For the majority of those “traditional” Lutherans who have been expressing dissatisfaction with current directions of the ELCA, a disregard for the authority of Scripture is cited as the compelling reason. This seems a spurious issue to many of those inclined to stay with the ELCA since a commitment to the Bible as the Word of God does remain an officially stated principle of the denomination. The situation is not dissimilar to the kind of political argument with which we are all familiar, where both sides vehemently claim fidelity to the U.S. Constitution. As in almost every argument of this type, there is a general agreement about the identity of a principle which is to be upheld, but a lot of disagreement about what upholding that principle actually means in terms of its application. In other words, it is not so much a question of agreeing about the authority of a document (the Bible or the Constitution) as it is about agreeing on how one interprets that document.

In the case of Biblical authority, it is significant that the ELCA launched its “Opening the Book of Faith” initiative a few years ago. The ostensible purpose for this initiative is to encourage reading of the Bible by making it more accessible to average Lutherans. A centerpiece of this initiative was the publication of the Lutheran Study Bible by Augsburg Press. This volume employs the well-regarded NRSV<sup>1</sup> translation and is thus obviously not particularly “Lutheran” in terms of the Biblical text itself. What makes the volume distinctively “ELCA Lutheran” are the extensive pages of introductory material, and especially the notes and discussion questions that appear in the margins of most pages. So, it seems reasonable to look carefully at the content of these marginal notes as an indication of current ELCA practice in terms of Biblical interpretation.

## A First Example – Women’s Role in the Church

I have chosen as a first example of Biblical interpretation the notes that accompany the controversial passage in First Corinthians where St. Paul speaks about the role of women in the church. The passage reads:

As in all the congregations of the Saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. 1 Cor 14:34-35

The commentary on this passage, reads as follows (some reference details omitted):

... Some believe that in light of 11:3 there is a God-ordained order that is to be the basis for administration and authority. Women are to be in submission to their husbands both

---

<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version

at home (See Eph 5:22) and in the church (see v. 34; 1 Ti 2:11-12) regardless of their particular culture. According to this view, a timeless order was established at creation ... This interpretation has been the traditional view of Lutheran theologians.

Others maintain that Paul's concern is that the church be strengthened (v26) by believers showing respect for others (see vv 30-31) and for God (see v33) as they exercise their spiritual gifts. Such respect must necessarily take account of accepted social practices. If within a particular social order, it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church – and it was in this case (v. 35) – then she shows disrespect by doing so and should remain silent. There were occasions, though – even in this culture – for women to speak in church. For example, in 11:5 Paul assumes that women pray and prophesy in public worship. Thus, his purpose, according to this view, was not to define the role of women but to establish a fitting (vv. 34-35) and orderly (vv. 27-31) way of worship (v. 31).

Still others say that in this context Paul is discussing primarily the disruption of worship by women who become involved in noisy discussions surrounding tongues-speaking and prophecy. Instead of publicly clamoring for explanations, the wives were to discuss matters with their husbands at home (cf. v. 35). Paul does not altogether forbid women to speak in church (see 11:5). What he is forbidding is the disorderly speaking indicated in these verses.

The reader is probably saying “and what’s wrong with that?” relative to the above commentary. Certainly this seems like a very conscientiously even-handed discussion of the topic. Although a particular point of view is expressed, alternatives are also expressed (and supported with passage references) and the reader seems encouraged to study the material and discern an appropriate response. This seems all quite commendable.

And, indeed this IS quite a commendable commentary, in my humble opinion. But I have played a trick on the reader – this quote is not from the Lutheran Study Bible published by the ELCA, but rather from the Concordia Self-Study Bible published under the auspices of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Most readers will be aware that in this denomination, women are not ordained as Pastors in keeping with the first of the three interpretations cited above. What is notable, and commendable, however, is that the LCMS commentator seems to have made a conscious effort to incorporate differing interpretations, and in point of fact the opposition views get rather the more extensive treatment. To me, this is what real Biblical commentary looks like.

I apologize for the deception and also for subjecting the reader to a rather lengthy discussion of a point which is not actually germane to the subject with which we are concerned. I have done this for two reasons, however: Firstly, this passage is often cited as an example of an archaic Biblical injunction which we in the ELCA freely disregard, so why not another? I would hope that it will be apparent from the above, however, that one can readily find within scripture the

compelling arguments which have convinced many denominations that a prohibition against women clergy is not scripturally mandated. Secondly, I want this reasoned and even-handed treatment to stand in contrast to what now follows.

## A Second Example – Sexual Morality

Let's now take a look at another heavily disputed Bible passage, but this time as actually interpreted by the ELCA's Lutheran Study Bible. The passage in this case is one of the frequently-cited verses at the heart of the ELCA debate regarding homosexual practice:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1Cor 6:9-12).

Here is the marginal commentary from the Lutheran Study Bible (p 1881):

Ancient writers often listed specific vices to illustrate a more general evil. Two terms in the vice list have been mistranslated in all modern versions and this has caused needless pain in the church. Malakos ("soft," that is lacking in self-control) and arsenokoites (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.

It is hard to say what is the more remarkable about this commentary: the unqualified certainty with which it is expressed, or its total disdain for the intelligence of the reader. A traditional (and legitimate) way of understanding difficult passages such as this is to ask ourselves "what was Paul trying to say" and "what did his readers understand him to be saying." Those can be challenging questions, and often (as in the prior example of women's silence in the church) a scrupulous commentator must acknowledge that differing opinions can be justified. I, for one, am prepared to acknowledge that (especially when read in isolation) one might have legitimate questions about exactly what Paul intended in the present passage. But I think that any objective person would agree with me that Paul's meaning, and the original reader's understanding, was almost certainly NOT what the above commentator asserts. For example, when the commentator confidently states that the topic of the vice list is injustice, one has to wonder just how that characterization can be defended relative to the plain meaning of the words. Ignoring the "homosexual" terms, for the moment, how does one conclude that fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, drunkards, revilers, and robbers are being cited for

their practice of “injustice?” (I’ve allowed “greedy” as possibly fitting that category). Aren’t these all just examples of immoral behaviors that Paul assumes that the reader will recognize as flagrantly sinful? (That’s the conventional understanding of the point of such a vice list.)

The commentator asserts that “mistranslation” of two words “in all modern translations” has caused needless pain (odd that all modern translators commit this error). By this, I assume that the exception is being taken with the use of the term “sodomite” for “one who beds a male” and “male prostitute” for “soft person” as specific modern terminology being used for unusual Greek terms. So, to avoid that, let’s read the passage using the literal translations that the commentator provides:

Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, “soft” (lacking in self control) persons, those who bed males, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

Ah! That certainly changes the meaning of everything, doesn’t it? How could we have thought that “one who beds a male” has anything to do with homosexual practice?<sup>2</sup>

Now what is particularly weird about this is that most commentators arguing a gay/lesbian perspective try to dispose of this passage by arguing that we don’t know what those words *malakos* and *arsenokoites* actually mean.<sup>3</sup> This ELCA commentator, however, professes to know exactly what they mean! Thus the “soft” person (who apparently is submitting to intercourse for hire) is guilty of taking “more than his or her due” (though how this is inferred from “soft” or “lacking in self control” isn’t explained) and the sin of the “one who beds males” is that he “rapes and shames other males to increase his reputation for power.” I cannot even begin to imagine where that interpretation comes from – certainly not from the plain meaning of the words, or from historical scholarship or the writings of the ancient church fathers. It is apparently an understanding that is being imposed on the text purely from the personal biases of the commentator. That’s just inexcusable. So I frankly don’t know which to be more offended by: that the ELCA tolerates such blatant propaganda in a Bible that it foists upon

---

<sup>2</sup> Ron Belgau, a young gay Christian who has concluded that the Bible calls him to a life of celibacy has this to say about the interpretation of this word: [http://www.gaychristian.net/rons\\_view.php](http://www.gaychristian.net/rons_view.php)

*The key debate over this passage concerns the meaning of the term *arsenokoitai*. There is a lot of debate over this word, but having studied Greek, it seems to me fairly self-evident that *arsenokoitai* is a compound word referring to those offenders condemned in Leviticus 18:22. In the Septuagint {the Greek translation of the OT in use at the time of Paul}, we find “You shall not lie [koiten] with a male [arsenos] as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Leviticus 18:22).*

<sup>3</sup> See for example, the often-cited essay by Mel White, What the Bible Says – and Doesn’t say – about Homosexuality. [www.soulforce.org/pdf/whatthebiblesays.pdf](http://www.soulforce.org/pdf/whatthebiblesays.pdf)

trusting Lutheran readers, or that a lot of money was spent assembling a slickly-packaged “Study Bible” that incorporates such shoddy scholarship.

Lest the reader think this is just an isolated instance of reaching for an interpretation that violates the apparent sense of the text, let me now turn to a couple of other marginal comments in the treatment of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. I’d invite you to skim 1 Corinthians 5:1-14:40. Topics that are covered include: incest (chapter 5), consorting with prostitutes (6:12-20), marriage (chapter 7), eating food offered to idols (chapter 8), etc. Thus, it will come as a surprise to learn in a marginal note (p1880) that “In these chapters Paul criticizes various practices in Corinth that show how the privileges of the elite have distorted the common life. The biggest obstacle to ministry, in Paul’s view, is for the church to forget the values of love, communion, and equality and instead become a location for observing distinctions in social status.” By subscribing to this novel interpretation, one must presumably conclude that when Paul condemns the man “living” with his father’s wife in Chapter 5, this is not actually an issue of sexual immorality (as Paul himself labels it), but one of class warfare? When Paul famously says: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!” (1 Cor 6:14-15) we are then blandly informed in a marginal note (p1881) that “In condemning this behavior, Paul refutes another privilege of the prosperous.” Now it is certainly clear that Paul was concerned about abuse of the fellowship (11:17-22) and certainly Paul was concerned about “love and communion” (though “equality” is an arguable premise, given 12:12-30). But in characterizing these chapters as pertaining to social distinctions the commentator eliminates/obscures Paul’s traditional moral teaching in favor of a modern “politically correct” social agenda. That may play well on “Oprah,” but I’m quite certain it wasn’t what Paul was all about, and in that opinion I am confident that I am firmly in the company of the vast consensus of Christian scholars, past and present.

### **Two examples of “Reflection Questions”**

Having told the reader what they are NOT permitted to understand from these passages involving sexual (and other forms of) morality, the editors of the Lutheran Study Bible invite the reader to apply these interpretations to their daily lives. Quoting from one such “Reflection Question” on page 1881, the reader is asked: “How do Paul’s views on sex and marriage here compare with the best moral reflection of our culture and the experiences of the faithful today?” Read in the context of the commentary provided, can there be any doubt about the kinds of conclusions that the editors hope will be drawn? And equally clearly, “the best moral reflections of our culture and the experiences of the faithful today” are considered at least equally authoritative relative to Paul’s words.

Another interesting example I ran across is found in the Old Testament account where Elijah orders the killing of the priests of Baal following the convincing demonstration of the True God’s authority over all false gods. (1 Kings 18:20-40). The reflection note asks: “Does passion for faith

ever go too far? What do you make of Elijah's execution of the false prophets?" Now a story such as this does involve some troubling questions for the thoughtful Christian, and some well-reasoned commentary could be helpful for understanding what lesson we might draw from such a story. None of that is to be found, however, and instead the reader seems encouraged to regard this whole episode as a case of a prophet who just went too far in his religious zeal – another reason not to put too much stock in what the Bible says.

A traditional Christian understanding of the Bible is that it expresses timeless principles by which we may discern what it means to faithfully love and serve our God in the midst of a world that pursues other priorities. In the way in which these reflection questions are posed, however, it seems clear to me that the reader is being encouraged to do just the opposite – to discern from the contemporary culture how much of the Bible to consider relevant. Rather than placing our faith in the One who has revealed himself to us in the words of scripture, we are encouraged to seek god in human wisdom. For me, this is idolatry.

### **The Great Commission**

Perhaps the most disturbing comment in the Lutheran Study Bible is the one that accompanies the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always until the end of the age."  
(Mathew 28:18-20)

Surely, this passage is one of the bedrock commands on which the Church has been built. Yet, here is the marginal note in my copy of the Lutheran Study Bible (p1658):

... 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 (5:3-10, 25:31-45).

After recovering from their shock, most readers will undoubtedly wish to check the passages cited to support this remarkably unorthodox interpretation of one of the most familiar passages of scripture. In Matthew 5:3-10 we find the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the poor in spirit ..., etc.") and this accompanying marginal note (p 1611):

The Beatitudes create what they declare. Jesus makes the new world of God's rule actual now in this broken world. ... Notice that [the Beatitudes] do not depend on faith or even knowing Jesus. This is one way God creates salvation.

The reference to Matthew 25:31-45 is Jesus' description of the final judgment in which all nations appear before him, and some are surprised to learn that in ministering to the needs of the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner, etc. they have ministered to Jesus. The marginal note (p 1650) then advises:

... The parable speaks of a surprising way the unbelieving nations have a relationship to Jesus. What they do to these little ones, they do to Jesus. ... Jesus makes these little ones, who suffer and are broken, the place of his presence in this world even for those who do not believe in him or know it. This is one way Jesus creates salvation for those who do not even know him.

I must humbly acknowledge that God's complete plan for salvation is not necessarily known to us, and I would very much like to believe that my Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, atheist, and agnostic friends will also experience salvation through Jesus' atoning sacrifice. However, scripture as it has been transmitted to us does not encourage that belief (for example Luke 10:16: "... whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.") I also am having a difficult time understanding how a purportedly "Lutheran" Bible commentator can so casually overturn the doctrine of justification by faith, and propose an alternate means of salvation based on works.

Now it is my understanding that in response to negative reactions, the marginal note accompanying the Great Commission was deleted (amended?) in the next printing of the Lutheran Study Bible. As the several parallel comments clearly indicate, however, this was not simply a matter of an isolated aberrant statement that was corrected, but represents an intentional and consistent message – a teaching which is diametrically at odds with the understanding of the Christian church from apostolic times. The fact that such statements appear in a "Lutheran Study Bible" produced under the auspices of the ELCA raises many troubling questions: Who chose these commentators to provide authoritative comments? Was no attempt made to involve a spectrum of reviewers to comment on these notes prior to publication? Just how common are such extreme positions within the ELCA anyway? And perhaps most to the point: Are these guys reading the same Bible that I am?

## Two Bibles?

There are not, of course, two different Bibles being employed within the ELCA, but there is such a profound divergence in the way the Bible is interpreted that the effect is nearly the same. That is not just my opinion, but is shared at the highest levels:

... [Presiding Bishop Mark] 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, an ELCA seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, 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 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. (ELCA News Service, March 11, 2005, emphasis added) [http://archive.elca.org/ScriptLib/CO/ELCA\\_News/encArticleList.asp?article=3020](http://archive.elca.org/ScriptLib/CO/ELCA_News/encArticleList.asp?article=3020)

In the cited examples of what I will charitably call “novel” interpretations found in the Lutheran Study Bible, I trust that I have illustrated the nature of the non-traditional hermeneutic (method of interpretation) that Bishop Hanson alludes to. I have been painfully aware of this split in Christian thought ever since I read Marcus Borg’s *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, a number of years ago (Borg, as you will note is one of the academics whose opinion Hanson cites). That was my first encounter with the “Jesus Seminar” – a group of self-proclaimed Biblical scholars who met regularly to vote on which parts of the Gospels they considered the authentic words of Jesus (and rejected most of them). In contrast to some of the more outspoken members of the seminar who have openly expressed their goal as that of undermining the convictions of the Christian community, I will charitably say that Borg strikes me as a man who is probably sincere in his religious convictions – but although he identifies himself as a Christian, his beliefs are in stark contrast to the apostolic teachings<sup>4</sup>. Borg’s foundational understanding of scripture (which seems to be what Bishop Hanson is alluding to) is that “the gospels are seen as the developing traditions of early Christian communities.” Though Borg (raised and educated as a Lutheran) is now an Episcopalian, I have encountered ELCA theologians and Pastors who approach the Bible in a similar fashion. The essence of that approach is that the Bible is a human document that, though it contains a kernel of authentic religious truth, is so badly corrupted by the biases of those who wrote and “redacted” the texts that its “true” message can be discerned only by those perceptive individuals who know how to recognize the editorial additions and tease out its real meanings. Thus, it is entirely appropriate for modern Christians to discern new truths, not incorporated in (or even contrary to) Scriptural teaching, as they think appropriate to their contemporary experience<sup>5</sup>. In the final analysis, the message that is discerned in Jesus’ words has little to do with eternal salvation, and everything to do with contemporary justice (does that sound familiar?) Apparently, when Jesus said that

---

<sup>4</sup> Borg understands Jesus to have been a “spirit person” whose followers continued to sense his presence in their lives after his death and thus he eventually evolved into the “Face of God” for them. According to Borg, “Easter does not have to include something happening to Jesus’ body.” [www.aportraitofjesus.org/borg.shtml](http://www.aportraitofjesus.org/borg.shtml)

<sup>5</sup> As an illustrative example: Dr. Dan O Via, in arguing the pro-homosexual position in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress Press, p 94) states:

[My opponent’s] accumulation of biblical texts condemning homosexual practice is irrelevant to my argument since I agree that Scripture gives no explicit approval to same-sex intercourse. I maintain, however, that the absolute prohibition can be overridden regardless of how many times it is stated, for there are good reasons to override it.



“When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13) he saw no problem<sup>6</sup> with allowing the church to muddle along for 2000 years before delivering the goods on that promise!

In the eyes of those of this ilk, my faith is naïve and dangerous: Naïve because I trust that God’s will for his people is accessible to ordinary Christians through a “plain” (though not always literal) reading of scripture, and dangerous because it makes me “intolerant” of violations of that which, in my simplistic faith, I perceive as God’s revealed will. That kind of assessment by those identified as “scholars” has, not surprisingly, given me a lot of pause. I have prayed hard for guidance and I have at times been badly shaken by doubt. Fortunately, I have also encountered credible scholarly voices who are standing firm against this diminution of scriptural authority and who have convinced me that the orthodox faith in which I was brought up remains both intellectually and spiritually valid<sup>7</sup>. However, I also know the seductive power of those self-proclaimed “right thinking” voices on the other side, and it has become increasingly clear to me that the “controls” of the ELCA have been taken over by such influences. This does not mean that I think that a majority of those who serve in the ELCA are necessarily in agreement with that way of thinking about the Bible, but rather that there is not a will to resist and “push back” against these positions.

It is my opinion that the great danger that the Christian faith faces in Western society is a desire to make it “relevant” (i.e., subservient) to contemporary humanistic thinking. This is not the first time that the Church has faced challenges from the society in which it exists, and it will not be the last. The reason the Church has always survived in the face of such assaults is because our Lord has raised up people of conviction who, armed with God’s Word, have stood fast against persecution and ridicule. That is what is called for today, but that prophetic voice is not being provided by the ELCA. Thus, if my own faith is to be strengthened and nourished in the company of fellow Christians – Christians who can correct and teach me from a solid foundation of Scriptural authority – I must look elsewhere.

Fred Schamber, March 2011

---

<sup>6</sup> Not a problem for the Jesus Seminar either, since they reject virtually the entire Gospel of John.

<sup>7</sup> Many of these voices are those of scholars and theologians associated with other denominations. Others are Lutherans who I have long respected, but who have left the ELCA in protest.