

From the Pastor's Desk

So What's So Great About the ELCA?

Lutheranism was the flagship of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, which opened the gates of exodus from the Roman Church. As millions of people left Catholicism, they embarked on a road away from what they disliked about religion, but not all were so sure about where they were going. Some became as legalistic and controlling as Catholicism by prohibiting the use of statues, icons and stained glass windows because they feared divine status would be given to these images. They proclaimed infant baptism ineffective claiming true baptism can only occur when a person is old enough to choose Christ as their Lord and Savior. Luther was not impressed and referred to these people as “radical reformers” saying they had “swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all!”

Decision Theology

Today, Lutheranism calls this “decision theology”, where the act of deciding for Christ is viewed as a “good work” or “works righteous”. Decision theology puts God's grace under the power of human decision. Luther strongly opposed this position and taught that God is unlimited and always takes the initiative. He saw this most clearly with infant baptism, where the baby does nothing to merit it. Luther had little confidence in fickle human decisions, which so often become a source of pride and self aggrandizement. He taught that life in Christ did not depend upon any person's decision, rather it was the result of God's grace. Faith, according to Luther, is living daily in the embrace of God, which flows out of baptism.

Luther clearly understood the two extremes between Catholicism and the radical reformers and tried to steer a more rational road down the middle. For Luther in 1540, and for us today, traveling the middle road is not easy. It takes thoughtful, intelligent effort to avoid going to extremes.

Reformation Today

Our religious landscape today is not much different from Luther's. Catholicism, especially during the past twenty or so years, has taken a turn back to “works righteous” and the proclamation of itself as Christ's true church. According to recent statements from the pope, other Christian churches cannot be called “churches” in the true sense of the word, unless they embrace Catholicism.

On the other hand, during the past fifty years in America, the radical reformation has given birth to a new form of religion. Like the radical reformation of 1540, the center of this new religion is “decision theology”. Once human decision has usurped God's grace, other teachings that follow are also misguided. This is especially seen with the popular “Gospel of Prosperity”, which proclaims that God will make his true followers rich. Also, because decision theology places human decision at the center, it presumes the ability to clearly delineate between the saved and those who are not. There is little room for mystery in this new religion where humans are in control.

Decision theology has huge ramifications and is very popular these days. Although it gives lip service to God's grace, it actually replaces grace with human control and priorities. Luther found similar problems in the Roman Church and reformed it by placing the Gospel of God's grace at the center only to see it again being usurped by the radical reformers and the same continues today. Making decisions in life are important, but God is not depending upon them. God knows well the fickleness of the human heart. Nevertheless, he has grasped us and is unwilling to let us go.

Perhaps in the ELCA, grace can best be compared to sunshine. Some try to charge money for it and others claim to have the ability to control it. But we proclaim that sunshine is free, abundant and given for all. We may avoid the sunshine and live in darkness, but the sun continues to shine. We return to the sunshine by seeking forgiveness of God and one another. During Sunday worship services we celebrate the freedom of sunshine and bask in its healing rays.

And that's what's so great about the ELCA.

~ PB