

Differences between Lutherans and modern Evangelicals (Part 2)

The life of the Christian seems to be the central focus and purpose of present day evangelical churches.

Their (20th century) reformed message, which I will subsequently refer to as the contemporary evangelical theology, is certainly different than the Lutheran message, which I believe to be the closest to the Biblical message.

The contemporary evangelical theology and practice places a heavy emphasis on life and little on doctrine. The errors being committed are not easy to point out to the person who is uninterested in doctrine, because they involve emphasis that is misplaced and balance that is not achieved.

The contemporary evangelical theology view of salvation is that a person is living a life ignoring and opposing God. This person then hears that he is heading for destruction, so he must let God take control of his life. He agrees, accepts Christ's forgiveness for his past sinful life and asks Christ to come into his life and take control. Thus, salvation is complete. Therefore, unless he should backslide into open sin, he mainly needs to hear messages about how to correctly serve God.

The cross is limited almost entirely to being a tool in evangelism instead as a continual source of salvation as it should be in the Lutheran church. The primary goal of any Lutheran service should be to convict listeners of their sins, and ultimately, their sinful nature so they are drawn to the Cross. Whether they have believed before or have believed for years, all listeners need to be pointed to the cross. This is different from the Baptist sermons in which non-believers are pointed to the need to come forward for a conversion and believers are pointed to get to work and bring more to hear this message.

In contrast to the writers of the Bible, these churches do not ever mention the promises of baptism as a lifelong source of salvation and assurance of forgiveness from God. As a reaction to some people or churches who erroneously have a dead faith in the externals of baptism, they feel justified in ignoring baptism entirely as a source of comfort and faith. Most of them would probably feel that if baptism has any value other than as a ritual, it is as a stop-gap measure necessary to hold infants over until they reach the age where they can make their own decision to follow Christ. Then, baptism is ignored for the rest of their lives in reference to their own salvation. I remember someone asking how we can still be receiving salvation when we have already received salvation at conversion. This is a contemporary evangelical theology idea. Luther stated in his explanation of the small Catechism answering the question regarding the Lord's Supper: "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? Answer: ... Through these words the remission of sins, life and salvation are given unto us in the Sacrament... A similar statement is made referring to baptism.

I am also concerned about the growth in works righteousness that this shift is producing.

The followers of contemporary evangelical theology criticize those who by a dead faith are mistakenly trying to try to work their way into heaven. They correctly feel this dead faith should be replaced with “a personal relationship with Christ”. Isn’t trusting that you are right with God because of a personal relationship with Christ just another way of saying that you are right with God based on a good Christian life or Christian living? It is fine to proclaim the necessity of a good Christian Life, but that necessity is part of the message of the law, not the message of the gospel. If faith in a personal relationship with Christ is the basis of faith, the person is trusting in law, not gospel.

A “personal relationship with Christ” is an extension or application of the first commandment. It also could apply to a statement Jesus made when asked what is the greatest commandment in the Law. He answered that you should love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind.

The view that God is merely standing by watching (but doing nothing) to see who does good and who does bad, then selecting the good ones to enter heaven is certainly erroneous and not the correct interpretation of the first commandment. God through His Spirit is active in this world, gives us guidance, and expects and desires communication with us through his word and prayer and sometimes through direct communication, such as the call to the ministry. However, this direct communication needs to be tested by the word and should not be placed on the level of scripture. It should always be open to some question and discernment as to whether it was actually a direction from God even if it is witnessed to by unusual coincidences. This correct interpretation of the first commandment, which can be correctly called “a personal relationship with Christ” is part of the law, not the gospel.

The proponents of the contemporary evangelical theology try to cover the legalist aspects of their religion by vaguely defining the terms “personal relationship with Christ” and liberally mixing in a mystical element. They believe that continually looking for signs from God will keep a believer fresh and free from works righteousness and legalism. For many, unusual coincidences are absolute evidence that their lives are pleasing to God. To them, whether this is actually the case is not open to question. If you were to question it, bitterness would result. But, the same person often could not state doctrines from the Bible with any surety at all. When a church doesn’t focus on the cross and the doctrines based upon it, the church will gradually drift into legalism, mysticism and/or emotionalism to try to fill the void or it will long for a strong leader who can lead their Christian lives onto a higher plane where they can feel secure.

Unfortunately, this contemporary evangelical theology ignores the very people that God, through his Spirit, is preparing for the message of the gospel. There are certain people in life who are more organized, disciplined, and naturally gifted in leading exemplary lives. Some of them have been lead astray, but when confronted by the law, realize their error and leave their destructive behaviors behind. You will find these people in the Moslem, Mormon, Jewish, and yes, Christian faiths, as well as others. Is this group of successful people the only group we are to try to reach with the Christian message? If the church doesn’t focus on the cross, this is exactly the group who will thrive. Those struggling

with a sense of God's justice and their own sinful nature will be ignored. The "successful" (not necessarily monetarily but in Christian life) Christian will become the goal and message. Are we reaching those with a tender heart for God who are troubled by their sinful nature, or are we reaching those who can get their life in order? They are not necessarily the same people.

We, as Lutherans, have tried to keep the law and gospel in balance, with the cross taking the central stage for our message. This has not made us as determined to achieve a feeling of confidence in our Christian life as is found in this other movement. Justification cannot be felt, it must be believed. Emotions are cautiously used in the Christian life. As a result, Lutherans are more reserved than many others. But, it seems we are ashamed to be who we are, and any meeting with these other groups finds us apologizing for our demeanor and views.

The message of the cross and solid Lutheran doctrine are being emphasized less and less and the Christian life is being emphasized more and more under the guise of "a personal relationship with Christ". If the Christian life is to be made the basis for Christian assurance instead of the cross, Christians will need dramatic conversion experiences that they can remember, an adult baptism, mystical signs, etc. to be certain of their salvation. Lutheran theology and practice will not really fit. It seems to me when I read and hear about the work among youth that "a personal relationship with Christ" is being heavily emphasized as the definition of salvation. If so, Lutherans will face constant struggles trying to justify infant baptism, because many if not most of the people who base their assurance on a Christian life really need an adult baptism in their arsenal for assurance of salvation.

Those who return from youth gatherings speak of turning their lives over to Christ and then subsequently rededicating their lives to Christ, but very little (none) is said about an understanding of the Cross. If a successful Christian life is the message they are trusting in, what will occur in the long run is a shake-out of the youth who just cannot get their lives in order due to lack of parental example, lack of strong will, or whatever other means are necessary. Only the strong and successful will survive to lead good Christian lives. But, if the power of the cross were to be presented in the gospel, maybe God could use this message to work a miracle in their lives. These youth would not need to be doomed to an emotional roller coaster ride before finally giving up someday in disgust with the Christian faith. They should be taught to trust in the finished work of Christ. The victory has been won and it does not depend upon their "success". When success is not pursued directly, it can come through the freedom of the cross for these kids.

At a church service, the law and gospel should be presented clearly where the main purpose of the service is to seek to draw me to the cross. We should be encouraged to draw strength from the promises we received in baptism.

There are all kinds of churches today that preach the contemporary evangelical theology messages. Conservative churches that preach and practice Lutheran doctrine are becoming rare.

We need pastors who have a commitment to follow Lutheran doctrine and practice. Our people need to be instructed in the difference in true Lutheran practice from the contemporary evangelical theology. They need to realize that about all the messages from Christian radio stations and interdenominational Christian organizations are promoting this message. Pastors who solidly hold to Lutheran doctrine and practice will provide a solid foundation and will be much more valuable to the future church than pastors who have a lot of energy and zeal but lack this commitment.

If we return to the consistent preaching of the Law and the Gospel, maybe God's Spirit will become our ally.

Romans 5:21a

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...

I Cor 2:2

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified

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