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## Yes, They Said It — Revealing Comments

Tuesday, December 11, 2007



Those wondering what has made orthodox believers in mainline Protestant denominations so upset need look no further than two very revealing comments offered by leading figures in these denominational conflicts.

*Exhibit A* — Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson

The 2003 election and consecration of Gene Robinson as the first openly-homosexual bishop of the Episcopal Church USA set the stage for the separation of orthodox believers from the denomination that is now reaching fever pitch. Robinson was elected Bishop of New Hampshire even as those investing him in office were aware that he had years earlier divorced his wife and was then (as now) cohabitating with another man.

Keep that in mind as you read this comment Bishop Robinson made in recent days as he was speaking to students at Nova Southeastern University in Florida. Here is how [Religion News Service](#) reported the comment:

*“I always wanted to be a June bride.” — Openly gay Episcopal Bishop V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, telling students at Nova Southeastern University in Florida of his wedding plans. Robinson and his partner Mark Andrew plan to enter into a civil union in New Hampshire in June. Robinson was quoted by University of Miami News Service (Dec. 4).*

Well, how will the leadership of the Episcopal Church USA respond to that? Undoubtedly with the same acceptance of the unacceptable that has marked the church’s leadership for decades.

*Exhibit B* — Lutheran Pastor Bradley Schmeling

Bradley Schmeling, pastor of [St. John’s Lutheran Church](#) [ELCA] in Atlanta, was removed from the denomination’s clergy roster earlier this year after a church court found him in violation of church policy for being found in a same-sex relationship. Schmeling has not been caught in the relationship; he had disclosed the relationship to church leaders.

Subsequent to that action the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#) [ELCA] —the most liberal branch of American Lutheranism — voted in Chicago to retain the current policy, but to encourage “restraint” from any punitive action if ministers were found to be in violation. The Atlanta church has refused to relieve Pastor Schmeling of his duties.

The December 11, 2007 edition of [The Christian Century](#) features an interview with Pastor Schmeling in which he makes this comment:

*In my early preaching there was a lot of traditional Lutheran language. I saw every lectionary text as a means to preach about “justification by grace through faith, not by works of the law.” Over time, I began to see that people weren’t worried whether they were going to heaven or not; they were afraid that they would finish life and find that there hadn’t been any heaven in it.*

*If the issue of the 20th century was the experience of existential dread, the issue for the 21st century seems to be*

*community. People aren't coming to church to hear that their sins are forgiven; they are coming to experience connection to God, to the people sitting with them in the sanctuary and to people around the world. My theology has thus become more incarnational and relational.*

Few statements are more revealing. Pastor Schmeling is convinced that people do not come to church because they are worried about heaven or the forgiveness of their sins. No, all they want is connection.

Thus, Pastor Schmeling — *Lutheran* Pastor Schmeling — has abandoned preaching about “justification by grace through faith, not by works of the law” — the very heart of Lutheran theology. Indeed, the very heart of the Gospel itself. This pastor has exchanged the Gospel for a more “incarnational and relational” theology.

Martin Luther, we are reminded, was constantly concerned about heaven, hell, and sin. As the late historian Heiko Oberman explained, Luther always saw himself, and all sinners, as caught in a battle between God and the Devil. Heaven and Hell are always in the balance and the forgiveness of sins is our greatest need. Luther understood “justification by grace through faith (alone), not by works of the law” to be the only truth that secures our salvation.

Of course, we might surmise that a pastor unconcerned with the forgiveness of sin is likely to draw a congregation equally unconcerned about sin. No need for the forgiveness of sin . . . no need for justification, no need for the Gospel, no need for a Savior. In the end, this statement explains everything.

When you hear folks wondering why orthodox believers are so heartbroken and concerned about the travail of their churches, keep these revealing comments in mind. They reveal the problem in a tragic nutshell.

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Professor Heiko Oberman's biography of Martin Luther, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, remains in print from Yale University Press. The interview with Pastor Bradley Schmeling is not available online, but can be found as “Ministry and Mission: An Interview with Bradley Schmeling,” *The Christian Century*, December 11, 2007, pages 10-11.

