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The Idolatrous Religion of Conscience — A Lutheran Lesson for Us All

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“It wasn’t primarily about sex.” With those words, Lutheran theologian Robert Benne explained that the actions recently taken by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to normalize homosexuality were not primarily about sex at all, but about theological identity. “The ELCA has formally left the great tradition for liberal Protestantism,” Benne declared.

Taking its stand with the radical theological revisionism of the Protestant Left, the ELCA “left the Great Tradition of moral teaching to identify with United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church,” Benne lamented.

Writing in *Christianity Today*, Benne argued that his denomination had abandoned the Gospel for a social gospel. “The liberating movements fueled by militant feminism, multiculturalism, anti-racism, anti-heterosexism, anti-imperialism, and now ecologism have been moved to the center while the classic gospel and its missional imperatives have been pushed to the periphery.”

Benne, director of the Roanoke College Center for Religion and Society, offers a first-hand account of what took place in Minneapolis in August as the ELCA met for its Church Wide Assembly. The actions were sweeping in scope and effect. The ELCA voted to allow churches to call partnered homosexuals as ministers and then adopted a Social Statement on Sexuality (which passed by one vote) which insists that the Bible offers no clear teaching on homosexuality.

As the smoke now begins to clear from the votes in Minneapolis, a larger issue comes clearly into focus — the authority of the “bound conscience.”

As Robert Benne explains, the ELCA’s authority-smashing actions were made possible by the denomination’s adoption of a “bound conscience” principle that, in effect, means that anyone can believe almost anything and demand a place at the table, if they claim that their belief is rooted in a “bound conscience.”

Mark Hanson, the ELCA’s Presiding Bishop, explained that the “bound conscience” principle calls upon all Lutherans to respect the “bound consciences” of those with whom they disagree. Documents released or adopted by the ELCA explained in multiple ways that a conflict of interpretations concerning the Bible should not lead to a break in fellowship. For example:

The very fact that several different positions may be bound to Scripture means that we cannot assert one interpretation of Scripture over another but are called to respect consciences in the community of faith on this matter. The emphasis of “conscience-bound” is not on declaring oneself to be conscience-bound; rather it is that we recognize the conscience-bound nature of the convictions of others in the community of Christ.

In the case of the ELCA, the “several different positions” included the entire spectrum of positions on an issue as



controversial and important as same-sex unions. The Social Statement on Sexuality affirmed no less than four “conscience-bound” positions within the church. The positions, all claimed as “conscience-bound,” ranged from the rejection of same-sex marriage to its outright acceptance. This affirms Robert Benne’s judgment that the church now has “no authoritative biblical or theological guidance” on a crucial theological and pastoral issue.

Though the issue of sexuality garnered media attention, the theological issue of “bound-conscience” is more fundamental. In accepting this principle, these Lutherans effectively abandoned any claim of normative instruction from the Bible. On an issue of such crucial pastoral and moral importance, the ELCA offers an entire range of contradictory positions, each of which is now to be “respected” because someone holding it claims to be bound by conscience.

Of course, any serious person declaring a position on any important issue will (and should) claim to be bound by conscience. The alternative to this is to suggest or to admit one’s position to be both baseless and insincere. All sides in a theological controversy claim to be bound by conscience. This claim settles nothing and, on its own, leads to ecclesiastical disaster. The church simply surrenders to the autonomous individualism so prized by the larger culture and abdicates any authority to speak the truth.

The concept of being bound by conscience goes directly back to Martin Luther, the great Reformer who established what became known as the Lutheran tradition. On more than one famous occasion, Luther publicly took his stand and held his ground, claiming that his conscience was bound by the Word of God. He most famously made this case as he stood on trial before the Diet of Worms on April 18, 1521. Before the impaneled church leaders and the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Luther declared:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ..., I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.”

Of course, Luther was not merely claiming to be bound by conscience. He was specifically claiming that his conscience was bound by the word of God. Luther, unlike the ELCA, believed that the Scriptures offer a very clear presentation of the Gospel and of moral and theological teachings. Luther affirmed the inspiration, authority, sufficiency, and clarity of the word of God and he took his stand on the authority of Scripture alone. The Word of God bound his conscience by its clear teaching.

Indeed, Luther was very suspicious of the human conscience. In the main, he was convinced that sin had so warped the capacity of conscience that it actually functions in most persons to foster a works religion which is the very opposite of the Gospel. The conscience makes the sinner aware of doing wrong, but then suggests works as a way of earning God’s good pleasure. As Randall C. Zachman documents in his important work, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, Luther was convinced that the conscience uncorrected by Scripture would lead to “the idolatrous religion of conscience.”

In Luther’s own words: “God wants our conscience to be certain and sure that it is pleasing to Him. This cannot be done if the conscience is led by its own feelings, but only if it relies on the Word of God.”



Thus, the ELCA’s new principle of “bound-conscience” actually embraces and leads to what Martin Luther most feared — a burlesque of conflicting consciences without accountability to the Scriptures.

The point was not lost on many Lutheran observers. Retired ELCA Bishop Paul Spring of State College, PA, chairman of the Lutheran CORE Steering Committee, a group opposed to the ELCA’s radically liberal direction, noted: “In its emphasis on conscience, the task force forgot that Luther was not talking about his own right to his own opinion. He was declaring his commitment and allegiance to the Word of God.” He added: “It is exactly the opposite of the task force’s idea of conscience as one’s personal beliefs. They are encouraging the strange notion of a bound conscience as nothing more than individualism.”

The idea of a bound conscience is deadly dangerous unless the conscience is bound by the Word of God. Those who would claim a bound conscience but pervert, deny, subvert, or relativize the Word may indeed be bound by conscience. But a conscience bound by anything other than the Word of God is a conscience given over to idolatry.

This is a Lutheran lesson we all desperately need to learn. And Martin Luther himself deserves the last word:

“It is the nature of all hypocrites and false prophets to create a conscience where there is none, and to cause conscience to disappear where it does exist.”

I am always glad to hear from listeners and readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Rev. Robert Benne will be my guest on today’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Tune in to hear a discussion of why the actions of the ELCA must be of interest to all committed Christians.

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