

Remarks of Dr. James R. Crumley, Jr., January 9, 2010
St. Stephen's Lutheran Church, Lexington, SC
Gathering of Orthodox Lutherans – SC
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Confession

We meet here today because we have a common concern. A dilemma has arisen for each of our congregations and for each of us as individuals. That dilemma has been caused by an action of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (the church to which we belong) taken at the churchwide assembly in August of 2009. I will describe that action and we ponder together its consequences.

I appreciate your action and the proposal to form the Society of Orthodox Lutherans. Our conclusion about the assembly's action is that it is a confessional matter that goes to the very heart of our faith and of our faith as Lutheran Christians. I fear that many of our people fail to see the depth of the action taken at the assembly and discuss it only in terms of homosexuality. Both issues are important but the matter of our confession has to take priority.

For me, the confessions were given priority in my catechetical instruction and other parts of my congregational life. Then, in seminary, we were taught that the confessions define the very nature of the church and of its ministry, correctly demanding our knowledge of them and our loyalty to them. I remember the wise admonition of a professor that the Lutheran Church is defined by its confessions. Liturgy, style of buildings, congregational life and such matters may be similar to other churches but its confession will always mark it as Lutheran.

I consented to speak to this gathering out of my concern as a pastor of the ELCA. I am retired and I have no jurisdictional or administrative authority in the church. But we have to derive our conclusions through deliberate thought and discussion. We now have that responsibility as church members.

Especially do we need to be clear about our understanding of the assembly's action as of confessional gravity. Through the years we have experienced some actions of the church with which we disagreed but with which we could still live faithfully and loyally. This one goes deeper. It denies what we have confessed and adopted as the guiding principles of the church's constitution. The ELCA is simply not the same church as it was before the assembly.

When the assembly adopted the proposal permitting the certification and/or ordination of persons in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship, it changed directly the policy which had been in effect through the whole life of the ELCA and the predecessor churches. Not only so, but it changed what had been a part of the "great tradition" of the whole Christian church since its beginning. The question then becomes, "On what basis did the church make such a decision? Where in Scripture is there permission or mandate for such a change? How will the action affect the life of the ELCA and its communion with other churches?"

The assembly also adopted a new social statement, "Human Sexuality; Gift and Trust", which provides a groundwork for the action on same-gender relationships. While marriage is still

defined as a covenant between one man and one woman, the same-gender relationship is also defined as normal and acceptable. That new understanding is based primarily on social and psychological norms rather than on a careful study and analysis of Scripture.

At this point we must turn to the place of Scripture in such decisions as defined in the Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Underlying the constitutions of the churchwide, synodical and congregational unit there is a carefully written Statement of Faith.

There are seven paragraphs in that confession and each not only states the position of the ELCA but a truth that is also church-defining. For example, the first paragraph confesses the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A group cannot deny that article and be a church. The same applies to the next paragraph which speaks of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. A group denying that statement could not be a Christian church.

Then a subparagraph says: "The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's creation centering in Jesus Christ."

Then paragraph three is crucial to our concern here: "This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm for its proclamation, faith and life."

Now our question becomes even clearer: "Was the action of the assembly mandating the certification and/or ordination of same-gender relationships based on the careful study of the Scriptures as recorded in the Bible?"

I conclude that there is no evidence based on the text of Scripture which permits or mandates the change as stated in the new policy adopted at the assembly. The action rather was unconstitutional and violated a part of the Confession of Faith. On that basis, the appropriate question is whether the ELCA is still without question a faithful and confessing church. I conclude that the ELCA has placed itself in a precarious position. Can I recognize my membership as authentic and God-serving in the fullest and truest sense?

As I make such a personal judgment I understand that many faithful and committed people arrive at a different conclusion. I know quite well that there are many different interpretations of Scripture. There is one approach from those who are deep into historical criticism with which I disagree: the supposition that homosexuality in the Scriptures speaks of a totally different situation from our modern one and thus such passages may be dismissed as not applicable to our modern discourse. Bishop Mark Hanson stated the view recently: "The understanding we have of homosexuality does not seem to be reflected at all in the context of Biblical writers." To dismiss the passages of the Bible concerning homosexuality as irrelevant is beyond my understanding and appears to me to negate the authority of the Scriptures.

A careful examination of all the documents from the assembly would undoubtedly provide additional critical insights. However, we must now ask the question that we would like to avoid. We have few answers to it. "What do we do? Where do we go? What are our options?"

My own conclusion is that options are few but each person must act as faith and conscience demands. With one another we need to discuss the process and help each to make his/her own personal decision.

Possibilities: (Suggestions from various sources)

1. Remain in the ELCA and as a member of the congregation to which I belong. After all, we love our church and have given our lives to it.
2. To withdraw my membership and go to another church. Which one? Can my confidence in the Lutheran confession assist me in making the choice?
3. Work to change the ELCA. My own personal opinion is that it will take much energy and patience to change the churchwide structure.
4. Redirect my contributions to the ELCA. For what reason? Do I want to cancel all of the creative mission projects at which the ELCA is quite successful?

You will add some other options but it will be difficult, I think, to find one with which you can be totally comfortable

My comments about our church are quite negative. That is painful for me, for I have always been an advocate and a positive representative for it. I am deeply disappointed and distressed as I know many of you are.

When in our lives we come to an impossible situation, what do we do? It is important first that we be realistic about the problem. To gloss over it or just expect it to go away does not help. But then we give attention not just to what we have lost but we concentrate on what we have.

We know that by God's gift we belong to the mystical body of Christ ,the one, catholic, apostolic church, in which our sins are forgiven and our salvation assured. Thus we will remain faithful and do what we are called to do. We must give even more time to the reading and study of the Scriptures and to fervent prayer.

I do not know, I cannot see at this point what God has in mind for our churches in South Carolina. I am confident that He has a will and a plan for us, and if He uses us to work out that plan or if He goes ahead without us, His name will be praised. In Him and by Him there is a future for his people. We will continue to trust and serve as He guides and directs us.

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