

## Anschauungen

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Opinions, Viewpoints.

By Dr. John E. Bauer, Editor

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### The Ten Commandments

The US Supreme Court handed down a mixed ruling a while back about the public display of the Ten Commandments on public property. This has become a significant issue for many Christian fundamentalists who still try to argue that America was founded as a “Christian” nation and that all civil law is ultimately grounded in the moral law as expressed in the Decalogue. There also seems to be an underlying belief that the posting of the Ten Commandments in schools and courthouses will somehow instill moral values and good behavior in the citizens of our land.

I happen to think that it is a mistake to press for the public exhibition of the Ten Commandments for a couple of reasons. First, the first table of the Ten Commandments demands exclusivity of faith in only one God. Love him only, worship him only, honor his name only. In a pluralistic society, that represents a breach of the principles enunciated in the First Amendment.

Furthermore, Christians don't have a lock on the Ten Commandments. They were given by God to his Old Testament people, the Jews. They are revered by Muslims. But it is fundamentalist Christians who are the loudest in their demands for the right to make this religious expression. They have, therefore,

staked out a claim of exclusivity that serves to alienate, rather than welcome, people who could be brought into dialogue around matters of faith. This is exactly the wrong use of the Law. No one is converted by having the Ten Commandments shoved down his or her throat. The result is exactly what we see being played out in courtrooms and classrooms as secularists grow in their disdain for those “right wing evangelical Christian extremists,” and believers become more entrenched in their fear of those “ungodly left wing liberal atheists.”

Another reason I think pushing this issue is a mistake comes from the fact that the second table of the Ten Commandments by itself doesn't hold any more moral authority than, say, Hammurabi's Code or the Laws of Solon in the minds of nonbelievers. They are nice moral prescriptions, but they lack any real meaning or substance because, as they stand by themselves, they are divorced from the context in which they were given and followed. Without understanding the unique relationship between God and his people, the Ten Commandments are without real substance. And most important, without understanding Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and the sacrifice he made of himself on the cross, the weight and significance of the Ten Commandments cannot truly be known or felt.

As well meaning as many Christians are over this matter, and as heartfelt as their prayers on the steps of the Supreme Court may be, the intended impact of publicly displaying the Ten Commandments is undermined. Outsiders looking in are never going to understand or appreciate the Ten Commandments—not as a mirror that leads to repentance, nor as a guide to love and serve God. Not unless the context of God's story of salvation from sin and death is shared as well. It just strikes me that either insulting people with the claim of Christian exclusivity, or acting all weird and fanatic with loud prayers and protests on courthouse steps is counterproductive to the higher goal of trying to lead people to the Truth. The Ten Commandments never saved anyone and their use as a means to curb crime or to produce

good moral thinking in school children reflects a limited view of their real purpose.

### **A Sense of History**

I enjoy watching the History Channel. Not much else is worth viewing in the early hours when sleep eludes. It is the perfect background for middle-of-the-night existential musing. How much clearer everything seems when nothing else intrudes.

Watching footage of long ago wars, seeing the cars and planes and fashions displayed in black and white, listening to the speeches of early- and mid-century presidents gives one a sense of how quickly time passes. From the days as a child watching the Lone Ranger and Superman on Saturday morning, to middle-aged surfing through 150 channels of cable to find anything that isn't mind-numbing and debasing, I've seen the evolution of a culture and the emergence of a society that scares me to death.

I suppose it's a lot like Barna's frog in the kettle. Incremental change goes by undetected. It takes a radical jump back in time through something like the History Channel to see how much has changed. And I'm not talking about technological advancements, or the information explosion. Those things are morally neutral. But I have seen in my short 56 years of life the accelerating deterioration of basic moral decency, the erosion of civility, the open celebration of behaviors that not all that long ago would have been shocking to even the most libertarian among us.

I recall talking a number of years ago to my 90-something-year-old grandfather. He was born in the 1890s before airplanes, television, highways, space flight. I couldn't understand why he didn't express a greater sense of awe at the advancements of humans over his nearly a century of life. I came to believe later that such things don't really matter quite as much as the moral condition of man or his need for deliverance from himself. My grandfather was a Lutheran pastor who served rural congregations for the entirety of his 55

years in the ministry. He saw what his members needed, and it wasn't a new color TV. He observed the changes occurring in society, and knew that his job as a pastor was never really done.

Do things change in such a way that we don't notice what is going on around us? Are we like frogs in the kettle—indifferent to the changes in the moral and spiritual fabric of our society? Is the post-modern mantra of tolerance serving as an insulator that not only protects the rights of the most blatantly immoral to express their deviant lifestyles, but also protects us from having to speak out?

### **What's in a Name?**

An increasing number of churches are finding their denominational labels to be barriers to reaching the unchurched—whether never-churched, de-churched, or non-churched. One case in point is the former Garfield Avenue Baptist Church in Milwaukee. Founded in 1888 on the near north side, it moved in the '60s to the western suburbs and dropped the "Avenue" from its name. And with its move even farther away from the city a few years ago, it is now called "Spring Creek Church," attracting almost 1,200 worshippers each weekend.

There are many other examples around the country of congregations engaged in name changes to "detrribalize" the church, a phenomenon written about by folks like Eddie Gibbs, professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, and Alan Wolfe, director of the Biosi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, who documents post-denominational trends.

Even within conservative Lutheranism this trend can be observed, albeit with greater frequency in parts of the country away from the "hinterlands" of the Midwest. Unfortunately, neither synod yearbooks nor annual statistical reports list the official names of congregations, opting instead to list congregations as "St. Paul's" or "Living Word" instead of "St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church" or "Living Word Lutheran Church."

So how important is the label? What's in the name? Does removing "Lutheran" from the congregation's name make what goes on there any less Lutheran?

It would appear that the Lutheran label is very important to those who are already in the fold. Many lifelong Lutherans seem to have a hard time letting go of the identity, and rightly so, for it clearly communicates the church's doctrinal parameters. Such a view is fine if the church is viewed as an exclusive group of people who possess a common heritage, upbringing, education, or even ethnicity.

But some people apparently believe that denominational labels are roadblocks to making connections with people—especially people who have absolutely no clue about the content of the Bible, let alone what goes on in a church. To them, the institutionalized and denominationally constricted church represents something out of the Middle Ages and involves beliefs and practices which are incomprehensible and antiquated to a younger generation with virtually no previous church experience.

Those in churches which cling to their denominational labels and on their own tribal rites and rituals for membership, might want to take a step back from the debate about names and ask themselves the more fundamental question, "What does the Great Commission mean to me and to my congregation?" If it means that your church doors are always open to all who wish to visit, but that the elements of church culture can't change, then it might be argued that denominational "forms" have the potential to get in the way of evangelistic "function." On the other hand, if the Great Commission means that every member of a church is expected to share the Gospel with lost people, wherever and whoever those lost people are, then such churches are going to be less concerned about the formal aspects of denominational identity and much more concerned with finding ways and means to fulfill their evangelistic function. Biblical ministry functions don't change. Most ecclesiastical forms can be adapted.

Names can say a lot about people, businesses, organizations, and churches. Location, community context, and age demographics are variables that affect how a church positions itself with respect to its denominational identity. This writer is not advocating abandonment of denominational identification, nor is he suggesting that numerous other factors such as pastoral leadership are less important than the name. Rather, the question is being asked, "in my ministry context, does the denominational label help or hinder the evangelistic mission of my church?" There is no one easy answer.

### **Where Have Lutheran Synods Gone?**

Quite the contrast in tone and substance between the General Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS)! The former narrowly defeated a resolution that would permit individual discretion to bishops in the ordination of homosexual clergy who are in committed lifelong relationships. It also approved occasional Eucharistic fellowship with the United Methodist Church.

In contrast, the most problematic issues at the 59<sup>th</sup> biennial convention of the WELS had to do with finances and a study calling for the eventual defunding of synod-owned schools. Not exactly earthshaking or revolutionary stuff, and for that, perhaps, we should be thankful. The WELS also reaffirmed its commitment to mission outreach, ministerial education, and publications, thereby focusing its energies on core missional values.

Do these conventions reflect the extremes to which Lutheranism has developed in America? The ELCA appears to have so thoroughly embraced the historical criticism of the modern era that it no longer knows with certainty what the Scriptures have to say. The recent hermeneutical studies of the pertinent Scripture passages on human sexuality are but one example. The doctrine of Scripture seems to have become secondary to the need for greater inclusion and a larger

sense of “community.” One can conclude from the speeches and writings of the leaders in ELCA that their Lutheran identity is the product of an evolving and changing interpretation of the core beliefs held by Martin Luther.

The WELS on the other hand, while staunchly defending the Scriptures and striving to maintain purity of doctrine, seems to behave in ways that at times create barriers to reaching the lost. Can it be that efforts to maintain homogeneity among members actually alienate those who most need to hear the gospel? This observer wonders whether recent concerns over applications of biblical principles have in fact resulted in a tendency toward Pharisaic prescriptiveness that undermines the church’s call to be evangelistic.

And so these opposite poles (not counting the few other miniscule Lutheran synods that continue to hover on the fringes) seem to mark the outer limits of Lutheranism in America. The ELCA embraces everyone with a diminished gospel in the interest of creating an ecumenical fellowship or community. The WELS seems to support a culture that is hesitant to embrace others for fear of violating an application of the doctrine of church fellowship.

The ELCA is already seeing an exodus of congregations that can no longer stomach the liberal leanings of the corporate church. A network of similarly minded churches is beginning to emerge. It is hard to say if the WELS in danger of losing congregations that feel unreasonably restricted in their attempts to reach the lost. Given the financial problems facing all Lutheran synods, the Lord of the Church just may be using economic forces to radically change the appearance of Lutheran denominations in America. At any rate, one gets the sense that these growing internal and external tensions are building to a crescendo and that something dramatic is about to happen. If and when it does, it seems highly likely that all Lutheran synods in America are on the cusp of significant change.

### **Of Things Sacred and Secular**

So now the ACLU appears to be on a mission to proscribe all religious references from the public arena. Prohibitions against religious displays of any type, particularly around religious holidays, are being sought in Colorado, New Jersey, and numerous other states. This liberal organization has determined that the First Amendment prohibition against the establishment of religion should be interpreted so as to erase from the public consciousness the fact that religion is practiced at all in our nation.

Now comes a Supreme Court nominee who in a Federal Appeals Court ruling suggests that such stuff is nonsense. And because he is a professed Catholic, and a conservative, no less, the left is rallying the troops to portray him as part of the “radical right”—the new buzzword for anyone opposed to their activist liberal judicial philosophy.

While this author has generally encouraged restraint in the public demonstration of religious symbolism (see opinion on the Ten Commandments), particularly on public property as some kind of generic Judeo-Christian witness to the worldview of our nation’s forefathers, the notion that the non-religious have a superior right to be protected from seeing any religious figure or hearing any religious carol is nonsense. This is about as ludicrous as a Christian demanding on First Amendment grounds that all those little Darwin fishes be banned from car bumpers because our sensibilities have been offended.

The government’s positive recognition of our nation’s religious diversity by allowing visual displays at holidays is not in and of itself establishing religion. In fact, advancing religion as a powerful force in maintaining civil order is not only *not* a violation of the establishment clause, it is healthy for the nation. The trick is in how to do it without crossing over that fine line. Banning every religious reference from curriculum and courthouse, park and plaza, will help to create an environment of hostility toward Christians who seek to share the hope they have.