

THAT BAD OLD MISSOURI SYNOD IS AT IT AGAIN!

By Pr. William P. Terjesen

The ALPB-ers (American Lutheran Publicity Bureau) have waxed petulant about official reaction in the Missouri Synod to District President Orval Mueller's unionistic participation in his niece's wedding (he preached, and another uncle, an ELCA cleric, conducted the service). According to the April 97 "Forum Letter" the malignant Missouri Synod has cast its jaundiced eye with evil intent upon innocent "fawn-in-the-woods" Orval Mueller, and is poised to devour him whole and spit out the bones on his niece's wedding cake.

While they concede for the sake of argument that the official LCMS position is that there are to be no joint worship services with those who are not in altar and pulpit fellowship with us, we are reminded for the ga-zillionth time that there are special circumstances that might call for a pastoral care giver to make exceptions to the rule. We know this. But here's the thing: possible pastoral exceptions to our regular principles of fellowship are to be rare, and to be applied to extreme circumstances. But among LCMS "moderates" these pastoral exceptions have become a huge loophole that is used to justify all kinds of regular departures from our biblically based practice of church fellowship. In the hands of "moderates" the term 'pastoral' has come to mean "without regard to truth or doctrine." Is it true that an LCMS "moderate" is someone who has never met a situation he could not declare "a pastoral exception"? What official LCMS reaction is saying is that it's time to stop abusing the idea of pastoral exceptions.

Many pastors are occasionally put in difficult situations with regard to their extended families. We are often viewed as 'family chaplains,' and are expected act accordingly. Sometimes, when a family consists of people of different faiths, a pastor is faced with a real challenge. But however much we may love our families, we are commanded to love God and His Word more, and to seek to please God rather than men when pleasing both is not possible. Part of what it means to please God rather than men is to instruct and guide a family with people of different faiths ahead of time so that they understand what divides their particular faiths, what is possible, and what is not possible. Then the pastor is not hit out of the blue with requests to do things that would put him in a compromising position. Will that anger and annoy some family members despite your best efforts. Yes. Some people cannot understand issues of religious integrity and cannot be reasoned with. Let it be. Sometimes it's fun to be the "family chaplain" and sometimes it's not.

This leads me to another observation. Some people might bristle at the idea that the ELCA and the LCMS should be called different faiths. No amount of doctrinal or practical deviation on the part of the ELCA seems to convince LCMS "moderates" that the ELCA is anything but a slight variation on our faith. That many "moderates" have friends in ELCA who were once on the "walking" side of the seminex issue may account in part for their blindness. That their own doctrinal position is probably several serious steps removed from Missouri and toward ELCA may further account for it. Whatever the reason, LCMS "moderates" seem blind to this fact: the differences between ELCA and the LCMS are not minor variations on a common theme, but two strikingly divergent themes! We believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, they reject and mock that idea. We subscribe unconditional subscription to the Lutheran confessions, they don't. They can seriously consider, and probably will end up, entering into full communion with various "Reformed" churches; we wouldn't even think about such a thing. They ordain women to the office of the ministry, we strenuously reject such an antibiblical, antichristian idea. They are pro-choice, we are pro-life, etc. The list could go on and on but this is a brief article not an extended paper, so I will end the list here. The soon to be fact of "full communion" with Episcopalians, Presbyterians and others, will only be a confirmation of what LCMS

conservatives have been saying about ELCA since its inception, and what the LCMS's refusal to enter into altar and pulpit fellowship with them has always implied: That ELCA is not a genuinely Lutheran Church at all, but a generic, middle of the road, liberal protestant church body along the lines of the United Methodist Church or the United Church of Christ. The sooner we recognize this the closer we'll be to solving the fellowship problems within our own synod. Maybe ELCA's upcoming union with her new friends will force that recognition on us.

No criticism of the Missouri Synod by liberals and "moderates" would be complete without a charge of legalism thrown in to tweak conservative noses, and the ALPB-ers were true to form here. According to them the Missouri Synod is, as usual, a veritable cesspool of legalism for seeking to act faithfully in accord with it's doctrinal position. It fails to tweak on several counts: A) we've heard it so many times that we now consider it funny, like Al Sharpton talking about racism, B) the charge reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of legalism, and C) it reveals more about the antinomianism of the accusers than the legalism of Missouri.

What is legalism really? It is trusting in our obedience to the law as the source of our salvation, and trusting in the works of the law as our power for service. Is it legalism when a synodical official is admonished, rebuked and called to repentance for violating our biblical, synodical stance? Of course not. It would be legalism if a penitent person was refused absolution until he had worked his way back into good graces. Is it legalism to warn our pastors not to make "pastoral exceptions" an excuse for regular unbiblical fellowship practices? No. It would be legalism to claim that there were never legitimate exceptions, or if the claim was made that rigorous discipline of erring members is what commends us to God. But to seek to believe and act in faithfulness to our biblically based doctrine and practice of church fellowship, to expect pastors and officials to believe and act accordingly, to correct them when they err, and discipline them when they refuse to repent, is not legalism.

Let's remember, however, that when the cry of "legalism" goes forth against the Missouri Synod, it usually an antinomian spirit which utters it. Historically speaking antinomians made two major errors: 1) they denied that the Law should be used in preaching to produce contrition, and 2) they denied that there was any proper use for the Law in the life of the regenerated person. Modern antinomians are deeply influenced by the relativism and permissiveness of our culture, which causes them to stare, like a cow at a new gate, at any application of the Law of God. In their hands the preaching of the Law becomes something less than the Law, and consequently the preaching of the Gospel becomes something less than the Gospel. Believing that we are supposed to affirm and "support" everyone all the time, they view any form of saying "no" to anyone with alarm. Faithful consistent practice of biblical church fellowship, which takes the confession of truth and error seriously is considered legalistic and "judgmental." Using the "pastoral care" loophole frequently, the Gospel is viewed as permission to disregard the Law. This is not a biblical, Lutheran attitude towards the Law and the Gospel, but a sad caricature.

Orval Mueller has been on the clergy roster of the LCMS for a long time. He is a district president and knows that he is responsible to abide by the resolutions of the Synod and to see to it that the pastors under his administration do the same. There is no way that he can claim ignorance or foul play. A highly visible synodical official should not be surprised when his actions attract negative attention. What really has the ALPB-ers upset is that this whole affair is an indication of the coming end of the unofficial "don't ask, don't tell" fellowship understanding. It remains to be seen how much the Rev. Mueller will have to pay to the piper, but it is certain that he has danced to the music.