

May 7, 2013

**To: An Open Letter to The Congregation of Ebenezer Lutheran Church, the Elders, and the Ebenezer Role of Women in the Church Study Group (hereafter ROW Study Group) and to the Church of the Lutheran Brethren to whom the paper was also addressed**

**From:** Pastor Robert Overgaard

### **Opening Remarks**

I have a deep respect for you as a family of believers at Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. This respect for your service to the Lord that has rippled out across the world over many decades makes me feel conflicted as I write this letter to express my concern about the way Scripture is used in the study paper you have published on the web and have addressed to the larger family of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren. While your paper, "Role of Women in the Church Ebenezer ROW Study Group," shows the dedication and careful work that we in the larger family have come to expect of your people, I am troubled that it follows a path of Bible interpretation, sometime referred to as the *new hermeneutic*. This seriously clouds the discussion of the main subject of your paper, and your vision to open the offices of pastor and elder to women in our church family.

Your decision to reopen a discussion of the Role of Women in the church is entirely appropriate. It creates an occasion for all of us to re-examine the issue in the light of Scripture. The issues that arise in each generation call for a re-thinking of our practices in light of changing conditions. This means that we as a church, with a high view of Scripture, will go back to Scripture again to ask whether or not our practical theology positively addresses these changing conditions while retaining its alignment to the Scripture and God's purposes disclosed there.

It should go without saying that our high view of Scripture is a matter of a common confession of faith in our family of churches, so we assume the authority of Scripture at a profoundly basic level. Our Statement of Faith confesses:

The Bible, including both Old and New Testaments as originally given, is the verbally and plenarily inspired Word of God and is free from error in the whole and in the part, and is therefore the final authoritative guide for faith and conduct.

This means that when we assume this Scriptural authority as the highest guide in all matters of faith, we will have concerns that would not necessarily surface with those who do not make this assumption. As common as this assumption is to people who have been catechized in our church or trained in our theology, it may not always be taken into account unless it is re-emphasized in a discussion that addresses the whole congregation. Also, this assumption serves as a reminder that we begin our conversation on common ground within this community of faith and so can avoid the confusion of starting with different assumptions. Of course, this also means that we are deeply concerned if we find we are being asked to make decision on a basis other than this common ground.

**Reason for this letter**

The Elders of Ebenezer Lutheran Church published the ROW Paper on the web for consideration by the congregation and by the Church of the Lutheran Brethren family of churches last December and asked for responses. After some months I have felt led to enter this conversation to express some concerns that I am not hearing discussed. I realize the paper is a draft paper, but I also understand that the process of controlled discussions of this matter with the congregation is scheduled to go forward so that the paper is already becoming a part of the *working theology* of the church.

I am writing this letter not only as a friend of Ebenezer, but as a member in the larger community with which you have shared your process of studying the role of women in the church for the purpose of opening the offices of pastor and elder to women. My hope and prayer is that what I have to share will be useful for the guidance of the church, and for unity that is not limited to the surface, but reaches to the deepest commitments of the community of faith of which we are a part.

**The Policy and Process of Maintaining Unity in the Faith**

The current Ebenezer ROW paper often cites the 1988 ROW Position Paper of the CLBA. Let me review the *policy* under which unity on this issue has been sought in our family. First of all, it was addressed at a denominational level with the full resources of those gifted and called to teach in the denomination, including all pastors and all lay teachers. This time a choice was made to do this review in one congregation by one committee, and the process of changing the culture of the church to accept this new teaching has begun without serious teacher peer review. This is a radically different approach, and those who are knowledgeable in methods of leadership that rely on the secular model of placing the teaching authority in the *situated community* may understand why this was done both by the leaders of Ebenezer, but also the leaders of the denomination, as the ROW claims. My purpose here is only to bring these methods into view for the whole church so we can examine them in the light of the Word and our common confession.

In our church body at the time of these actions, church policy of this importance was made by the Annual Convention after a full presentation of the proposed position based on exegetical studies of the Word which were presented as the warrant for the change. For the Annual Convention to be able to act on this issue, we had to place before the whole church exegetical studies *examining what the Bible says*, and ultimately to draft a position paper that could be discussed in the congregations. This meant that before the new position could be taught, it was reviewed by the whole church.

The point is, these papers, based directly on reasoning from biblical texts became the basis of the decisions which followed. Should someone start sharing their personal preferences or their experiences and seeking to build a support for their position, they would naturally be asked to justify this in detail with support from the Scriptures. This process invited congregations to take their own initiatives to share their convictions as to what the Scriptures say. This was done and the congregations responded with serious study because they were studying from a biblical perspective with which they were familiar in the context of a family of churches that confessed the same faith.

While this process is never perfect, it substantially serves to allow the Word to actually be the highest authority in matters of faith and life. This process was all a part of a faith community making decisions

and making disciples. The votes in all cases were by strong majorities when the decisions were finally made. I served as President of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren during the time the 1988 document on the Role of Women in the Church was created, published and confirmed as an official Position Paper, and know firsthand that the process was subjected to careful review at every level of the church, including significant congregational involvement.

Let me say a few words about that unity. The unity we sought and found was not like a mathematical unity as if we all agreed that  $2 + 2 = 4$  with some kind of Cartesian certainty. In the current spirit of the age it is common to imply that all that hold to a high view of Scripture hold to some kind of vision for Cartesian certainty. That is not how people who know they are finite beings find unity, and it was not our goal or what we achieved. We know (both then and now) that we “know in part”; but we also know that we know some things *truly*. We seek to be workmen who need not be ashamed as we seek knowledge that is true to the Word, always remembering that what we claim to know truly may need to be corrected by knowing the Word and the questions we ask of the Word better. Incidentally I believe the Ebenezer ROW paper shows evidence of the same desire to be workmen who need not be ashamed, but I also believe that desire is thwarted by some basic practices of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) that I will address.

Further, since God’s thoughts and purposes are greater than ours, we know that we will at times necessarily hold ideas in tension, unable to fully understand these ideas in all aspects of God’s design and understanding. For example, we trust the biblical teaching of the Trinity in this manner. Is God three persons and yet one? It seems to have a built in contradiction! However, this antinomy is not a mystery to God, because He knows all things. But it is in part a mystery to us. Yet, we adjust all of our thinking to this truth as a revealed truth because this truth is given to us from God, whom we trust. As followers of Jesus Christ we come to unity of conviction and practice that is substantial, not perfect. However, in some cases it is remarkably specific. And at some times agreement is critical. Working together in love, we trust God to give each of us the love-joy to discern the things that really matter (Philippians 1:9).

*Given our Statement of Faith as an expression of our common confession as a people, there should be no threat to the unity of the church when this process is followed faithfully.* If there are life questions that arise, we who are a people abiding in the Word of God will turn to the Word for answers. All things being equal, we can expect that God will lead His church through His Word, our highest guide for faith and life in the church.

### **Same Game — Different Rules: A Serious Hermeneutical Departure**

However, in this case, all things are not equal. We are being asked to study the ROW in the church again, but with *different rules of interpretation*. Within the study paper presented, there is a major assertion of a new set of hermeneutical rules that is in conflict with the hermeneutics that have historically governed the Church of the Lutheran Brethren and have been widely accepted around the world by churches of evangelical faith for centuries. Not only so, but the new rules of interpretation are in conflict with established rules otherwise affirmed in the paper. I believe the consequence of this new hermeneutical approach and the strategy used to gain acceptance for this change is a serious issue threatening church health and church unity. A change in the rules of Bible interpretation affects the way we understand and apply *all the truth in the Bible*, including the biblical teaching relative to the offices of pastor and elder, the specific teaching the ROW paper wishes to change. As we shall see, this change is not just a whim of

the ROW Study Group but is a change anchored in the hermeneutics of Liberal Protestantism in a postmodern form that has most likely found its way into Ebenezer through the influence of Dr. Craig Van Gelder, which we will detail later.

### **Two Major Concerns in the ROW Paper**

In view of this new way of interpreting Scripture put forward in this paper, there are two major concerns for all of us in the paper presented by the ROW Study Group, concerns we must talk over. I say we because I believe that when the issues I raise are made clear, all of us should want to talk this over to see whether or not we really want to go down this path being laid out by the ROW paper. The subject divides itself into three somewhat distinct subjects:

- I. The New Hermeneutical Principles in the ROW paper
- II. The Procedure for Bringing About Change in the Congregation
- III. The Offices of Pastor and Elder: Shall Women Serve? (Not discussed in this letter)

I will focus mainly on the first two of these major concerns because they potentially have far more sweeping consequences. Further, we really can't have a meaningful discussion on the offices of Pastor and Elder unless we agree on how to interpret the Word.

I will attempt to lay out a kind of anatomy of the problems. It will be a task for the congregation to determine how much this anatomy explains their experience and study.

## **I. The New Hermeneutical Principles in the Ebenezer Role of Women Paper**

### **Hermeneutics Defined and the Problem Introduced**

Although we cannot begin to discuss the whole field of hermeneutics in a meaningful way, *we must* discuss the meaning of hermeneutics in the everyday work of the congregation when we are faced with this major departure from the hermeneutics of our church and of all churches of evangelical faith and life.

For many in the church, *hermeneutics* is not an everyday term, but it is not mysterious in its basic meaning.

The word hermeneutics simply means the study of the principles of interpretation. When those principles are stated, they function like rules, rules that should be followed in the process of interpreting the texts such as the Bible. It is a discipline of study that first developed in Western Civilization in connection with the careful interpretation of the Bible. Only in relatively recent times has this discipline of hermeneutics become of wide interest in similar ways in literature, philosophy and other disciplines. Whatever the value of secular hermeneutics is for society in a society setting, these ways of interpreting texts do not take into account the reality of biblical revelation and the authority of that revelation in the church. In fact, some of them are highly influenced by a profound skepticism as to truth itself and so interpret texts in a skeptical manner. Further, the Bible is written in the language and in the context of ordinary people. While it has something to say about the findings and speculations of the world, it does

not stand on worldly ground. It invites all to take the perspective of the Word which is rich in the many forms and settings in which it is given. In this Word we have both the promise of life and the basis for the Judgment.

Generally, it is only in the last 30 years that these new principles have emerged and gained significant traction in several of the liberal arts, although their history goes back further in philosophy. As far as I can see, only since the 1990's has this begun to have an impact in churches of evangelical faith and life as it has been applied to the study of the Bible, but to date, this impact has been limited. Of course, Liberal Protestantism has been involved in like issues for over 100 years, and the inroads of the activist strategy relying on critical theory goes back 40 years and more. It was evident in the Bangkok conference of the WCC in 1972. Now we are facing the issue in relationship to the practical theology of the congregation, which has become the entry point of the new hermeneutics, and is potentially threatening all of evangelical theology.

### **Shifting from Textual Truth-Authority to Current Context Value-Authority in the ROW Paper: The Great Hermeneutical Departure**

The ROW Study Group gives us a clear road sign showing us their point of departure from biblical hermeneutics.

Here are our primary interpretive assumptions (These should be taken as a whole, not as if in order by priority. See also Appendix B on our hermeneutical guidelines):

1. The big themes of scripture shape the smaller themes. Of course, this begs the question of what are the big themes and what are the small ones (ROW, page 4.).

This first point proves to be pivotal. This line of reasoning is developed further and is illustrated in action in various parts of the paper.

I don't wish to imply that anyone just decided to shift to a new hermeneutic. I assume that the church leadership was sincerely and passionately seeking to find a way for Ebenezer to become more effective in a changing community. With those good motives, a process was begun that gradually entangled the church with a method of leadership and a method of Biblical interpretation that promised to help the church to reach these goals, but which in fact was not really anchored in the Word or in a high view of Scripture. As a result, I believe it leads to a land of multiple unintended consequences.

In writing this letter I also assume that most of the leadership has yet to discover the full implications of the system of thought they are introducing to the church. I am writing to explain my concerns lest this system of thought gain more traction without being understood in the context of the congregation and of our church body, both of which are evangelical in faith and life and hold to a high view of Scriptural authority.

### Introductory Concerns:

1. While the reference is to “interpretive assumptions” that are being put forward, and then to “hermeneutical guidelines” it appears that the ROW Study Group is not only talking about two locations in the paper, but about two different things: “interpretive assumptions” and “hermeneutical guidelines.” It is misleading to treat them in this way because the above stated assumption functions as a rule of interpretation as their use of their assumptions shows.

We expect to show that there is a serious conflict between the assumptions and guidelines. This will be shown especially in this first assumption:

1. ROW Assumption: “The big themes of scripture shape the smaller themes” (page 4).

This assumption is a problem, especially as it is used in the paper, resulting in the casting off of the restraint inherent in the textual meaning. As I have traced the process it appears to transform meaning through a series of reclassification as the interpretive process moves from what the text says to what themes can be developed from texts, to what big themes have to say to shape small themes, and then, as we shall see, from a truth authority to a value authority that is created by the receiving community.

*This conflicts with:*

2. the other hermeneutical guidelines that the ROW paper accepts in the CLBA Statement of Faith about the authority of Scripture which they quote in their guidelines:

The Bible, including both Old and New Testaments as originally given, is the verbally and plerarily inspired Word of God and is free from error in the whole and in the part, and is therefore the final authoritative guide for faith and conduct (CLBA Statement of Faith).

The ultimate point of conflict is whether or not the Bible is an authoritative guide for faith and conduct in the actual practice of the congregation, or whether the Bible is to be decentered from its place of highest authority with the new center of authority becoming the multi-perspectival consensus of the situated community.

This will take some unpacking, and will take some serious effort to understand.

I think the effect is a paper that is trying to have it both ways: 1) An established hermeneutic; 2) a new hermeneutic. The effect is confusing and leads to the decentering of the Statement of Faith. To decenter is to both break the authority of the Statement of Faith and move it to the margins of discussion. The resulting *working theology* of the congregation will tend to ignore the Statement of Faith unless someone intentionally brings it up, and then it will come into the conversation only as an outside resource, treated as a *tradition*, not as the highest authority in matters of faith and life. Even if Scripture comes up, citing it becomes socially incorrect if authority is ascribed to it. This may seem hard to imagine but the situation will become clearer as this explanation unfolds and is traced in several contexts.

2. Throughout the ROW Paper the Study Group compares and contrasts their teaching to the *CLB 1988 Role of Women in the Church Position Paper (1988 ROW)*. They do so, at times, using their own new hermeneutical rules. It is important to continually notice the different hermeneutical positions. The

resulting discussion is at times like a ball game refereed by two referees using two different rule books. If it went on too long, there would be a riot in the stands. We need to be clear about which rules we are really following and what our real authority is.

Therefore, I have inserted several *principles of interpretation* from the 1988 paper, and refer you to that paper for a more complete discussion of standard hermeneutical principles. <http://www.clba.org/resources>

From the CLB 1988 Role of Women in the Church Position Paper:

**Affirmation 2: There are general principles or rules that must govern our study of the Bible. These hermeneutical rules need to be clarified and applied when the church faces new or changing cultures**

Clarifying the rules of Bible interpretation is a demanding task. While we must always rely on the Holy Spirit as we seek to understand the Word, God also expects us to be diligent students. Paul writes, “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman who needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Some of the major rules of Bible interpretation are listed below:

1. The Bible must be interpreted in its original languages and in its historical and cultural contexts. These contexts include the original language and how it is otherwise used, the immediate passage, the surrounding passages, the entire book in which the passage is found, the other writings of the author, the entire Bible, the culture of the time and the previous history.
2. The Bible must be interpreted in light of its unity since it is all inspired by God. The unity of the Bible enables the reader to let Scripture interpret Scripture and requires the exegete to interpret the parts in terms of the whole, thereby reaching conclusions on which all Scripture agree.
3. The Bible must be interpreted as a progressive revelation. By **progressive** revelation we mean that the Bible sets forth a movement of God, with the initiative coming from God and not man, in which God brings man to an increasingly clearer understanding of God’s character and His purposes. Progressive revelation is the general pattern of revelation.

Bernard Ramm asserts, “This perspective of progressive revelation is very important to the interpreter. He will expect the full revelation of God in the New Testament. He will not force New Testament meanings into the Old, yet he will be able to more fully expound the Old knowing its counterparts in the New.”

“Progressive revelation in no manner qualifies the doctrine of inspiration, and it in no way implies that the Old Testament is less inspired. It states simply that the fullness of revelation is in the New Testament” (Ramm, 1950, p. 82, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*).

4. Bible passages which speak to an issue in a direct teaching fashion (didactic) should be used to help understand incidental, descriptive and historical references elsewhere. The direct teaching of Paul in the letter to the Romans, showing how men can be made right with God, develops a formal, complete picture of this issue. It helps us to see that the description of Cornelius as a righteous and God-fearing man does not give the full basis of how man can be judged righteous before God (Acts 10:22).
  
5. The Bible interpreter must distinguish the applications of principles within a given culture, such as the culture of the New Testament, from the principles themselves. The principles, not the specific application, must be our guide to faith and life. . . .
  
6. The Bible affirms one system of truth about God, man, and salvation because it reveals that God is one. Just as we assume a unity in the Bible itself for purposes of exegesis (rule 2), so also we expect to build a consistent system of truth by which to guide our lives. When there are no exact current day counterparts to Scriptural texts, or when there are present day situations which do not have Biblical counterparts, appropriate teaching will be found by relating to the truth revealed in the Scriptures about the character of God, the nature of mankind, the revelation of God's purposes, the experience of the church and the leading of the Holy Spirit. These are the basic ingredients of systematic theology in which we seek to think God's thoughts after Him, starting from the revelation which is given. . . . (The rules of interpretation were taken from a discussion beginning on page 2 of *CLB 1988 Role of Women in the Church Position Paper*. For a full discussion see <http://www.clba.org/resources>.)

It could be objected that the “big themes” are not being *selected and used* for shaping smaller themes, it is not something the interpreters are doing, but it is just the meta-biblical context. We are just interpreting the Scripture in light of the Scripture. But, we shall see in more detail later, that is not actually what is going on here. If it were, the lesser text would not be “shaped” by the bigger themes, it would be interpreted by the bigger themes *that were talking about or were germane to, that is closely and substantially related to the same subject giving a more complete understanding*. Or they would stand in some kind of tension as an open question. What we actually see in the ROW paper is that a theme like salvation, when converted to a value, is being used to shape the understanding of texts that are not germane to the original source meaning. They are not substantially related at the point of supposed likeness. Instead, preferred *values* are used by the ROW Study Group to shape and overcome the meaning of texts that do not agree with the proposition being put forward by the ROW Study Group. If this sounds unnecessarily complicated to some, we should remember that if someone drops and spills a pail of fine fireplace ashes on the living room floor, and another person has to clean it up, the one cleaning it up should not be criticized for raising some dust. This becomes a difficult subject when new rules are injected into the game.

We must not miss the significance of any interpreter making a claim that general terms of great value can shape the interpretation of lesser texts as the interpreter's right, giving themselves authority over the text. This is a 180 degree reversal of normal theology that seeks to conserve the authority of the text as we submit to the Word of the Lord. When theology is systematized, we are starting with the meaning of the text in its context, seeking to find consistent teaching in multiple texts, and refusing to go beyond what is

written when we cannot make the text agree in our finite knowledge. We end up at times with open questions. We are obligated to try our best to “close” them, to find further evidence while interpreting Scripture with Scripture that would give us a systematic theology, but when they remain open, we adjust our thinking to the Word. *We do not accept as a principle that we use the greater theme to shape the lesser theme.* That arrogates to ourselves an authority we have no right to assume. The lesser theme has a contribution to make that must be taken fully into account. It is the Word of God.

This conversion of truth to values process can also be seen as moving from the original concrete situation through a process of abstracted meaning, climbing an abstraction ladder that gets further and further above the original ground, and then coming down to earth again on different ground. It starts on textual ground, with particulars assertions in the text, steps up to general themes, thus freeing the theme from the original textual context in a natural way, then converting the theme to a generalized value, and then going back down the abstraction ladder to make specific judgments on the ground of general values.

Who has the authority ultimately to announce these values? I take it, of course, the “we” used in the Ebenezer ROW paper is not meant to be just the ROW Study Committee, it is meant to be what the situated community will be developing as a consensus about the meaning of the Bible after the guided discussions have worked through these great themes that are presented as values (not textual truth) and applied to the needs of the situated community by consensus, making the situated community the new highest authority in these particular matters of faith and conduct.

### **Introductory Affirmation:**

So that my readers may have a sense of where I am going with the discussion that follows, I want to simply affirm that given my understanding of the hermeneutics used by the ROW Study Group in this paper, I believe their paper represents a serious departure from living under the authority of the Word of God as inspired in the whole and in the part. Therefore I wish to enter into a discussion and invite others in the church at large to enter into this discussion both with the ROW Study Group, the congregation of Ebenezer Lutheran Church and the family of churches that is the Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America. If I have a correct understanding, following the Ebenezer ROW paper hermeneutics will undermine the authority of the Word on the large themes as well as the small. For example, the large theme of salvation by grace through faith has often been turned into a general universalism by churches when it has been divorced from the specific biblical truths that support the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. Without alignment to the text the Gospel can become the gospel of good forces at work in society saving all. It won't happen in a day, but it is likely to happen more quickly than we would have thought.

I will follow a kind of spiral process, coming back to concepts already touched upon and explaining them more fully as the circling spiral climbs and becomes wider. I follow what may be a somewhat tedious process because I think the subject matter requires it.

### **From The Truth in Biblical Texts to Values in the Situated Communities**

We are talking about issues that are major issues in theology, philosophy, social science, gender and culture that are all being re-studied because there is a shift in understanding of how the Scriptural text (or

any text) will be interpreted. Since these issues are of major scope, we can only hope to point to some of the sign posts that will help us avoid wrong choices and lead us in God's way.

Let me say it again. One way to understand the shift in how to interpret text is to shift the discussion of the text from a discussion of what the text says to what I value when I consider this text. Notice how it shifts the meaning of the text from what the text says, with the text being the authority for the meaning, to what I value, so that I become the authority for what is meaningful to me in this text. But, of course, if it were just what I personally value everything would be relative with no authority but personal preference. That wouldn't do, of course, so the process of community dialogue leading to consensus of some kind results in social authority anchored in broad human experience. Contrast these: If we have a confession of faith based on what the texts say, and if we change it to a values statement to say what we value instead of what we confess, we have the new basis of meaning.

Now if we reason from a Statement of Faith and ask what this means for a particular situation, we are reasoning from truth statements to what this means in this situation. That reasoning can be shown to be true or false based on the texts. But if we reason from value statements, we are saying we value this, and this is what it means in this situation. This is not now a matter of truth, it is a matter of values and preferences. In practical terms if we develop a new *working theology* based on our values, it will be very general and plastic. The authority will lie with the group that expresses their values. In contrast, when you deal with a Statement of Faith you are dealing with truth and the authority is outside of the group. Truth claims can be challenged and even falsified. They can be found to be without warrant, and so without authority. But a discussion where we reason from values always turns on the question of which is better, which is greater. We can tolerate some very questionable values in a community if we start with the premise that our highest values will be developed from multi-perspectival, guided leadership. Our better values become our social ethic. They are the authority on questions like the requirements for the offices of pastor and elder.

It should be noted that this process fits well in the spirit of the age because in postmodernism there is no truth that has any claim to tell people of another community what to do or that they are wrong, we only can share values. Of course in the political arena this means choosing up sides and all that goes with our polarized society.

If we think about this, we can easily see how one could form a community with multiple perspectives about most things in life if we limited our conversation to values. Even the person who advocates their values in a strong fashion can be handled by the group by saying, "We respect your values and we respect that you hold them passionately. But, in *our* community we all know that we have different values and many of us give *greater priority* to some issues than to others. Since one of our major purposes *and one of our highest priorities* is to form an inclusive community, we all have to give some on our values for the sake of the common good. True pluralism has arrived.

But if we actually believe, for example, that there is "no other name given among men by which we must be saved" than the name of Jesus, then we have a truth that divides. We don't value this because it is one of our values; we trust it because God is telling us this truth through the Word. We proclaim it. This is His Word about how people lost in sin can be made right with Him. And since we take it to be true, we value telling others about the free gift of life in Christ Jesus. The basic principle here is that in the Bible

values flow from truth. In the hermeneutical turn of our time, “truth” flows from values, and values are plastic. *They can be shaped, managed, made.* A full understanding of neo-pragmatism, a major philosophy driving the postmodern mood will show how this view is shaping the spirit of the age.

### **What About Justice?**

To take another example, it is obvious that there are many people who seek justice with great zeal in this world. When we seek justice we are in line with God’s purpose for the state, His human agency in His reign over creation. And we are in line with the way we are created in the image of God. We simply *are* concerned about right and wrong if we are normal human beings. As Christians, we are citizens of the secular world and we are concerned about justice together with other citizens of our community. We want justice in our world, in our nation, in our state, in our city, in our community. But this is not unique to Christians; it is the common concern of humanity. Even very unjust people want justice in some areas of their lives.

What is more, some people who are not Christian sometimes put Christians to shame when it comes to seeking justice. Take the large issues of sexual abuse that have led to the purging of major church bodies by *secular* agencies as an example.

Of these agencies and institutions in society, one of stronger voices for justice is the press, the media. Scratch most reporters and you will find a reformer under the skin. These people may or may not be Christians, but whether they know it or not, all of them are serving under God’s reign over Creation. He created us that way. Many citizens have official responsibilities to bring justice to their neighborhoods. Many of our social programs bring justice by putting an economic floor under the poor, for example. We could go on and on.

Now, we can become a player in this realm as a church if we make the general idea of “kingdom ethics” into a plastic value term. We can change culture and society as the mission of the church. Or can we?

### **Kingly Reign or Kingdom Values**

But, this is not the *kingdom of God* of the New Testament. If we are going to call this kind of ethical value concern the “kingdom of God” we are creating a *theological* term than can only correctly be used if we speak of the *twofold kingdom of God*. The *New Testament* was radically new because it was an unveiling of a mystery that had only been partially understood before. When unveiled, it revealed the reign of the Messiah, the King, the Son of God. It is the king that is at hand! Now we begin to fully understand that God always reigned according to two separate purposes after the fall. He reigns over creation to resist evil and advance justice. But according different purposes, He reigns to bring about redemption and eternal life through grace and truth as revealed in the Gospel.

These two fold reigns of God, one over a fallen creation and one over the glorious kingdom of redemption move toward different ultimate ends. The one ends in Judgment, the kingdom of redemption never ends because it becomes the kingdom of heaven.

According to Kittel,<sup>1</sup> every reference to the Kingdom of God in the New Testament is salvific in nature. Since salvation is through Jesus Christ alone, and since the teaching about the Kingdom of God in the

New Testament is abundantly clear as to the assertion that no one can enter the Kingdom of God except by faith in Jesus Christ, the New Testament use of this term *is clearly about the Kingdom of Redemption*. Not all of creation is in this kingdom, even though it is open to all. Nor can one enter except through the One who is the “way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6). “Straight is the gate and narrow the way and few there be that find it.”

The kingdom of God in the New Testament is the full disclosure of the reality of the reign of the Redeemer. As a kingdom of redemption, it is a kingdom of *grace and truth*. Conversely, the kingdom of creation is a *kingdom of power*. The church is God’s human agency in the one; the state is God’s human agency in the other. As we shall see, the new hermeneutic and the critical theory strategy to bring about social change are at home in the kingdom of power, not the kingdom of truth and grace. And when we mix them we bring confusion, trying to advance the faith with power, or trying to govern a secular state with grace.

If we equate the kingdom of redemption with resisting evil and advancing justice, making it a servant of the kingdom of creation, we are secularizing the church and making it just another agency advancing the good causes of the state and society. We are stepping out from under the reign of God in redemption, usurping His realm for other purposes, and leaving the great mission of proclaiming the Gospel undone or shifted to the margin. Our Lord made it plain: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” When we let the words of our Lord define the Kingdom of God we will know that this is the kingdom of redemption. It is His disciples under His reign of redemption whom He prayed for when He sent them into the world, that they would be kept from the world. He sent them, but he prayed for them that they might serve at a spiritual distance that is required to pluck brands from the burning, to be servants of deliverance with a high respect for the destructive heat of the fire. (Jude 23).

But don’t the people who are redeemed have a witness to justice? Yes, in two ways. They are citizens of the secular realm that God allows within His reign over creation. Like the other citizens they should seek justice and resist evil. They also have a second responsibility and that is to bear witness to truth and righteousness from their perspective in the reign of redemption. But this is witness of truth and grace; it is not a power play. In fact it often leads to suffering because it goes to the heart of man, not just the social structures, and it is resisted.

Jesus talks about the kingdom of God as the kingdom of salvation, a reign of truth and grace, more than most any other topic. Some people are under the reign of grace, some are not. Only those who come in by the narrow gate are in the kingdom, under the reign and therefore in the realm that leads to life.

What is more, the very meaning of the word *kingdom* is *reign of the king*, the primary meaning in the New Testament. It is not like a democratic country or society, it is the reign of the King. The realm is secondary. Those who Jesus characterizes as being “in the world” are not in the kingdom even though they are called to redemption. They can only relate to God through His redemption, by grace, through faith. They must enter the Kingdom of God. Every instance in which the term “kingdom of God” is used in the New Testament refers to the reign of salvation and to the realm of those who are saved by grace through faith.

There is, of course, a witness *to* the King given to the world as we proclaim the Gospel. We bear witness to His Words and His Works, as those who are under His reign of redemption. But the only way to be saved from the world “that is condemned already” (John 3:17 ff) is by grace through faith. The development of Kingdom of *Creation* ethics is important under the agency of the state, but they are not about salvation. They are about resisting evil and bringing justice in a secular world which is the Devil’s playground, where people may or may not take God into account in their search for justice.

We must be careful not to be following a false mission as a church. Are we to take the major theme of the Kingdom of God, convert it to an ethical *value*, give it over to the situated community (both believers and unbelievers) , and let them decide how to apply what it means? Or shall we let the Lord who reigns in this kingdom of redemption specify the *truth* of His kingdom in all the detail He wishes to give, and then take our place as servants in His realm, allowing our minds, by the power of the Spirit, to be broken loose from conformity to the world, as we yield to the transforming of our minds through the Word? Who shall we serve?

### **Introduction to a Case in Point from the ROW Paper**

This example we will give shortly will show the re-classification of a *truth* teaching about *salvation* by grace through faith, into a *value* teaching about “*salvation*” *that has a much more generalized definition* and will show how it is cut loose from the constraints of the context. As we go along we will show how reasoning from the framework of value-authority is used to support the concept of opening the office of pastor and elder to women. Please note, this is not yet a discussion of the requirements for the office of pastor and elder. It only shows the interpretive path the ROW is following.

The critical issue now is to show how a conflict develops as the new hermeneutic is advanced. We will seek to show how this shift to value authority to guide the church effectively *decenters* the authority of truth as found *in the interpretation of this specific text*. Decentering both breaks the authority of the text and also moves the text and the teachings drawn from the text to the margins in the dialogue of the group, where it ultimately will only be consulted as a voice of tradition, not a present voice of authority.

For example, it will shift the “salvation” as a value from its *context*, thus setting a pattern for ignoring the textual meaning in the third chapter of Galatians where Paul is proclaiming truth about our relationship to God. This shifts “salvation-value” to the *context of* social conditions of today for purposes of interpreting values that are meaningful to the ROW Study Group and to their understanding of the values of their *situated* community.

Here is another way to see the shift. We are familiar with a three step process that asks: 1) What does it say? 2) What does it mean? 3) What does it mean to me? This new process often does not even fully ask “What does it say.” It more asks what values are in this text that are useful to us. It skips the normal second step of interpretation, “What does it mean?,” and folds that step into what would have been step three. The result is to ask of the text: “What does this word, phrase, etc., mean to us in our situated community here and now?” At times, what the word, phrase or sentence means in the original text as understood within its context is of little consequence. That was then, this is now.

Of course, this will present problems in a church group and ultimately more and more of the original teachings must be re-classified and the terms re-defined. We will end up with exhortations for us to turn

our imaginations loose in a situated community of believers and unbelievers because this is how the Holy Spirit works. This seems to be dangerous ground to separate the work of the Spirit from the Word and describe our group imagination as a work of the Holy Spirit. I wouldn't want to go there. I don't think the people of the ROW Study Group want to go there, nor the people of Ebenezer, but this is the road you are on if you continue with this kind of hermeneutics and the related methods that this pathway uses.

It seems unlikely that all in the Study Group understand the full implications of this shift from truth authority to value authority because the idea comes from complex philosophical roots which we shall seek to trace in the Ebenezer context. Most members would not have had a chance to take the 101, 201, 301, 401 courses that are necessary for a working understanding. In fact, the ROW Study Group uses *both* value and truth authority to anchor their inferences at various times in the paper, or as if they didn't sense the differences. Therefore, we will have to trace out the process and see which is which.

### **Galatians 3:28: A Case in Point**

We have been working toward a case study of how a particular interpretation of a specific text illustrates the points being made. The interpretation of Galatians 3:28 in the ROW paper is an instance of converting truth assertions made by the Apostle Paul into value statements that are generalized as values that the ROW Study Group resonates with in the text. Although there are many instances of reasoning from value authority to desired policy in this paper, this example is treated as a key interpretation in the ROW paper, so we will address it first.

Again, I want to emphasize that this process may or may not be fully understood by the Study Group. I hope to help those who have not understood the new hermeneutic and the new procedure to lead the group to understand it in relationship to the Word of God.

From the ROW Study Group:

2. Jesus' kingdom is central to understanding how to live in the current age. We presently live with some of the benefits of his kingdom and it is our hope to live fully with all kingdom benefits in the age to come. One of the immediate benefits of Jesus' kingdom is the new reality Paul speaks of in Galatians 3:28. We view this passage not just as articulating equality before God in terms of salvation but in terms of life. For what is salvation apart from the rest of our lives? Doesn't salvation, when understood biblically, include all aspects of our lives, individual and collective? The answers must be yes. (Page 5)

The first point here is that the paragraph begins with *values not truth*. Terms such as "benefits," "live fully," "kingdom benefits," "articulating equality," "all aspects of our lives individual and collective" are value terms or they point to values. They are not addressed as truths taken from Scripture and applied carefully to develop their conclusions. We will develop this point further, but we note here that this is the interpretation path chosen by the ROW Study Group. It is a path that will take some work to understand because it is a departure from normal Bible interpretation.

Second, to speak of salvation in all our lives has a strange ring in this context. The normal sound one expects to hear is more one of salvation *from our natural lives*—our lives of sin and rebellion against God. We are born again, into a living hope and this is salvation—that God rescues me from the evil of sin

and rebellion against him. It includes all our lives in the sense that all our lives must be killed—in the old man—to be reborn in Christ.

Third, we need to notice a shift in how definitions function in this method of interpretation. Sometimes *the principle meaning* of a truth or even a value is used, the *denotation*. But other times it is only the associated or secondary meaning of a word or expression, *the connotation* that is used. If we reason from the general connotation of a word we are breaking down the authority of the text to control the meaning of the word, the sentence, the paragraph and all the other circles of context. We are doing interpretation, in some cases by literary allusion.

Telling us what salvation is, how it may be obtained and to whom it will be given is to lay out the truth about salvation. Of course this is what Paul did in Galatians 3. Now the truth of salvation is good news to the sinner, a value of highest price. Notice that we can take just the good news part of this and generalize the term salvation to be the great value of God working to give us flourishing communities. We are now moving out of a discussion about our relationship to God and the blessings of it, into the semantic field, the field of meaning of “happiness” of “constructing our self,” etc., getting close to a secular world that is pretty much the same with or without God. But alas, what an empty world that we have gained! It takes a few steps in between, but we can get there if we speak of salvation as a value instead of as the truth of how God makes people right with himself through the message of the cross. With a generalized good news value that carries the positive connotations that salvation carries in the Bible, we have created a very plastic value term. Now who would be against this generalized salvation? It can become even sort of utopian. By extending our argument we could say that since we are all for salvation, we should all be for bringing social deliverance to anyone who is oppressed or blocked from reaching their full potential. Think of the power we bring to our argument in a Christian context when we can use a connotation of salvation to advance our cause! What could be more Christian than salvation? So notice that the first sentence refers to values that are good and then takes another leap to the value of equality that is another good.

ROW: One of the immediate benefits of Jesus’ kingdom is the new reality Paul speaks of in Galatians 3:28. We view this passage not just as articulating equality before God in terms of salvation but in terms of life.

The ROW Study Group says, “We view this passage...” But, clearly Paul does not view this passage this way, because if he did he would have said so in this crystal clear exposition. Why do they view it this way? Again, the best reason I can imagine is because of the *connotations* of the phrases Paul uses in Galatians 3:28. These connotations of the word “salvation” are the associated or secondary meaning of a word. They represent an expression of values we all want and the basis from which the ROW Study Group prefers to reason. The connotation of salvation has a certain joyful sound to it that may or may not be appropriate if it is cut loose from its *denotation*. The words taken from Galatians 3;28 have a certain ring to them, a connotation of equality because even though they were talking about a different subject, they say the kind of things we want to hear. Now if we can *abstract* the value of equality from this text into the context of a statement about male and female roles in the church, we could begin to reason toward our goal of using value authority to declare that men and women should be equal in all the offices of the church because *this is an application that we want for interpretation on our horizon, here and now, in our situated community. It works for our purposes*, even if that isn’t what Paul said. What is totally

lost in the process is that God may have a purpose to organize the church so as not to undermine the family by creating cultural friction in some settings (in the whole world for which this was meant) and to support families as He created them in other settings. I'm not trying to give a definitive answer to the question here, only to urge the church to search for Scriptural comprehensive answers.

### **The More Profound Problem**

But the problem that develops in this paper is more profound and illustrates that the majority apparently *will not be guided by the texts* in this matter, a serious hermeneutical and spiritual issue. It is not a mistake, it is not an oversight. How can this be said? Because their argument from values taken out of context from Galatians 3:28, however well intentioned, is already effectively refuted by the Minority Report that is contained within this ROW paper. (See page 67 and following)

Having considered the Minority Report on this text, and the conclusion of that report which is firmly based on Biblical exegesis of Galatians the third chapter, the majority of the committee *confidently ignores* the teaching of Galatians chapter 3 in their published draft. They go right on with their project to take a value out of the text that is meaningful to them in their current context as if it is not constrained by the meaning of Paul's context. After considering the teaching of the Minority Report, *the majority just reasserted their own position again without any qualification or notice:*

Majority Summary: This text states that unity in Christ removes boundaries within the body of Christ based on ethnicity, social class, and gender. This is one of the great verses in the Bible and speaks to the transforming good news of Jesus Christ. (First stated on page 5; now stated on Page 10.)

Not so. Actually this text states that *salvation in Christ*, not unity in Christ, removes all *distinctions* as to worthiness before God. It does not happen automatically *in the body of Christ*. There are still slaves and masters! Rather, we grow in our recognition that since we are one in Christ we are brothers and sisters no matter what our past distinctions might have been. In the real world, the body of Christ has way more distinctions of class and ethnicity than would be pleasing to God. It is our growth in grace and in fellowship with one another that breaks down the barriers, but that is a different subject, discussed in other texts. What is more, God sets priorities. He may give higher priority to one value because He has a purpose to do so. This is Lordship, not democracy, not equality. Despite His love for all mankind and His evident love for the poor both in His Word and in His works, Jesus refused to make their need an absolute priority. He said as he led toward a different goal, "The poor you have with you always." We can't settle an issue of God's priorities by our preferences. We must settle them within the context of revealed truth.

Let's look at the Majority Report and the Minority Report and note the differences that were *not* resolved in reference to Galatians 3:28 because they were using different rules of interpretation (See particularly "Galatians 3:28 heading, page 69 and following.):

### **Galatians 3:28**

Majority: Summary: This text states that unity in Christ removes boundaries within the body of Christ based on ethnicity, social class, and gender. This is one of the great verses in the Bible and speaks to the transforming good news of Jesus Christ.

Minority: This is, indeed, a great verse. But it's great with reference to the salvation we have in Jesus Christ, not the dissolution of God-given roles for women and men.

a. Looking closely at this verse we ask the question, "How are women and men equal as they come to Christ through faith and baptism?" The context lists six ways:

v. 24 they are equally justified by faith,

v. 25 they are equally free from the bondage of legalism,

v. 26 they are equally children of God,

v. 27 they are equally clothed with Christ,

v. 29 they are equally possessed by Christ,

v. 29 they are equally heirs of the promise to Abraham." (Grudem & Piper, "Answers to Basic Questions about Biblical Manhood and Womanhood")

b. If we ask the question, "How do the three 'pairs' in the verse compare?" We note that only the third, "male/female," has its roots in creation.

3) So what is the significance of the first pair, "Jew/Greek?" In fact that is the subject of this and every chapter (1:13,16; 2:7-9, 12-15; 3:14; 4:8,21; 5:6; 6:15). Why does Paul emphasize that to the Galatian readers? Galatians 2:4 calls out "false brothers." (See also Acts 15:5 "Pharisee believers.") They are attempting to impose Jewish rituals (v. 2:3 + 32 times in Galatians), calendar observances (4:10), kosher food laws (2:12) and circumcision (2:3 + 12 times). Paul is arguing for faithfulness to Christ (1:23 + 21 similar times, 2:7 + 3 times, & 3:9) (Wayne Walden, "Galatians 3:28: Grammar, Text, Context and Translation", Journal of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Spring 2010)

4) A simple outline of the context would be:

How one gets "into" Christ (vv 24, 27)

Who can be "in" Christ (vv 26, 28)

Who belongs "to" Christ (v. 29)

5) Verse 28 gives examples by showing the restrictions that have been eliminated. One does not have to be Jew, free, or male; Greeks, servants, and females are also eligible.

6) So what is the organizing principle of this text? From the text itself, "All are one in Christ Jesus." It does not say, "All are equal in Christ Jesus," but "All are one in Christ Jesus."

**d. Conclusion: Neither this verse, nor this chapter, nor the book of Galatians addresses the God-ordained roles of women and men. (Emphasis added.)**

What can we conclude from this unresolved difference? I think the answer is clear. The Minority report is using standard exegetical principles appropriate to a high view of Scripture. *The majority is using different rules of biblical interpretation.* They are marching to the beat of a different drummer.

The clearest way for me to understand this impasse is to say that the Majority and the Minority stand on different ground when they reason. These are people who have known and respected each other for years. How can we explain this different way of responding to the word of Scripture? One group accepts the authority of the text. The other feels they have the right to extract values out of text, whether from single words or phrases and without regard for the textual context. Then they feel justified in using these values as an *authority* for guiding the church in its ministry. They can even use them to counter other texts.

The formula is simple: “We value this, therefore this means that.” The inferences are drawn from their understanding of the values *in the context of the interpreter*, not the context of the text.

This is not isolated to the treatment of Galatians 3:28. It is the way the major argument of the entire paper runs.

### **Value Authority Hermeneutics, How Did They Come To Us?**

Is this a hermeneutical process original with the ROW Study Group? No. It is a process that comes to the church from philosophy, from philosophical sources that are sometimes firmly set against any claim to revealed truth. The reason for this change from truth to values is the development of what is called the *hermeneutical turn*, a key concept in current secular hermeneutics. Of course, there are other streams of thought that blend with this understanding of how we know what we know. We cannot fully develop a philosophical background to these issues here. We can say that this way of interpreting a text creates skepticism as to truth and instead ascribes an authority to values that are developed in the situated community of the interpreters.

When we give priority to values over truth we start asking the universal value question, “Which is better?” If we start asking “which is better,” instead of “what is true,” we will soon divide the community into “political” parties; some for one set of values, some for another. Cut loose from immediate truth claims, we are free from any chance of our claims being falsified. Going this route we will find ourselves coming to a great divide in the road in contemporary culture. If we follow the world in our strategies of leadership in the church, we will divide the church and silence much of Scripture.

Let’s try unpacking a simple outline of how this happens and how it may have begun in Ebenezer. I believe the flow of events and teachings will be sufficiently strong to warrant our asking whether or not this is indeed the more complete picture of a departure from living under the authority of the inspired Word of God.

Time will not allow us to trace all the instances where value authority replaces truth authority in the ROW Paper, although this is a task that others may well do. How has Ebenezer come to this point of hermeneutical conflict? Let’s look at some history that gives us some strong clues.

### **Finding a Consultant In a Time of Change**

Churches that see themselves in a crisis of decline are looking for new ways to not only survive but to re-invent themselves in their geographical communities, a responsible thing to do within limits.

This may be why Ebenezer engaged a church consultant named Dr. Craig Van Gelder some years ago. I invite you as members to check it out with your own memories of that time. You may not have used the words I am using, but that is how I remember being told about it.

Dr. Craig Van Gelder of Luther Seminary was engaged. His views are much better known now than when he was engaged. He has written many books. His views are clearly put forth and his credential as a teacher and leader are respected in his church, a mainline denomination.

Dr. Craig Van Gelder is also a respected teacher in churches that do not have the same view of Scriptural authority that Dr. Van Gelder holds. In our technical and pragmatic society many think they can borrow methods and techniques in a kind of value-free way. Some who may even know the full system of Van

Gelder's teaching may think they can borrow from his teachings on leadership given in a Missional Theology context without endangering their confessed faith, even though there is much that is in conflict with their confession in substantial ways.

I want to simply assert that Van Gelder's teaching *framework* is simply incompatible with *our framework*, as we shall see below. That does mean that there are not practical insights that can be gained. For example people following activities appropriate to this way of doing church will have positive encounters with their neighbors that they otherwise would not have had. My concern is that there is a dynamic system of teaching and leading that is compatible with Liberal Protestant churches that is not compatible with churches of evangelical faith and life with a high view of the authority of Scripture.

Reasoning from the missional theological framework as structured by Van Gelder will not fit in our setting and will break the bond of peace. The negative impact will happen even if those actively advancing the hermeneutical rules and process of missional theology as developed by Van Gelder's are sincerely convinced that what they do is for the good of the congregation

### **Problems with the Missional Theology Taught by Van Gelder in Our Framework**

In ordinary circumstances, inserting academic and philosophical information into an open letter like this would be out of place. Again, many of the members of the church don't have the 101, 201, 301 prerequisite courses for the 401 material. However, I feel we must face what we are faced with. Dr. Van Gelder was a consultant in Ebenezer and his influence is considerable through those who have studied under him at whatever level, not only in Ebenezer but across America and perhaps around the world. I do not present myself as an expert in these areas, but neither am I an entire novice. My hope is that I can at least serve as a watchman on the walls.

So why should we be concerned with this framework of thought? It is well beyond our purposes to go into these academic issues in depth, but we need to note three things that can be drawn from two articles he wrote: *Method in the Light of Scripture and in Relation to Hermeneutics*, and in, *The Hermeneutic of Leading in Mission*, both found in the "Journal of Religious Leadership," Vol. 3 No 1& No2, Spring/Fall 2004.

- 1) Van Gelder says that we cannot go back to methods that rely on an inerrant view of Scripture;
- 2) The merging of the activist philosophy of action called Critical Theory with a modern revival of the philosophy of Pragmatism, often called neo-pragmatism suggests a way forward for the church as illustrated in the writings of Gerben Heitink in his book, *Practical Theology* (Eerdmans);
- 3) There is an opening into the possibility of major change in the church that presents itself through certain aspects of missiology. Some who follow Van Gelder call it a major paradigm shift in understanding the mission of the church and a pathway to the church's future relevance in an increasingly secular world.

Let's consider the first point about Scripture. These two articles referred to above are a unit, published in the same quarterly. The first serves as a basis for the second. The first article's title indicates that method (however that is to be defined) will be examined in light of Scripture, and in relation to hermeneutics. As it turns out, the article is primarily focused on the relationship between hermeneutics and method, and says little of substance about Scripture except in the conclusion. It does not examine "method" in the

light of Scripture at all. Rather it examines the interpretation of Scripture in the light of method and in effect does a critique of the norms of interpretation for most of the 2,000 year history of the church. This change is referred to as the *hermeneutical turn*, a phrase not original with Van Gelder.

Here is the essential point about Scripture given in his conclusion at the end of the article:

Some may still long for the days when it was possible to assert an objectively formulated view of scriptural teaching on the basis of an epistemological foundationalism. But it is now evident these days are long over for the church in the aftermath of: (a) the rise of modernity, (b) the collapse of foundationalism in relation to an Enlightenment-shaped epistemology, (c) the development of the hermeneutical perspective, and (d) the emergence of the postmodern condition. *There is no going back.* (Emphasis added) (p. 31).

In fact his firm stand relative to Scripture is the most clearly stated conclusion of the paper, although the paper covers many important topics. Needless to say what Van Gelder says about epistemology would be soundly rejected by any people with a high view of Scripture and truth, although it would be welcomed in much of Liberal Protestantism. His reference to epistemological foundationalism is a straw man because this is not a valid description of the view held by evangelical scholars, the ones he would not go back to. Further, evangelicals cannot build on the postmodern condition, and the hermeneutical perspective is not an evangelical perspective that is compatible with a high view of Scripture.

Note: (If you have a scholarly interest in the question of foundationalism and correspondence theory of truth, consider the following two books as they treat these subjects, follow their footnotes, and inform yourself. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian World View* by J.P. Moreland & William Craig, IVP; *Truth Considered and Applied* by Stewart E. Kelly B&H Publishing Group, Nashville)

Do any leaders in Ebenezer hold to this part of Van Gelder's view? That is for them to make clear. I seriously doubt that there could be many, and I certainly hope there are not any. But this is the well from which some seem to feel they can safely draw.

Why is it particularly unsafe? Don't we read with profit from many scholars who do not hold an evangelical view? Yes, if we are talking about specific subjects or the fruits of particular research. But this liberal view of Scripture is particularly functional and needed in the methods of leadership that we are about to discuss below. They won't work well with a high view of Scripture because if your goal is to build a situated community that is multi-perspectival as the source of our knowledge authority, a high view of Scripture just doesn't fit in. In fact it breaks community, the power of the whole process. At best, this is high risk borrowing from a highly developed thought system designed to bring about social change. We are not dealing so much with a body of knowledge as with a strategy to change the culture of the congregation. We need to note here that this is not about a change of heart and mind in individuals brought about through the Word (repentance), but a change in people's view of reality (ideology) through guided and controlled social interaction.

## II. The Procedure for Bringing About Change in the Congregation

### Missional Theology via Critical Theory: Explaining How it Works, A Necessary Detour

We most likely cannot get a handle on the full implication of the missional leadership methods of Van Gelder unless we take a major detour and try to come to a basic understanding of how Critical Theory works when it is used to change the culture of a community of people. Even reaching a basic understanding is a high goal for a non-academic article, but it may succeed to at least point the way for further study.

Why critical theory? Critical theory is a significant factor in the “theological theory of action” that Van Gelder advocates to bring about social change in Christian congregations. It is a core element, something we can look at even though we cannot here study the whole missional approach. We can take the words of Van Gelder himself as to the source of his method as he details it in his article in the *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 3, No. 1-2, Spring/Fall, 2004 entitled, “The Hermeneutics of Leading in Mission.” Speaking of Gerben Heitink and his book, *Practical Theology*, Van Gelder says:

He draws on the communicative action theory of Habermas (critical theory) and the hermeneutical treatment of text and context by Ricoeur to flesh out the fuller dynamics of his proposed theological theory of action.<sup>27</sup> *The proposal of this essay draws substantively from this work, (Heitink) but adds to it a more focused content regarding a hermeneutically-framed, theological theory of action.* (Emphasis added.)

What does this mean? It means Van Gelder *draws substantively* from Heitink, Heitink draws on Habermas, one of the most influential philosophers in the critical theory school today. Heitink fully explains his dependence on critical theory in his book, *Practical Theology*, so critical theory is a significant stream in the method of Van Gelder. To draw a core concept from another is not simply to quote them, it is to build your system of thought around their thought, in this case.

Jürgen Habermas was a member of the Frankfurt School in Germany which developed a Marxian based school of thought and theories of action. The School (faculty) was exiled to the United States during the Nazi era, in part going to Columbia University. Migration to the USA included a popular philosopher of the Sixties Counter-Culture Movement in America, Herbert Marcuse. Most of the members of the Frankfurt School returned to Germany after the war. In the late thirties they started to use the term *Critical Theory*. Even today when Critical Theory is capitalized it refers to the Frankfurt School. But critical theory, no caps, is a broadly used term and Habermas has migrated much of the philosophy into involvement with sociology and developing a critical theory of communication in society as an instrument for recognizing oppression, mobilizing a following in the cause of lifting this oppression, creating conflict with the dominant group within the community and its ideology, and gaining power to establish a more just and flourishing community. It is a political theory for bringing about change.

### How Does Critical Theory As a Theory of Social Change Work?

It is necessary to distinguish the theory as an *activist* process. It is not just another philosophy, an ordinary pursuit of knowledge. An ordinary teacher may be trying to teach you knowledge you did not have before. He is doing this with the expectation that this knowledge will be applied, but his concern is

to share the knowledge. An activist is trying to change the social structures of the social group you are a part of. While he may appear to you as just another person seeking knowledge, he does not see himself that way. He is an agent of change. He is not primarily an interpretive teacher. He is an activist with a goal, a strategy of how to reach the goal and a motivation to go into action. The action is to change the social structures of a group which will change their ideology (view of reality) on key points. Why? The change is sought in order to bring about deliverance from oppression, change leadership and leadership ideas, and to move toward a utopian goal, often stated today as the flourishing of the community in current language. There may be other goals, of course.

If it is critical theory at all, there is some group within the community that can be identified by critical analysis as being in some way oppressed. This does not have to be some obvious great oppression like plantation owners oppressing slaves. It can be an oppression of one gender by the other, an oppression brought on by the media in the way it talks about a minority. (In the ROW this is about the gifted women who are not allowed to use their gifts in the two offices of pastor and elder, or this may just be one of many issues that demand change if the church is to be better accepted in its community.)

How does it work? For example, in our society, a critical analysis will show according to the data used by the analyst, that women are oppressed in America in various ways, certainly a true concern over decades of time. In our society, this use of critical theory is common and has undoubtedly brought about some positive change. According to the theory, there is some group that is dominant in the community, past or present that has been able to solve their problems by holding back some other group. In the case of women, this may be a corporation that can solve profitability problems by using women as cheaper labor. In order to sustain this process, they may talk about women in a way that implies that this is justified. Putting down women as a class may in fact be embedded right into the way the corporate leaders see reality (their ideology), and they may not be conscious of it themselves. In their minds they may not have been putting down women, they maybe were just trying to make a profit, the price of staying in business. This is how the dialectical dialogue sets up.

This oppression can be obvious or it can be expressed even subtly in the language used. A feminist critical theory may do an analysis of words that are used by advertisers and discover that there are sexist words that put down women in advertising. Note carefully, this is not just something to be known, there is an "ought" in it, "It just isn't right and all of us should seek justice for the oppressed (activist intention)." We are all familiar enough with critical theory analysis of this kind so that we know what it means to become more politically correct when they achieve their immediate goal. We usually exempt comedians from PC requirements, however! (No, I am not advocating the exception; militants, please relax.)

Note: We are not here judging the need to seek justice for women in the marketplace. Critical theory may be one form of political action that does work for justice in society. We are going through this explanation *to provide a basis to judge whether or not this process is an appropriate process in the Body of Christ and whether it may become a way of resisting the revelation of the Word even if it is an unintended consequence.* If it is not under the authority of the Word, it is a highway to unintended consequences in a congregation of evangelical faith and life. There is opportunity for all kinds of skirmishes here if one wants to do that, our purposes is to understand a strategy that has several moves and counter moves, that are not always obvious, and to evaluate this strategy to see whether it is an

appropriate method in the church that is under the Lord's reign of redemption, a reign of grace and truth, Word and Sacrament, walking in the light in the Spirit of Christ.

There is an elaborate "in" language in critical theory talk and there is a whole parallel set in a theological theory of action that embraces critical theory and puts it into religious language. I am using simple, common sense language to address a very specific situation. I am not trying to score academic points; I am trying to show what this kind of activism does in the church when it is applied to theology and to congregational life. I am trying to lay out an anatomy of this living system of thought so you can understand the forces at work.

If you start hearing what I am saying as if I were interpreting a philosophy, you need to go back and realize that this is not what is being said. Critical theory is not so much a body of knowledge as it is procedure to follow to bring about social change. It results in many bodies of knowledge that come with the process as in Feminism, Liberation Theology, some Missional Theology, Black Theology, etc..

### **Focusing Down on the Process**

Think of a game of chess. It has been claimed that a super-computer trained to play chess, after just four initial moves have been made, can anticipate 4 million moves going forward! Critical theory is like a game of chess in that it sets up a competition between two parties each of whom will make their own moves along the way. It has some built in strategies for dealing with the responses of those who do not want to change, more than we can dwell on here.

In a way I cannot take time to explain in detail, the critical theory process goes forward through multiple group discussions or dialogues. But, again, these are not just discussion groups. If we understand these groups as discussion groups, we will go back to just seeking and discussing knowledge. They are *dialectical dialogues!* They are the way activists do their thing. They are set up as an argument (a discourse containing inference: if this, then that; If x, then y, no matter how subtle the process). The argument isn't obvious, but it will show up. In our ROW case, it is a value dialectical dialogue. It sets up an ongoing argument about *which is better*. This can be a pleasant argument, but the people who plan the dialogues *set it up to create a tension between two values and the groups that hold those values*. Of course, not two critical theory analysts will do this the same, with all the variable of particulars from scene to scene. In the various applications of this method to missional theology there will be differences and sometimes a zero understanding of critical theory strategy as a separate discipline.

Creating a tension between two good things that *all agree are good* means that is not a conflict between right and wrong, truth or something false or between good and evil. It is a conflict between two values to show that one of them is better to lift oppression, bring about change, and contribute to the flourishing of the community. Let's look closer at the process. This is all about changing the priority with which we value values in the church in light of our goal going forward. Ultimately, it is not by using the authority of the Word, it by using the authority of the social group.

### **Phase One: The Discovery**

The procedure has different phases that can be identified logically. When we identify them one after another they seem to be chronological steps in a process. That may be how it happens, but not always. In some instances more than one of these phases might be going on at roughly the same time because they

require multiple conversations over a period of time to bear their best fruit. As I hope to make clear, they are accomplishing more than one thing at once.

The first phase I am calling the Discovery Phase. But is not mainly a discovery of facts, it is a search for signs that a value I or someone else holds is not being realized because the people in power are oppressing others in their own self-interest. Sounds too crass for a church, but we are describing the original secular version. For example, we might assert a value about the role of women in the church. Women don't have the same opportunity to serve in some offices as men do, for example. This becomes the basis of the discussions to follow. Besides making this a subject for discussion, it is placed before the group as a potential injustice. Of course, this triggers the God given human reaction of wanting to help find justice. If the group can be led to discuss the issue as a value, this value of being just to women will be a strong force in the discussion. What is more, those who resist this conclusion will be defending themselves from the beginning as defenders of what is unjust. The well is poisoned for truth authority. In contrast, if it would have been discussed as a question of revealed truth, then many other truths, other purposes, other concerns would have been a part of the discussion. That would greatly complicate the issue for this process of social change. However, for now we can say that at this "discovery phase", the critical theory procedure is concerned with an ethical concern: it is a concern for justice. As we continue to uncover the process, we will see that this may change. The immediate goal for strategic reasons may be to intentionally invite a power struggle pitting one group against another. I speak here of the dynamics of critical theory as a strategy of social change. The process may be used to gain power in the group for a secondary reason which may actually be the real reason, but that is getting ahead of ourselves. So, at this first phase it will always be an ethical concern even though this phase is embedded in a power strategy. So what is the criterion for criticism? It is some value. In phase 1, it is a value that is held by the dominant group that is oppressing a lesser group, and a value of justice that calls for the lesser group to be delivered.

**Phase Two: A Discussion Described as Dialectical Analysis (A focused argument in an ongoing conversation surfacing the inner dynamics of the social group)**

The process of the second phase is designed to create as wide a participation in discussing the issue of oppression as possible. Usually it requires many conversations over a longer period of time. In this second phase there is an analysis of the present oppression and the causes of the oppression by the group. To keep focus on the critical issue requires a trained person I will call a *critical theory analyst* (CTA). This discussion can only lead to social change in the community if there is extensive *dialectical dialogue*. This is an important part of transforming the community. Their eventual transformation must be a community transformation in order to bring about lasting change. This strategy in each of its phases builds the sense of community so that it will eventually become strong enough to enforce its own consensus.

The nature of the discussion in phase two is a low key *dialectical* discussion. This means there is a guided and controlled argument focusing on preferred values. This low key argument identifies the oppression, gradually identifies the *oppressors*, repeatedly calls for justice, shows in a Christian context how this action toward justice is just the Christian thing to do. Again, this dialectical dialogue is done under the leadership of a trained critical theory analyst (CTA) who can maintain the focus of this and other phases. Incidentally, there do not have to be many in the group who understand the whole process,

but of course it must be understood by an effective leader. In many cases it is better for the process to be obscure for strategic reasons.

The effect of this phase will be to sharpen the focus, gain new insights into the problem as seen through the lens of these values. Begin to identify the forces that resist justice. Two values held by this very community start to emerge as being in conflict with one another.

### **Phase Three: Dialectical *Conflict***

Let's move on to Phase Three. The same dialogues take on a *different tone and aim*; they gradually start to point at a different target. The controlled focus on a two party argument about values starts to shift to a controlled argument that targets the dominant authority structures in the group and the dominant group itself as a separate entity within the community. It is not now only about values alone, it is about being *against* those who hold values that oppress. In political science terms, we politicize the argument, and by now this is a political process. This can produce a big backlash if this takes place in a church because it may be seen as dividing the church, so it must be managed carefully. It isn't that dividing the church won't happen, it is just that the damage must be minimized. For example, opposing leaders must be neutralized or marginalized. If they represent a small group, it may even be necessary to calculate if the community can survive the loss of these people if the process goes forward. What percentage is tolerable?

Note: By now we should be starting to feel a tension with the truth revealed in Scripture as to what it means to be a shepherd, and how this fits with leaving the 99 to seek the one that is lost. It ought to awaken our sense of responsibility toward the lambs and the old and infirm, the less well informed. It should awaken a puzzle as to whether we are making disciples of Jesus Christ in this process. It should raise the question as to whether this is an appropriate method of leadership for leading disciples of Jesus Christ. Of course, in any specific situation, it cannot be assumed that leaders understand the underlying dynamic driving the leadership methods in some missional theology. What they are embracing is at the surface.

Using a dialectical conflict phase in the leadership process can lead the group to take a turn against truth and truth advocates as well. In fact truth advocates may be cast as authority figures and authority figures are seen as oppressors. These teachers may inadvertently help the process because if pressed they may act in authoritarian ways, making the case for the CTA. Truth statements may now be safely classified as repressive statements because the one claiming to know the truth is telling someone else what to do. Truth-authority cannot be trusted because the people in power are just trying to maintain control. We should be more inclusive. Gradually values owned by the community are the guide in matters even of faith and life.

How does this work out in faith communities? In families of churches? It is one thing in the rough and tumble domain of politics in society to say that truth must be decentered as complicated, authoritative, etc. but it is quite different to do it in the church which is the agency of God's reign of truth and grace.

Let's be sure we understand what dialectical means for us in this situation. If it is dialectical it is an argument, however mild. That doesn't mean it is a fight, it only means that one side is making arguments for one value, and the other side for the other value. It is pressing one's perspective on what it means to

hold certain values. It is *pressing the points of differences* between what the analysis revealed and what the dominant group thinks. The tone is not a matter of trying to find out what is true; it simply isn't about truth, it is about values. It is a matter of pressing the point of what is right in view of this injustice. It becomes a matter of staking out a position against the authority of the dominant group. This will lead to some strange tactics for a church since minor annoyances and major negative issues both serve to discredit the ruling ideology and the dominant group that creates it.

This can even extend to authority figures within the Bible. The Apostle Paul is more given to doctrine than is Jesus, (so some say), so we prefer Jesus as a model to the Apostle Paul. This view ends up with *caricatures* of both Jesus and Paul. For example there is an emphasis on the grace which is in Christ Jesus, but not so much on the kind of truth which Jesus announces when he speaks of hell, or when he says, "Depart from me I never knew you," to say nothing of His sharp disagreements as in John chapter 8. Of course, Jesus was wonderfully tender with the broken reeds. He did not crush them. But the point here is not a comprehensive truth seeking, it is a matter of creating a value conflict so there will not only be a motivation to bring deliverance to the oppressed, but will also be a motivation to put down the oppressors, to decenter their influence, to move them to the margin.

But Paul really is hard to deal with if you want to convert what he says from truth into values. He is just too specific and his arguments are too well designed. So Paul (and systematic theologians and developed theology) sometimes become the bad guys. As the strong voice of authority in Paul is pointed out in dialectical discussions under the guidance of a critical theory analyst (CTA) it may cause a sense of resentment and it may increase the desire for social change. Notice we have identified two strong motives for social change. 1) Ethical: oppression just isn't right; 2) Anti-authoritarian: They keep telling us what to do, often in complicated truth laden ways.

Before we go on we should remind each other that our Lord Jesus Christ met Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus and appointed him an Apostle, like "one untimely born," as Paul said. Of course, our Lord knew that Saul was a member of the Sanhedrin, the body of 70 ruling elders, so he was a powerful authority figure in Israel. Our Lord knew that Saul of Tarsus was well educated in Greek thought. Our Lord chose this unusually qualified person to fully interpret for the church the meaning of both the Word of Jesus and the Works of Jesus, His sacrificial death and resurrection, and to write over ½ of the entire New Testament. Anyone who sets one against the other, as the Liberal Protestant church has done for a hundred years, is in danger of judgment. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, this party spirit of one being for Paul, one for Peter, etc. and even some just for Christ was due to be judged. (1 Corinthians chapters 1-3) Of course, this means that in times of conflict, all of us must look to ourselves to see that we are rightly serving the Lord of the Church, and to pray that God will search our hearts and show us when we are acting in the flesh. There will be no perfection on either side of any conflict, but there is a right authority, the Word. We are well aware of the postmodern mood that wants to deny the authority of any text by asserting a skeptical attitude toward all interpretation. It is often done by portraying those who trust the text as looking for 100% certainty and then showing how impossible that is. We discussed this fallacy earlier. But here, we are talking about a strategy that counts on conflict at a critical phase.

#### **Phase 4: Leading the Situated Community toward Flourishing**

By this time in the process the community is beginning to bond and new lines of authority are emerging. If the community develops an understanding of itself as a situated community that can solve problems

through on-going dialogue and is multi-perspectival in nature, it is on its way to making the “truth” it needs to flourish. Various versions of this phase abound.

For the bonding to develop, this community must at least be offered an opportunity for each person to speak their mind. In this sense it is democratic. But, when the final consensus is managed, democracy ends, like in any political party. (In fact, given the nature of the CTA and his leadership team, in practical terms it cannot be really democratic because it is anti-individualistic and is highly conformist. There is no protection for the minority). It must be inclusive for many reasons, but one of them is that when the community sees itself as a community because everyone has access, the consensus findings of the community will become value-authoritative. Those who don't fit in will be seen as breaking community, something no one really wants to do. We are communal beings and we like to be accepted. But for the greater flourishing of the community the process must press on.

Leadership strategies are developed to handle any undermining of the community consensus. If, for example, one person should say, “I don't think that fits with truth of the Bible,” he would be inserting a community rending outside authority. The Bible must not be seen as an authority that can settle disputes except on the most major issues. Even then, it is not clear to some of this mindset that a person of another religion should not have equal status in a church led community because the authority is not from outside or above, it is from the consensus of the multi-perspectival community.

Of course, not all people who advocate a critical theory process would advocate a multi-perspectival power sharing. Some in the political arena, for example, would settle all differences by saying, “I won.” Without a high view of Scripture the actual results may be much less democratic and much more autocratic than anticipated, even in a church.

### **A goal of a flourishing community**

There is a utopian ring to the envisioned future. Sometimes enthusiasts even bring the reign of redemption into their vision. Some even think of themselves as preparing the way of the Lord's return by having flourishing situated communities on earth, a thought that runs sharply contrary to biblical truth.

We cannot address this except to say that the process is driven forward by at least three powerful forces: 1) Removing injustice; 2) Marginalizing or overturning oppressors; 3) Bringing about a flourishing community.

Summary: We have sought to lay out in outline form the theory of social change that is embedded in Missional Theology as taught by Van Gelder. Our hope is that it is sufficiently clear to enable readers to recognize the shape of things even if falling far short of an academic explanation. It is not fully proved in this letter, but ought to be somewhat evident that this form of leadership, while common in the world, is not appropriate for the church, God's human agency in His reign of redemption that is a reign of truth and grace flowing from the Word.

I qualify this basic premise that the new hermeneutic advanced by a process that incorporates the core strategy of critical theory as an action theory is a major threat to churches of evangelical faith and life, by saying that many who might attempt to apply techniques from this system may not have understood the whole system of social change that is a major dynamic in this method of leadership and teaching.

In any case, my concern is that it decenters the Word of God as the highest authority in all matters of faith and life. While the new hermeneutics that is so appropriate to the multi-perspectival situated community that is envisioned, it inevitably reclassifies Scripture as a tradition instead of a living authority, used by the Spirit to bring newness of life, now and for eternity.

Making the *hermeneutical turn* and converting truths to values is closely tied to critical theory in the “flourishing situated community” phase. Here we see the full shift of truth to values to “value-truth” as agreed upon through community consensus. Some kind of truth is a necessary for everyday community life. Truth now is not discovered, or revealed, it is made and managed as Richard Rorty the neo-pragmatist and guru of postmodernism has said. Here, the situated community just won’t work if there is a divinely inspired Word. As Van Gelder said, “We just can’t go back.” It just won’t work.”

### Going Forward

How can we go forward? My primary suggestion in this letter is that we need to talk this over in depth. To this end I will be placing this paper on a web page from which it can be downloaded. [www.mwstudycenter.com](http://www.mwstudycenter.com) I hope it will be discussed there and in other forums and settings. Its limitations will be found, and I hope its message will be heard.

It should never be surprising to us that as we make attempts to solve problems like how to maintain the witness of a congregation when the neighborhood changes, that that some of them will turn out to have many unintended consequences. But that doesn’t mean we need to stay on the road we have chosen. We may need to think about finding an exit ramp.

We seek to serve the Lord faithfully, knowing that our service must be made full and substantial by the work of God’s sufficient grace. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture. He will tend the flock.

Grace and Peace,

Robert Overgaard

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<sup>i</sup> **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament**, *Editors*: Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich; *Translator and Editor*: Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan