

## **“Big questions: Did God really say this?”**

*(Author well known)*

This article is for those brothers and sisters of St. Paul's Tanunda and Zion Gnadenberg who couldn't come to our regular Bible Study. I'll try to summarize what we discussed and to emphasize the most important things.

Dealing with the topic of “Man, Woman and Marriage in 21<sup>st</sup> century” we repeatedly discussed how surrounding secular culture imposes its mindset and lies upon the Church under the cover of value neutral worldview, and how devastating it is both for the Church and for the society itself.

Suddenly we have an example of this destructive thinking that we discussed, presented as something good not somewhere else, but in our own church's journal “The Lutheran”.

The object for our discussion this time is one particular article from “The Lutheran”. “Big questions, bigger God.” (p.5.) The full title of the lecture from which this article is a summary is “God is big enough for our questions: introducing learners to a critical approach to study of the Bible.”

Please, note that this lecture was given not in some dark corner, but in the Australian Lutheran College as the opening lecture of this academic year. I assume, as a trend-setter for education in the ALC. As this lecture was given so publicly and now is published in “The Lutheran” I believe this kind of openness invites us to discuss what is presented.

### **What is that article about?**

As a reader can gather from the full title of the opening lecture, it is about introducing learners to a critical approach to study of the Bible: and the learners, as the author states, are all readers of “The Lutheran”, not only students of the ALC.

It is interesting, for even if you read the article very carefully you can't find author's explanation about what this critical approach is. The article is about introducing the learners to the critical approach, but the article doesn't even reveal what it is. [?]

However, introduction is made. Quite subtle one, and rhetorically very powerful. How does this subtle introduction work? Let's see.

If this critical approach is presented as a good alternative, it presumes that benefits listed would distinguish it from other approach, which is not named. For the sake of this discussion, I'd propose to call it traditional Christian approach.

[Author's note: What is this traditional approach? It assumes that the Scriptures *is the Word of God*. As this is Triune God speaking to us through His prophets and apostles, and as we are saved by means of His Word, we need to do our best to understand what exactly He is saying.]

Even if this critical approach isn't revealed, every reader of this article will get the message, consciously, or unconsciously. Rhetoric is a very powerful tool. It aims at

emotions instead of reason. Unfortunately it is often used when you can't persuade people by telling them things as they are.

So, what is this message, and what then are the benefits of this critical approach, comparing with traditional Christian one? These are things that the author mentioned.

It is good educational practice... it fosters further and deeper learning... it is widely used in scholarship... it is very Lutheran... it is reasonable... it can lead to stronger and more resilient faith... it can create an environment where faith might be born in others... it doesn't require a divided self... it is honest inquiry... it removes fear... it is humble and caring... it doesn't keep [people] in dark. This is how the author presents it.

If these things are highlighted as benefits of the critical method, it implies that the other approach, traditional Christian one, doesn't provide them, or at least doesn't provide them as efficiently as the critical approach.

It is interesting that the author admits that the critical approach 'could sound alarm bells for some Christians', 'can raise disturbing questions for some Christians', 'can be threatening for students with a priori Christian commitment', 'can destabilize the faith of Christians who are simply not ready for a critical approach'. Why would this beautiful approach cause these reactions? We'll find it in a minute.

Besides, pictures speak louder than 1000 words. The picture which is chosen for this article obviously illustrates those who don't use this critical approach; those committed Christians who are hiding their fears in darkness. How else can you interpret this picture?

As I said, rhetoric is a very powerful tool. The author doesn't even tell what is this critical approach, he just juxtaposes it with this other one showing what a beautiful thing is being offered. Who wouldn't want to be introduced to such an advanced approach?

## **What is this critical approach?**

If you remember just one thing, remember this one. It all boils down to the question about the highest authority. Traditionally for Christians the highest authority is the Word of God, the Bible. For the critical approach the highest authority is – human reason, or, put it straight, critics themselves.

Thus choosing between traditional Christian and the critical approach, basically it is a choice between listening to God speaking to us in His Word, or - deciding ourselves, what God is saying to us, and what He is not.

It is choice between two gods. Either Biblical God is God and speaks to us in His Word, or we are gods ourselves, and we decide what is good and what is not. Traditional Christian approach = God is God. Critical = we are gods.

I'll try to explain a bit more. We won't be able to discuss in details the history of Biblical interpretation, I'll mention just few things. When we read the Bible the key question is – what does this mean? What is God saying to us? What is His message?

For centuries and centuries, and especially since the Lutheran Reformation, God fearing theologians have done their best studying variants of manuscripts, immersing themselves in ancient languages, ancient cultural contexts, literary genres of the Bible, rhetorical tools used by the authors, meaning of the arrangement of biblical book in the Bible, how the Word of God does things, as the Law and the Gospel, accusing, teaching, guiding, comforting, forgiving, reconciling, and so on.

17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries came with what we call the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. This period was a time of scientific discoveries, when people were euphoric about how much we can achieve with our reason.

Reason was announced to be the ultimate judge. In other words, man was announce to be the measure of all things. This thinking created totally new approach to the Bible.

That is, if we want to know what is the meaning of the Bible, we need to explore it by our reason. Objectively, neutrally, scientifically. As any other book. Away with miracles! Not reasonable. Away with this Christian bias, that assumes that the Bible is the Word of God. Not reasonable. It is just a book written by men. Let's read it as a book.

To remind you that traditionally Christians have believed and confessed that the Bible is the Word of God, and Triune God Himself speaks to us in His Word.

Notice, that the author of this article specifically emphasizes that we need to discern 'between a book and One to whom it points'. That's one of the basic ideas of the critical approach, that the Bible itself in written by men, it only contains information about how people in ancient times, when they were not as smart as we are, thought about God.

Then this 'wonderful' critical approach comes to help us. It helps to recover true meaning of this man written book. How? One of assumptions of those using the critical approach is that the Bible wasn't actually written by those men, whom the Bible claims to have as its authors.

Instead, adherents of the critical approach believes that the Bible was put together much, much later by some kind of redactors, who used different sources, oral or written to compile what we have today.

It's believed that if they will be able to discern different sources, different redactors, different layers of oral tradition, then they'll understand what people really thought about God. These methods are called source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism, etc.

This is what the author of this article means by mentioning two 'conflicting' (not complementing!) accounts of creation. There must be different authors, or sources. That's why the authorship of Moses is questioned. Those who use the critical approach believe that books of Moses were written or compiled many, many centuries later by some unknown frauds, who just claimed that Moses did it.

The idea that Jesus words may not have actually come from Jesus lips; those who use the critical approach believe that initially there was a long period of oral tradition, then

much, much later authors of the four gospels using different sources and traditions compiled their accounts.

There is one example which illustrates well how the critical approach works. In 1985 so called Jesus Seminar was founded by Robert Funk. Was it about Jesus? No! The idea was to examine which saying from the gospels could be Jesus sayings and which couldn't.

How would they find it? By voting! Let's vote which saying could be Jesus saying, and which could not. This is the critical approach in its true beauty, or rather - ugliness. It is so convenient, because then we can choose what God says and what He doesn't. Then we don't have to listen to God, but, instead, we can create a god in our own crooked image.

Think, what will be the first things people will remove from the Bible, if they have usurped this authority? Teaching about sin. Teaching about God's wrath. This is what has already happen. In so many Western churches you won't hear the word 'sin' anymore. For we all are such nice people and don't want to offend anyone.

But think for a while, if there is no sin, there is no need for the Saviour, there is no need for the Gospel anymore. No sin, no forgiveness, what are we left with? No need for the Church anymore. The Church then is literary 'castrated'. Without the Words of God, you can't create or sustain the faith. Here is the explanation why churches in the West are on decline. How wouldn't they?

I hope that these few illustrations will help you to understand what this critical approach is about. It isn't anything new. In fact, it is something very old. What were these famous words from Genesis 3? "Did God really say this?" Don't listen to Him, you will be like gods yourself. That's it.

There is no place in this approach to admit that the Bible is God speaking to us. For those who have chosen the critical approach the Bible is only about people of old sharing their ideas about God.

This is what is introduced to the learners in pages of 'The Lutheran' as something good. It's quite obvious why one needs to introduce it rhetorically, not plainly telling what is this approach. "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." (2Co 11:14)

### **Few more comments.**

I need to say something about few embarrassing historical inaccuracies in this article. The author obviously believes what secular culture has been repeatedly telling, that all good things in this world have come from the secular culture, and not from the people transformed by the Gospel. Such as abolition of slavery, such as human rights, etc.

What a historical nonsense! Only Biblical understanding about dignity of every human being enabled Christians to stand up against the slavery. Of course, once this issues was raised, others could join in.

Only Biblical understanding about man enabled the very idea of the human rights. Even atheist philosophers have admitted that without the concept of God there is no bases for any human rights whatsoever.

The author of this article obviously doesn't believe that all good things in contemporary Western culture are fruits of Christianity. Sadly, but for him they are fruits of the secular culture, and it seems that according to him, we need to look up to the culture that is so hostile to Christianity and learn from it. Learn to be critical about what God really said.

Wake up! Following this very mindset we already have lost the very idea of God's design for marriage, for beautiful and unique vocations for husbands and wife. How could we retain this wisdom of God if the Bible is just an old book and we have modern secular culture to learn from!

We have accepted rampant adultery that this same culture imposes. Entire Western culture suffers from destruction of the institution of marriage, but this author looks in future with hopes that thanks to the critical approach soon we may be able to accept all sexual sins, even those who are still resisted. What a wonderful hope! Come Lord Jesus, come sooner!

It sounds so nice when the author says that the critical method places Christ in the centre of the Bible. The only problem is that if the Bible isn't the Word of God, just people's ideas about God, then which Christ is placed in the centre?!

How do we know what Christ is like, if He doesn't speak to us through His word, the Bible? How? By voting? By creating a god in our own image and likeness. Then this is not anymore Biblical Jesus, it is a creation of our minds. Idol. False god. Abomination.

What kind of faith then we have? One that we own, as the author put it, one that we can design according our whims, putting ourselves, but not Christ, in the centre of learning. This entire mindset in through and through shaped by surrounding culture.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Rom 12:2)

It's also nice that Luther is mentioned in this article. Even if he is misrepresented. Dr M. Luther indeed called our reason 'a whore', but especially he applied it to situations like this when human reason elevates itself above the Bible. When we dare to question “Did God really say this?”

### **What to conclude?**

All of this sounded so sad, so sad. But now comes the worst part. Remember, this article in a summary of opening lecture in the ALC. This wasn't said in some dark corner. Why and how was this permitted? Why is this published in “The Lutheran”?

There are two options, and they both raise painful questions. First. May by these people don't know what they are talking, simply good willed brothers in Christ with a lack of

knowledge? I'd prefer this answer. But then – what do they do in the ALC? Why and what do they teach future pastors and teachers?

Second option. And this is really scary. They know what they are talking about. The rhetorical style of this article makes a reader think that they know their agenda very well. Then again, what are they doing in the ALC?

All of this helps to make sense about what is going on in LCA. That's why there is more and more administrative thinking in our Church. Governance. Leadership. Management. If the Bible really isn't the Word of God, then we need something solid, something powerful to build the Church. Good management, good marketing, good strategies, great visions.

If the Bible isn't God's word, then what should we preach about? What should we teach about? The answer is obvious, - whatever are hot topics in this wonderful secular culture.

This is what has already happen in so many churches. If they don't have the Gospel anymore, they preach and teach about social justice, about human rights, about tolerance of all sins. They look up at surrounding culture as if the culture is 'the light of the world' and try to imitate it. As if we, who hid in the darkness of the Word of God, should finally catch up with it.

LCA have this foundational document, "Theses of Agreement", and Theses VIII describes what LCA (supposedly) believe about the Word of God. If you put this article next to Theses VIII, guess, how many contradictions one can find?

It would be a good task for those who study to be pastors, to see how many discrepancies are there. I just fail to comprehend how the content of this article can be taught openly, when it is contrary to our church's teaching?!

The critical approach is an open rebellion against Triune God. "Did God really say this?" May be secular culture knows it better? What are we going to do? To dream that deace and health can coexist? To introduce and teach this critical approach to everyone?

There can't be two true gods. There is either God of the Bible or idols of our imagination. What future can be for a church that turns back to true God and chooses to follow idols? You don't have to be a prophet to foresee what is coming.

There is so much more to say on these topics, but these are the things we discussed in our last study.

Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy! Lord, have mercy!

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Guntars Baikovs