

“Test everything, hold fast what is good.” (1Th 5:21)

Last Sunday the visit of ELCA pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber in the Barossa was unexpectedly advertised in our congregation. The following material will provide some brief information that was missing in the ‘green flyers’, and a few sources for your further reading.

What is the ELCA?

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Since shortly after its formation in 1988 the ELCA has been fixated on deviant sexual behaviour, culminating in the endorsement of homosexual pastors in 2009, and homosexual “marriage” in 2011.

Dr James Nestingen, a highly respected scholar and retired ELCA seminary professor, recently concluded that promoting acceptance of deviant sexual behaviour has actually replaced the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the primary mission and message of the ELCA.

The National Council of Churches reports that the ELCA has “the sharpest rate of membership decline” among all mainline Protestant denominations. 500,000 members and 1,000 congregations have left the ELCA in just the last four years, triggered by their endorsement of homosexuality beginning in 2009.

This is actually the biggest denominational split in American church history, and is directly attributable to that decision.¹ “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.” (Gal 6:7)

A little bit about Nadia

Nadia is our sister in Christ from the ELCA. I haven’t met her, but I have certain sympathies with Nadia. I can relate to her life story. She has been in dark places, has done and experienced things that most of Christians are spared. When you think about sinners, real sinners, she is one of them. As am I. I don’t know the whole of Nadia’s story, but from what I gather our ‘old’ lives, our mistakes, and our experiences overlap greatly.

When she was at her lowest point, Jesus, the holy Son of God, reached out to her and brought her to His Father’s home. This is what He does so well, touches those who are totally unworthy and brings them into His Kingdom. Jesus shows up in the most

¹ <http://www.virtueonline.org/elca-has-biggest-split-american-church-history>

unexpected places to the most inappropriate people, and turns their lives upside down.

Thus Christ found Nadia through the ELCA, where so much of the Biblical message already was lost, and Nadia fell in love with Luther's theology, or what was taught as Luther's theology in the ELCA. She studied in one of the ELCA seminaries, got ordained according to ELCA practice, and founded a new congregation called 'House for all sinners and saints' in Denver, US. Nadia rapidly became famous, thanks partly to her charismatic appearance (tattoos, swearing, etc.), partly to promotion by the ELCA, and partly to her preaching and teaching, which sometimes is really good.

Inevitably she is a product of her church, the ELCA, as we are all shaped by our environments. However, her background helps her to see things which we all need to be reminded of. It also blinds her to many things we need to see clearly. I will now provide a brief summary of some of the 'pros' and 'cons' of Nadia's teaching.

The 'Pros' of Nadia's teaching

God is gracious. Nadia is a good example of how unconditional God's grace is. Unconditional! It comes as rain, and then we flourish and bear fruit. Our fruits are not a prerequisite for God's 'rain' to come. It is good to be reminded of this, and to a certain extent she preaches this message really well. Praise be to the Lord! I only pray that the Holy Spirit would continue to work with Nadia so that she could learn the 'whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27) and fill the holes that come as a result of her theological upbringing in the ELCA.

We are legalistic hypocrites. From what I have read and heard Nadia is really good at revealing dangerous shortcomings that are prevalent in many churches. Fine, in all churches, there are no exceptions. One trait she rightly exposes is legalism. That is a way of thinking that we as Christians are morally superior to others (for we think we know God's will), that we are somehow better than those outside of our congregations (because we are inside). Or, that we need to merit God's grace and our place in the Church, that there are those who deserve to be Christians and those who probably don't. Nadia's criticism of legalism is well deserved.

The problem is that Nadia seems to portray institutional churches as evil places, full of judgmental hypocrites, but forgets that there is no other place where the Holy God comes to us and we are invited into His presence than this *one*, holy, apostolic Church. Broken, sure, full of hypocrites, yes, but holy and beloved at the same time.

Grace for those sinned against. Nadia is praised for her ability to speak to those who have lost their faith in their churches, who have been somehow mistreated by their fellow Christians. Unfortunately this is as relevant a topic in the Barossa as it is elsewhere. How many have left our congregations just because of some foolish arguments, or because somebody was too proud to say ‘forgive me, I have sinned against you’? To proclaim God’s grace and to restore the dignity of those who are put down by their fellow Christians or the world is a very important part of our message. Good on Nadia, to the extent that she does this.

Knowing the ELCA’s general direction, my concern is that some of those seemingly ‘mistreated by their churches’ could actually be unrepentant sinners, who are encouraged to continue in their sins under the false gospel of ELCA.

Lutheran theology. As I mentioned, Nadia has embraced many good things from Lutheran theology. This includes Luther’s principle that we are simultaneously saints and sinners. Sinners according to our fallen nature, saints thanks to God’s forgiveness which is given to us in Christ. It also includes the distinction between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. (We are discussing it in our Bible studies right now.) I don’t know how correctly Nadia has understood and teaches these Lutheran distinctions, but if she does it well, these are very rich and very practical teachings.

‘Cons’ of Nadia’s teaching

Here comes the dangerous part of Nadia’s ELCA theology. Just be aware of it.

The Bible is not really the Word of God. In line with the ELCA, Nadia has accepted this low and critical view of the Bible. In practice this means that we place our reason above the Scriptures and decide for ourselves which parts in the Bible could be God given, and which could not. (We discussed this trend to put ourselves higher than the Word of God recently in relation to the ‘critical approach’ article in *The Lutheran*.)

For example, Nadia can speak about some parts of the apostle Paul’s message as beautiful, and some as bad. When he writes about the Gospel his message is beautiful, but when he gets to the instructions for Christians (as he does in *all* his letters) he is just wretched, according to Nadia. Thus we are free to remove what doesn’t suit our (in Nadia’s case, the ELCA’s) agenda. Once we have usurped this authority, the first parts we are going to eliminate are those which disagree with our opinion, right? This is exactly what has happened in the ELCA. Once the authority of the Word of God is lost, the door is open to everything the surrounding culture deems to be acceptable.

The Lutheran Confessions are not correct expositions of the Bible. Again, this is a position of the ELCA. Quoting Nadia: „Oh my god, nobody believes every line of the creed.” Really, nobody? I do. the vast majority of Christians in all times and all places have believed and still believe the Creed. That’s why we use them in every service. We confess that “we believe...” and not that “we don’t believe...”. That is why orthodox Christianity is called Creedal Christianity, because the Creeds are summaries of the true Christian faith. The same attitude that is applied to the Scriptures is applied to the Lutheran Confessions: we only accept what we like (our ‘gospel’), i.e. what corresponds to our beliefs.

Authority of our experiences trumps the Bible. Not the Word of God, but her experience has the final say. If the Word of God comports with Nadia’s experience, good for the Word of God; if not, then Nadia will go with her experience as the highest authority. It is easy to see how slippery this road is. Remember that we are all sinners, even if we are saints in Christ. So if we set our experiences above the word of God, we have turned our sinful selves into the highest authority. Then we are ‘like gods’(Gen 3:5). Isn’t that what all sinners want?

Neglect of God’s design, God’s law. The ELCA is notorious with what is called ‘gospel reductionism’. This means discarding the teaching of the law and reducing all of the Bible to a distorted “gospel” message. The idea is simple. Their ‘gospel’ frees people from God’s law, so they are free to do whatever they want, to remain in their sins. Their ‘gospel’ says ‘sin is OK, for Jesus loves you’. This is no longer the old gospel of repentance and forgiveness, but an unfortunate misunderstanding of the gospel. We have discussed it in our Bibles Studies.

God is the Creator. He created the design for our lives (the Image and likeness), and it is “very good” (Gen 1:31). After the Fall we all are slaves of sin and fail to live up to His design. God’s law describes God’s design for our lives. The problem is not God’s law/God’s design, the problem is *our sin*. Our sin makes us rebel and desire what is contrary to God’s will, to His design.

The Son of God came to free us from *our sin* and from the *guilt* of our sin, not from God’s design. So, in fact, the Gospel frees us to live according to God’s design. To live as God has created and redeemed us to be This is our daily struggle, our cross till the end of our day, to deny ourselves, to resist our sinful desires, and to serve others. This teaching is so central in Biblical and Lutheran theology, unfortunately it is ignored by ELCA.

A little room for sin. Nadia has been criticized by those who have carefully read her sermons that she pays little attention to the main problem of humanity, original sin. She puts great emphasis on the Gospel, and sometimes, from what I have read/heard she does a great job. At other times it is the gospel of ‘gospel reductionism,’ which is no gospel at all. The problem is that if we are not conscious that our deepest problem is that we are sinners, that because of our original sin we are separated from God, that because of our sin the Son of God had to die on the cross, then there is no repentance, no need for forgiveness, and ultimately no need for the Christ. This neglect of the reality of our sin in her sermons make sense in the context of the ELCA, where the only ‘real sin’ left is the lack of tolerance towards all sins.

I actually hope that Nadia may have improved in this respect, for at least in one of her sermons she did quite a good job describing what our sin is like. I pray that she continues to embrace the whole of Biblical truth, even if it is not the most popular position in Western culture or in her own church.

Postmodern attitude. In simple terms, postmodernism claims that there is no such thing as absolute truth, just different perspectives. What works for me, may not work for you, and vice versa. The same goes with the Biblical message. It works for her, but it may not work for someone else. Thus the Biblical narrative, the historical revelation of the Triune God, is made into a one story amongst many. Each person can pick the one they like. Sure, this postmodern attitude does not go together with the repeated claim of the apostles, that the story of Jesus is fact, and has been established by the testimony of many eyewitnesses: “Which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands [...] we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life [...] which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you.” (1.John 1:1-3)

But, of course, who has the ultimate authority in the ELCA – some biased apostles from the first century, or we, the enlightened people of the 21st century?

What to expect?

Nadia is credited to joke along the lines of ‘if you haven’t been a comedian, how can you be a pastor?!’ She was a comedian for a while. I’m sure that she can put on a great show. She is advertised as being able to reach the disaffected. Reaching such people is a real challenge. So what is the solution? There is no easy fix. Don’t expect to hear one!

I think we all know what the solution is. We just don't want to apply it. It is *repentance* from our sins, *forgiveness* in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, *reconciliation* with others, and *restoration* in the Image of God. It requires us to die to our old selves and to live considering others as more important than ourselves, and to do it *daily*. There is no easy way around it. There is only one way. So take your cross and follow your Lord!

When we think about the food that we eat we are very careful. Yet “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mat 4:4). Our Christian faith lives by the clear teaching of God's Word. How would we react if someone told us that the salad we'd been served contained some very good food mixed together with rotten food? This is how we should think about teachings that are not firmly grounded in the Word of God. Consume with caution!

I urge you, Brothers and Sisters, to see that this is not only your pastors' responsibility, but yours as well: be wise; use God's Word as the light for your feet; search daily in the Scriptures; “test everything, and hold fast what is good”.

Yours in Christ's service,
Pastor Guntars Baikovs

Some sources

[Go to www.PastorsBlog.com.au and you can click directly on these links.]

Friendly summary of Nadia's theology: <http://issuesetc.org/2013/11/06/4-the-theology-of-nadia-bolz-weber-chris-rosebrough-11613/>

Nadia's sermons: <http://www.nadiabolzweber.com/latest-sermons>

Summary of ELCA's position on the Bible and the Lutheran Confession: http://www.stjohnhubbard.com/cms/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=23&Itemid=42

Little overview on Nadia's phenomenon: <http://pastoralmeanderings.blogspot.com.au/2013/11/not-your-grandfathers-pastor.html>