

Fault Lines Crack Church at Her Foundation

By Rev. Joel R. Baseley
Dearborn, MI

Encarta.msn.com describes an earthquake as follows:

The point within the Earth along the rupturing geological fault where an earthquake originates is called the focus, or hypocenter. The point on the Earth's surface directly above the focus is called the epicenter. Earthquake waves begin to radiate out from the focus and subsequently form along the fault rupture.

Earth shaking activities happen outside of our observation and result in tumultuous change and division. The process begins in a very isolated specific location and ripples out to have far reaching implications. Like a continent that was once united before and has a chasm dividing it afterwards, ripples are causing division in our faith fellowship, the LCMS. A fault line is developing. And fault is being found as the two sides look upon each other.

The Epicenter

The David Benke controversy¹, a very isolated, relatively small event, is the epicenter of the earthquake which is even now rippling in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, though the pressure has been building for some time. We are not the only church body experiencing this. The Episcopal Church in the US has recently elected an openly gay Bishop in New Hampshire. The Episcopal Church is rippling, shaking and splitting from the world wide Anglican Communion. It is in some respects a different situation, but also shockingly similar. In fact, the Episcopal situation shows where Benkeism ultimately leads.

The Focus

What is providing the energy for this division? It is underground. It is a spiritual battle. In our Synod, I believe everyone would agree that God and Satan are battling. But where is God and where is Satan? In this we disagree.

Two Versions of the Gospel

The Gospel is the revelation of God's love through the loving ministration of Jesus, true God and true man, who died for my sins, and not my sins only but the sins of the world. (Both sides agree). Christ desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (ditto). But what kind of love (Gospel) must be preached to reveal this astounding love of God? Ah, there's the rub. Let's focus on this.

Gospel Version 1: Salvation From a Wrathful God

All religions say that God will punish his enemies. But God's love is only revealed in truth to sinful man in our Crucified Savior, Jesus. That revelation wipes out the wrath of God through the suffering of His Son who bore it for us. God is reconciled to the sinner through Christ. For the man of faith, God is made known to him in the Gospel as a God whose wrath is so fully spent that there is no more. But that is only found, known and grasped through Spirit-wrought faith.

But this faith only grasps and knows God's grace through and in Christ crucified, who is the object of all God's wrath. Theologically, this knowledge of God as a loving merciful God will be perverted if that mercy of God is abstracted from Christ and made a general attribute of God apart from this crucified, wrath-bearing Christ. As Jesus says:

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” John 3:36

This dichotomy of a generally wrathful God who reveals his wrath as the general rule (condition) and provides relief through a very specific, seemingly small and finite work (Christ crucified) is God's epicenter of salvation that rippled through the ancient world in the time of the apostles. It was God's power unto salvation for all who believed (Romans 1:16,17). What did it look like? It divided life from death; old Adam from New man; Law (God's wrath with all embraced by it) and Gospel (Jesus death for the world).

The Gospel preached by the cross is specific forgiveness in the midst of general destruction into which the Savior came bodily unto death to give us grace. That is why the cross is a call to repentance. It is a call for men to die with Christ that we might live with him. Man must repudiate his natural knowledge of God (law) to embrace his grace in Christ. Man's natural knowledge of God in the Old Adam is to go through God's just wrath in Christ and only in Christ. This is the only way a person may share the God - man's victory.

Please note that this Gospel of cross wrought-love is assumed and addressed to David Benke and Gerald Kieschnik in the original complaint filed and sent in the present Synodical Controversy². Repentance under God is the condition desired for both the complainant and Dr. Benke. This is echoed in all subsequent complaints. The complainant writes:

“If I am in error because of this rebuke I beg that you would show me from Scriptures and the Confessions my own error that I might repent of it and I will beg your forgiveness for my importunity and sinning in boldness (Matthew 7:1). But my conscience is bound to God's Word and in your oath of Office you promised to also be bound to the same Word. I am convinced that you have shamed our Church and should be removed from office; especially in light of the apology and agreement you made with Synod in the immediate past. I call upon President Kieschnick to also respond and explain to me fraternally from Scriptures and the Confessions where I am wrong or to remove his endorsement and remove you from Office, to the end that you might return to the house of the merciful Father, not as a servant (pastor) any longer, but as a son. I pray that God might grant you repentance that He save you from your sin and error and that you be restored with joy to God's narrow Way (Matthew 7:13).”

Vice-President Schulz found as a fact, by evidence of Dr. Benke's actions, that he had violated the First and Second Commandments in mingling God's Name and prayers in God's name with those of idols (false Gods), confirming idolaters in their idolatry and weakening believers in their faith³. The Dispute Resolution Panel's (DRP's) remedy to the charges and findings of sin by Schulz was along the lines of supervisory authority and a dubious understanding of a CTCR document, not

Scriptures. The DRP who was assigned to review Schulz's finding did not think that the breaking of commandments was germane to his syncretism. They evidently saw other issues more important than sin, grace and repentance. How can this be? I would offer the following to suggest that in the name of inclusion and mission, another gospel, a gospel of pragmatism, is taking the place of the Gospel of the cross.

Gospel Version 2: Salvation Without a Wrathful God

H. Reinhold Niebuhr has been quoted as saying, "A God without wrath brings people without sin into a kingdom with no pain through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

Consider the following facts in the light of the above quote:

1. Dr. David Benke has a history of ecumenical activity. He was disciplined after participating in an interfaith service during the Barry administration. What does it mean that he participated in such events? It means that he joined the pure confession of our faith, the Lutheran Confessions, with those who have condemned and teach contrary to those Confessions. His actions indicate a belief that these people can teach lies (false doctrine) in God's Name and that they should be supported in doing so. How can this be? Repentance is not needed if the nature of God's mercy is apart from the painful cross. But if God's love is bound only to the cross, he would serve God by proclaiming that Christ lovingly died for their lies, and that they also must die with Christ in repentance to live before God.

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2. In the face-to-face encounter with Dr. Benke on May 24, 2002 the following interchange is recorded⁴: (p. 3 appendix DD)...

Benke: the charges must be based on the bylaws, etc. To go over and above that would be having an honest difference of opinion; charity must prevail; I absolutely believe this must be discussed; 9 months of malarky in my life...I do not need this; I need you to drop these charges because charity must prevail; I did not come to this to go through this emotionally; this is extremely damaging to our work in the Atlantic District; let this go to 2004 and let the chips fall where they may.

Michael: what I'm hearing is that there is basic agreement of clearly articulating how we as confessional Lutherans live in a pluralistic society; yet how do we interface with a variety of faith and non-faith; Dave Benke says that with this discussion not concluded and dialog needing to be followed, he followed advice of his ecclesiastical supervisor and the charges need to be dropped; then the dialog can continue in a more irenic fashion. Have I perceived this accurately?

BAUER: you have perceived Dave Benke's position, but certainly not ours...

At the head of this conflict are a number of pastors attempting to address the issue of sin with an erring brother so that he can be forgiven. Notice that at a high point in the discussion (quoted just above), after pressing Benke to discuss this in light of God's Law and the Gospel (Scriptures and Confession), the issue was dodged. Benke bemoans his suffering in the process as if he should have been spared this in the name of charity (love). He is writhing under the load of these charges. And he is doing everything to escape examining his action under the judgment of Scriptures and the Confessions. He states a willingness to have such discussions if the charges are dropped and there is no longer a threat, that is, if he does not need to suffer any death to that sin, but is permitted to live

with it. There are notable Scriptural examples of godly believers who would rather lose their worldly possessions, honor and even life if that was the cost of admitting their sin and receiving absolution in saving faith (Note, for example, Jonah (1:10-12), David (2 Samuel 12:12-13), Paul (Acts 26:29)). Benke would not discuss his sin under Scriptures and Confessions. He seems to be seeking a cross-less grace; love and charity without death and resurrection. The gospel, for Benke, seems to be license and safety for the sinner to keep his sin. The mercy of God which Benke seeks appears to be abstracted from the cross.

Although much was said in the dispute resolution process about following Matthew 18, the DRP followed Benke's lead and never considered the sin at issue or noted or admonished Benke for his avoidance of discussing his sin with his accusers, but only considered his defense using documents and lines of human authority. Matthew 18 was never concluded. He was not declared freed of Schulz's verdict of his sinning against the First and Second Commandments because of his innocence according to the facts. The DRP never ruled that he had not publicly broken the Commandments. Nor was his guilt affirmed unto the binding of his sin according to Matthew 18. Repentance, or an innocent verdict based on his actions, or excommunication in regard to sin that is unrepented are the only possible outcomes of Matthew 18. None of these happened. Instead, the DRP ruled that he had given pastoral aid in a time of exceptional circumstances. Thus in the name of missions the issue of his sin was ignored. Is it not a farce to use that passage as the basis of a procedure and then to ignore its intent and use procedural grounds to subvert its completion? "Tell it to the church."

Matthew 18 says, "If thy brother sin...", not "If thy brother breaks a by-law..." In Benke's defense, which resulted in the dismissal of his charges, human authority was used to divert the issue from the sin that was alleged and of which he was found guilty by Schulz. It begs the question. Scripture plainly says no matter who is in authority over us, we should rather obey God than man (Acts 5:29). Permission of a Synodical President trumped the commandments of God. The Fourth Commandment never trumps the First. Ecclesiastical supervisors (parents) never trump God's Word by virtue of their authority. No one has authority to oppose God's Word, even and especially when God has given that authority. God is not divided. What gospel could allow sin to be dealt with in a way other than the cross; perhaps the same kind of gospel Benke proclaimed in his infamous prayer?

3. Dr. Benke's introduction and prayer at Yankee Stadium is transcribed as follows⁵:

Oh, we're stronger not than we were an hour ago. And you know, my sisters and brothers, we're not nearly as strong as we're going to be. And the strength we have is the power of love, and the power of love you have received is from God for God is love. So take the hand of one next to you now and join me in prayer on this field of dreams turned into God's house of prayer.

O Lord our God, we're leaning on you today. You are our tower of strength and we're leaning on you. You are our mighty fortress, our God who is a rock. In you do we stand. Those of us who bear the name of Christ know that you stood so tall when you stooped down to send a son through death and life to bring us back together.

And we lean on you today, O tower of strength. Be with those who mourn the loss of loved ones. Bring them closer to us day-by-day. O heavenly father, we pray at this time that you might extend Jacob's ladder for those who ascended the stairways to save us as others escaped the fire and flames. O tower of strength, open innocent and victimized hearts to the sacrifice of the innocent one. Pour your consolation upon the promised eyes, especially our children.

O heavenly father, unbind, unfear, unscorch, unsear our souls, renew us in your free spirit. We're leaning on you, our tower of strength. We find our refuge in the shadow of your shelter. Lead us from this place strong to bring forth a power of your love wherever we are in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

Dr. Benke has rightly said, these are the most parsed words that have been uttered recently. Why? Because they are such an inadequate witness to Jesus. Jesus is mentioned. Love is mentioned. What is missing? The cross. Instead of the cross a ladder is implored for those who ascended the ladder to save us. One climbs a ladder. Jacob's ladder descends from heaven. Bad theology (Semi-Pelagianism). No cross.

John says: "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins." (NKJV 1 John 4:9-10)

Benke mentions love which all in Yankee Stadium shared and that strengthened all who were there from God and is poured out 'where ever we are.' He never mentions the cross and the propitiation of our sins. At Yankee Stadium he lets idolatrous messages of redemption and salvation directed to 'other gods' being spoken by false prophets stand unrebuked next to his own message.

John says how the love of God is manifest (seen, exhibited, taken out of obscurity and hiddenness). It is not manifested 'where ever we are' as Benke petitions for himself and the idolaters, but rather in the Son's work of propitiation on the cross. This manifestation of God's love destroys the concepts of love grasped and experienced by fallen humans in this world. The cross cannot be held in the category of 'love' as defined by the world. In Scriptures the world's concept or category of love is burst by the cross and resurrected by God's manifesting this love which otherwise would not be seen. It is not made known anywhere but on the cross. God died in love to restore his enemies. Benke's words of love do not declare the cross. He does not allow the cross to destroy the hearer's idolatrous concepts of divine love in order to manifest and reveal the love that would make them die with Christ, be forgiven, and rise again to true Divine love. Love is thus separated from the cross and no repentance, death/life, is possible.

Benke's words point to the peoples' love and refer them to love in their hearts. Why? I would venture to diagnose the other gospel; the gospel which makes God's love one of his abstract qualities rather than the love for us bound exclusively to his Son, the crucified and risen Christ. This abstract love somehow negates his wrath without the cross.

Benke says 'those of us who bear the name of Christ know...', which may be a veiled reference to the cross. But he seems to be saying, at best, 'we' know this by the cross, but *they* all know it by the general revelation of his love apart from Christ crucified. And this general revelation apart from the cross necessitates no repentance. Why? Because it is cross-less. It is apart from the suffering and death of God's Son, which faithfully is reflected in the death/life of repentance. But such abstracted love cannot save because it did not suffer and die for us. It produces no repentance and saving faith. It therefore confirms sin instead of putting it to death. 'God loves you just the way you are. Don't change a bit. Keep on living in his love, wherever we are.' Idolatry is thus confirmed and true faith offended (See endnote 3). At Yankee Stadium Benke is a blind guide because the manifest love in Christ is hid under a bushel. The doomed felt better in their doom. Its all done in the name of missions so some say its OK. But what kind of mission? What is the Gospel to which he testified?

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4. In the Episcopal Church, the election of Rev. V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire as the church's first openly gay bishop has been done in direct opposition to dominical practice, apostolic direction and the church's universal practice. This was done in the interest of the church being open to receiving gay people and being 'inclusive.' The Bible passages twisted to justify such inclusion subvert direct Biblical condemnations of homosexuality. God's love is for the gay, surely. But there is a difference between saying:

- 'Jesus accepts you as a gay person because he had to die for your thinking, speaking and doing homosexuality, which is against his will, against nature and his Law to save you from God's impending wrath for those things,' and
- 'Jesus accepts you as a gay person because its ok to be gay.'

The cross is divorced from the homosexual sin by the second position taken by the gay bishop and his followers. It is a cross-less love that does not require death and life; forgiveness. It is another gospel. Its done in the name of missions. It is a mission to deliver people to what? Certainly not repentance and salvation from the manifested love of God in Christ.

In summary, four examples have been given in which the Church or her leadership seem to excuse sin for the sake of unity and mission basking in a love of Christ which allows sin to remain without repentance, that is, without faithful reflection of Christ's death in my sin and new life. This is seen first in ecumenical activity which does not call erring Christians and unbelievers to die to error in the one true light of Christ's cross-won love. In the second example a Synodical Dispute Resolution Panel ignored violations of the First and Second Commandments by a District Official for the sake of his giving a cross-less Gospel witness to mourning people. In the third, Dr. Benke did not warn the people of the wrath to come on judgment day, a greater calamity than what they were mourning, but commended them to a cross-less Christ who loved them just they way they were. He did not bring those at Yankee Stadium the same Gospel extended to him in the charges of sin and call to repentance of his complainants and Wallace Schulz. The two sides are yet at odds. And in the fourth example, an openly gay Priest is elevated to the Office of Bishop because 'its OK to be gay.' Is God yet a God of wrath from whom we must seek refuge in the crucified Christ? Or is love an essential attribute of God which should be applied as such to all people apart from that cross? It cannot be both. These two Gospels' messages and effects are vastly different. Salvation is at stake.

Where's the Rub?

The cross is the place of the full visitation of the Law (wrath) of God. All sins were put to death upon the cross; yours mine and everyone's. And God's mercy is won for all on the cross. Because Jesus bore the curse of the Law and tasted death for all men and rose again for the sake of all men, the Law and the Gospel must be universally applicable. But in salvation, we who are born in sin are given eternal life as a gift. That is why we must join Christ on the cross and die before we share in his glory. It is not something we must do of our own ability and strength, but something that is done for us and to us by God only by the preaching of the cross and in the life he gives us under the cross of suffering, when we grasp in faith the crucified and risen One.

God is indeed love. It is his finest and most essential attribute. It is witnessed in creation where the rain falls upon the just and the unjust. But the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth. Therefore the clear witnesses of God's love in his general creation are hidden by the evil we are born with. So Christ needed to come and rescue us by dying on the cross. He freed us from our evil sin and blindness and revealed God's suffering love so that it might by ours and live within us. But not without Christ's cross and our cross of death and resurrection. Faith's fruit is always repentance; death/life; sorrow/joy; salvation from God's impending wrath on the great day.

Inclusion in the church without the cross and faith under some abstract characteristic of 'love' may be inclusion into an organization, but not an inclusion into Christ. Our theology and practice must be intentionally focused on the giving of the means of this death and life by clearly preaching the cross and delivering the fruits of that cross in the Sacraments. By this, and in no other way, divine love is manifest...Result? According to God's blessing and grace, and when and where he will, these will yield fruit to Christ in repentant saints.

If a Church tolerates open sin and elevates leaders that sin publicly and use every method to justify their sinful behavior, then powerless children in the holy crowd may well cry out 'the king has no clothes.' Promoting sin, preaching a cross-less love of God, and doing so in the name of 'missions' is a blasphemous misuse of the Gospel and is, indeed, a denial of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Churches that follow such blind leaders will end up in the same ditch. A Church that no longer works at applying the Law (wrath of God) to discomfort prideful and self-justifying sinners forfeits the right to preach the cross (love of God) to relieve them. For the cross reveals that sins deserve God's wrath. God's love tells all that we must die with him to live with him. This is repentant saving faith. The cross means our ultimate sorrow in the reality of what our sins deserve and ultimate joy in our deliverance. Faith in the crucified love of God means both. We either believe, practice and proclaim this by God's grace, or his beloved people can reject it and remain under his curse (wrath).

How Pervasive is this Cross-Less Love in the Church?

No parish or pastor has the right to say that they themselves are exempt from encountering or embracing this cross-less love of God. It is part and parcel of our sinful nature. We prayerfully and humbly continue to ask ourselves these questions:

1. Is the Law preached routinely to identify my sinfulness and need to die with Christ in repentant faith? Does the shape of worship direct me as a sinner to Jesus' gracious presence in our midst in the assembly?
2. Do the hymns/songs sung direct my attention to some love that is in me, or the love that is found and manifested in Christ on the cross? Can they only be sung to the crucified One, or could we insert a girlfriend/boyfriend's name instead of Jesus'?
3. When new members are instructed, are they taught that their faith and salvation depend not only upon what Christ did on the cross, but also on Christ delivered in Word and Sacraments to give them grace? Are members warned that if they are unrepentant in open and manifest sin against the Commandments, that after attempting to restore them to repentance, they will be eternally bound to their sins when they disdain and reject Christ's forgiveness?

4. Does my church body continue to study the Bible on issues that the Bible has already clearly answered as if they were looking for loopholes or exceptions instead of God's clear guidance? Do they say to clear passages of Scripture, 'Hath God really said?' Is the Church anxious to change God's teachings to make them more acceptable to the community in the name of missions? Does the church believe that society should reform the church or that the church is to be God's saving presence in society?

These questions and the variety of responses that would doubtless be made to them in our Churches and Christendom identify some of the fault lines of the earthquakes we're experiencing.

Earthquakes are a sign of the last days. My prayer for my every reader is that he acknowledge both the magnitude of the earth shaking events that are rocking the church and God's world and that he be anchored securely, not just in any Jesus or any gospel, but in the Jesus of the cross and open grave and in the Jesus whom the Spirit delivers in the true and pure Gospel in Word and Sacraments. E'en so, Lord, come quickly!

And if any man preach another Gospel (even a Jesus without his cross), let him be anathema.

ENDNOTES:

- 1 The Schulz Report can be found on line at: <http://www.crisisinthelcms.org/>
- 2 See Schulz Report Appendix B
- 3 From the Book of Concord:

We believe, teach, and confess that at a time of confession, as when enemies of the Word of God desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire community of God, yes, every individual Christian, and especially the ministers of the Word as the leaders of the community of God, are obligated to confess it openly, not only by words but also through their deeds and actions, the true doctrine and all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God (Formula of Concord, Article X, Solid Declaration, paragraph 10)

Hence yielding or conforming in external things, where Christian agreement in doctrine has not previously been achieved, will support the idolaters in their idolatry, and on the other hand, it will sadden and scandalize true believers and weaken them in their faith. (Formula of Concord, Article X, Solid Declaration, paragraph 10)

- 4 See Schulz Report Appendix DD, p. 3
- 5 See Schulz Report Appendix Z, pp. 8f – Transcript of Yankee Stadium Prayer Service