



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

925 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ Mar. 10, 2006

---

"Grace and Peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

I just don't get it. I keep hoping that some new wave of inspiration will flow over me, but so far that has not happened and I just don't get it. Perhaps it is because I am idealistically naïve, or reality challenged, or maybe it is just because I tend to be three egg-salad sandwiches short of a picnic lunch, so I just don't get it.

It just seems so logical, so sensible, so practical that all people who follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, all who are a part of the body of Christ, all who take seriously the Bible as the Word of God, all should be able to find some basic common ground on the most important moral and religious issues of the day. It just seems so grace-filled that Christians would be able to submerge their various differences and amplify some very clear and compelling ethics to the pivotal issues of our day.

Now I understand fully there is much ambiguity in theology, certainly in biblical interpretation, and that our cultural and denominational and familial influences are all over the map. But it still seems that surrounding some of the fundamental issues of our day Christians should be able to find a common language, a consistent paradigm. Of course the desirability of such a stance is beyond question, speaking with one voice would have far more impact than continuing with the discordant background noise so omnipresent today.

The problem, as I see it, is that an overwhelming majority of Christians seem to put more import and give more credence to their own political and social views that they do to Christian or biblical values. In other words, it seems as if the ultimate reality for most of us is our political philosophy, it has become the irreducible crux of our beliefs and actions. Spiritual discernment so often is a subset to our political ideology, and these political ideas have become so imbedded in our belief system that they have become seemingly intractable.

Problems abound with this turn of events. The Gospel of Jesus is not about politics, it is not about the basic tenants of politics, the accumulating or dispersing of power, the endless battle to determine who is winning and who is losing. Most seriously, as Phillip Yancey writes, politics is very

often ungrace, politics always seems to encourage "sharp elbows" which are used forcefully and sometimes even violently to gain leverage and influence. All of this flies in the face of the Reformation mantra, "grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Word alone."

Today more than ever we have seen that whenever the Christian community becomes overtly political, whenever the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes hostage to one or another political ideology or guru, then we have lost the biblical understanding. And wherever we look, it seems as if we do not see the world through the eyes and teaching and atonement of Jesus Christ, rather it is through our own parochial political views.

Let me be more specific, choosing two issues which cut politically in quite different ways. It is much easier to talk about this from 5,000 feet, but once on the ground it may be our ox which is being gored. These two issues which have such profound influence and angst today in our society are those of abortion and the environment.

Abortion. I don't think there is any disagreement among Christians that the Scriptures herald a very strong "sacredness of life." The ancient Greeks often taught that the body was evil, the soul was good and thus protecting human life was beside the point. But in Genesis 1 we are told that God created human beings, male and female, and created them, amazingly, in God's image. Just imagine, created in the image of God. No junk there. Or as Psalm 8 puts it, "we are created a little lower than the angels (a little less than God) and crowned with glory and honor." The Bible has an incredible high view of the value of human life.

Probably the premier biblical word about how this creation happens and God's place in all of this is found in the magnificent 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm:

*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately*

*woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance, In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed."*

When you read these words you have to ask the question, "how in the world could we ever justify destroying that which God has created, created in his image."

I found it fascinating that the editor of The Christian Century, the liberal Christian magazine, has also been bothered by the stance of his constituency on the issue of abortion. In the August 9<sup>th</sup> issue he actually says that people who advocate "choice" as the basic framework for making decisions about life and death do not reflect a biblical point of view. For instance he says that these groups never talk about "the value of unborn life." In fact, he says the language of choice is empty, theologically and morally.

Why is it that mainline and liberal Christianity has let political ideology shape their view of morality and justice? My own sense is that some of this is driven by the fact that liberal and conservative Christians simply do not like each other. The left is always distressed by people like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and the zealots from Operation Rescue. So since we can't stand the cousins, we gravitate toward opposing viewpoints, even if this seems to be in conflict with the Bible.

But it just seems to me that all Christians should be able to unite around an ethic of life, an ethic which heralds the infinite value of all human life. It seems as if we can really find no biblical justification, no Christian defense for the wanton destruction of life, which speaks directly to not only abortion, but to capital punishment, to euthanasia, to war and peace, to torture, to economic policies and many other issues. It just seems as if we all should be able to embrace a biblical world view that protects all life, especially the most vulnerable. But then I just don't get it.

The created order. It also seems to me that every Christian should be able to come together around a common ethic of protecting and nourishing and saving the earth. In Genesis 1, we see that God created the heavens and earth, that God created every living thing within it, that God told us to take care of the earth and God saw that the creation was very good. There is no possible justification in the Bible for trashing or destroying the earth, for polluting the air, the water, the land. None.

What is happened, I am afraid, is that many evangelical and conservative Christians have let their political beliefs trump their biblical principles. They have put more faith in political systems (democracy), more trust in economic systems (capitalism), and more trust in social systems (rugged individualism) than in biblical teaching. And the result is that we see our earth and sky and sea being ravaged. Thousands of harmful chemicals have been introduced into the earth every year, in fact the entire earth seems to be changing under the onslaught of human engineering.

Many conservative and evangelical Christians are beginning to challenge their basic political presuppositions. A month ago some 80 leading evangelicals, led by Rick Warren from Purpose Driven Life, issued a serious concern about global warming. As I walked around in 62 degree weather on Ash Wednesday I wondered what all the fuss was about, but these theologians admitted what the religious right has often denied, that human activity is significantly altering the earth and its environment. Most of the time this altering is not for the better.

Once again I think part of the reason why conservative Christians have refused to follow a clear biblical ethic in protecting the earth is because of their disdain for those on the religious left, for whom the environment is a top priority. Just like abortion, it seems like we are more interested in fighting political battles with other Christians than we are at finding out what God wants us to be and to do.

So I just don't get it. It seems as if all Christians should be able to find a common response to such issues as abortion and the environment, and a whole host of others as well. We can no longer afford to talk past each other, or worse, to swing our sharpened elbows at each other. Too much is at stake. If the lion can lie down with the lamb, then people who follow Jesus Christ from different political and cultural viewpoints should be able to consensus around the basics. I may be just a utopian dreamer, but without a vision the people perish. Don't you think its time?