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August 2009

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Where are the Lutherans headed?

Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first..
--2 Thessalonians 2:3 (NKJV)

On Wednesday last at 2:00 PM, an unexpected tornado touched down along Portland Avenue on the south side of Minneapolis, damaging the Central Lutheran Church and the Minneapolis Convention Center next door. The ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) was holding its annual convention in both places and was conducting a vote to validate "chaste" same-sex marriages when the whirlwind struck.

Local meteorologists were caught off guard, noting that the radial velocity (wind movement) scan showed only a broad rotation but no tornado "signature." The sudden, violent storm damaged the church music store, ripped and scattered display tents outside the convention center and sheared off the church steeple. But considering the outcome of a similar town hall meeting in a certain Canaan city (Genesis 19), ELCA delegates didn't fair too badly.

According to *Wikipedia*, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America "is a mainline Protestant denomination headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. The ELCA officially came into existence on January 1, 1988 by the merging of three churches and currently has about 4.70 million baptized members. It is the largest of all the Lutheran denominations in the United States and the fourth -largest Protestant denomination. The next two largest Lutheran denominations are the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod with approximately 2.41 million members and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod claiming some 390,000 members. There are also many smaller Lutheran church bodies in the United States."

Historically, Christians have viewed natural disasters, calamities, and even variances in weather as signs from God. In times past, if a tornado had struck on the day, the hour, and the specific location where a heretical vote was taking place, it would have raised concerns about "sin in the camp." *OneNewsNow* reports the thoughts of a few of the campers:

Even though the Rev. Mark Chavez believes the leaders of his church made a decision in direct contradiction of the Bible by lifting a ban on sexually active, monogamous gays and lesbians as clergy, he said he's staying with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. "I'm not leaving," Chavez said Friday night, promising an effort to keep the church [from] moving even further toward what he sees as an embrace of behavior condemned by Scripture.

Chavez, of Landisville, PA, is director of Lutheran CORE, a conservative group within the ELCA that fought the homosexual clergy policy. The group will hold a convention in Indianapolis in September to review its next steps, but Chavez said he thinks some ELCA clergy, congregations and individual members will walk away from the nation's largest Lutheran denomination.

The change to gay clergy policy passed with the support of 68 percent of about 1,000 delegates at the ELCA's national assembly. It makes the group, with about 4.7 million

members in the U.S., one of the largest U.S. Christian denominations yet to abandon the authority of God's Word on homosexuality...

...But the change may be too much for some Lutherans. Conservative congregations will not be forced to hire gay clergy, but opponents nevertheless warned there could be spiritual consequences for a church that strays from Scripture.

"This will cause an ever greater loss in members and finances. I can't believe the church I loved and served for 40 years can condone what God condemns," said the Rev. Richard Mahan, pastor at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Charleston, WV. "Nowhere in Scripture does it say homosexuality and same-sex marriage is acceptable to God. Instead, it says it is immoral and perverted." Mahan said he believed a majority of his congregation would want to now break away from the ELCA.

Other leaders indicated they might leave as well. The Rev. Tim Housholder, pastor of St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Cottage Grove, Minn., described himself during the debate as a rostered ELCA pastor "at least for a few more hours." The Rev. Marshall Hahn, pastor at St. Olaf Lutheran Parish in Dubuque, Iowa, said he'd need to talk to his bishop "to discuss what this means for my future with this church."

Other Christian denominations in the United States have struggled to remain united in the face of such debates. In 2003, the 2 million-member Episcopal Church consecrated its first openly gay bishop, a move that alienated American Episcopalians from its worldwide parent church, the Anglican Communion. The divide has led to the formation of the more conservative Anglican Church in North America, which claims 100,000 members.

But ELCA supporters of its denomination's change said failure to ratify it ran just as great a risk of alienating large portions of the membership, particularly younger ones.

The Rev. Katrina Foster, pastor at Fordham Evangelical Lutheran Church in The Bronx, NY, said Lutherans heard similar warnings about flouting Scripture when they made past changes that are now seen as successful - chiefly, the ordination of women.

"We can learn not to define ourselves by negation," said Foster, a lesbian. "By not only saying what we are against, which always seems to be the same - against gay people - we should be against poverty. I wish we were as zealous about that."

Under the new policy, heterosexual clergy and professional lay workers must still abstain from sex outside marriage. The proposed change would cover those in "lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships."

Before dismissing the ELCA as foolish for "voting against God," we should first consider our own condition. Sometime in the next several days, our Secretary of State will certify or disqualify *R-71* for placement on the November General Election ballot. *R-71* asks Washington State voters to repeal a new law granting same-sex couples all rights and benefits of marriage. At the moment, the measure seems headed to the ballot—by a razor-thin margin.

But too many church leaders in the Evergreen State have side-stepped the homosexual marriage controversy—including a substantial number of parishioners who seem rather oblique on the matter—voicing neither support nor disapproval of such societal sanctions.

A people who are neither hot nor cold could wind up with more than just damage to their steeples.

Rick Forcier