

Lutheran Confessional Resources
for the Study of Human Sexuality

An Introduction

The ELCA is engaged in a study of human sexuality.
It seeks to address some issues related to the place of persons
with a homosexual orientation in the life of the church

There are two issues:

Issue 1: *Can the ELCA recognize or acknowledge in some way committed relationships between two persons with a homosexual orientation?*

Acknowledge or recognize – rather than bless.

Bless

– “an authoritative declaration of divine favour addressed to persons.”

- Hebrew roots – **barak** – has to do with the fertility of fields, animals, & humans [attached to a blessing for marriage]

An Introduction (continued)

Issue 1 (continued)

- **Recognition/acknowledgment** - in light of the previous understanding of “blessing” these are neutral terms that can be appropriate for the committed union or partnership of G/L couple.
- **If “recognition”** the church will have to develop a rite , with scripture & prayer, and it will have to determine what it will call such a rite.
- The ELCA in permitting such recognition is not being asked to change its positions on various issues of sexuality (promiscuity, pornography, sexual violence/abuse)
 - RATHER, we are asked to address the concerns of Christian persons who are living in a committed relationship and intend it to be life-long.

An Introduction (continued) Issue #2

Issue #2: *Can the ELCA authorize the ordination to the pastoral office of gay and lesbian persons who are living in a committed relationship?*

- Distinguished from Issue #1
 - The church has the right to determine the qualification for its ordained clergy. Not all people who present themselves to candidacy committees, etc. are eventually recognized as qualified for ordination
- The ELCA shares a position with almost all Christian churches – no ordination of unmarried persons who are publicly known to be sexually active.
 - It is yet to be seen if homosexuals living in committed relationships will be recognized in the ELCA in a formal way...
 - So...**Issue #2 depends on decisions made on Issue #1.**
 - This second issue will not be addressed.
 - The first issue will be addressed with perspectives from the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church.

Why Use the Lutheran Confessional Writings when dealing with this issue?

It started with a question about those who support committed partnerships of gay and lesbian persons.

- Were the supporters **anti-nomian** – against the Law of God?

The Lutheran confessional writings occupy a position of doctrinal authority in the ELCA. BUT, it is not the *tradition* that has doctrinal authority. Rather:

This church accepts the Unaltered Augsburg Confession as a true witness to the Gospel, acknowledging as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession.

Chapter 2, the "Confession of Faith" of the ELCA. Par. 2.05

And, Par. 2.06

This church accepts the other confessional writings in the Book of Concord, namely, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, the Small Catechism, the Large Catechism, and the Formula of Concord, as further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church

Important lessons in human sinfulness that can help us in this discussion

- Our ultimate devotion to our own welfare and convictions or those of our own group inhibits our ability to be moral, rational, or just.
- When that to which we are committed is threatened we will do whatever we deem necessary to defend and secure it – no matter how our defensive actions affect others, or no matter how these actions compromise our own professed values.
- Our aggressive behaviors in defense of our commitments are truly religious, that is, they concern our real – in contrast to our professed – ultimate loyalties.

Problem:

In the heat of argument, we are rarely able to recognize that our sinfulness makes us unable to acknowledge the provisional character of our own convictions.

Makes it difficult to acknowledge the validity of different and sometimes opposing convictions

Note: We are not justified by our views on morality or the morality of our behavior.

By Christ alone – is the power that enables us to recognize and address these dangers when they arise.

And How Does Prayer Come Into All of This!?!

- We often begin a discussion with formal prayer – especially one in which there is anticipated disagreement.
- And yet...**the discussion itself is prayer.**
 - For in prayer we seek to discern the will of God
 - Discernment of the will of God requires that we deal with disagreement.
 - We need to listen to alternative and often opposing voices.

 - Difficult matters will also mean we even engage in different courses of action.
- Examples:
 - **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** – saw that Hitler was a threat that was so monstrous that an attempt to assassinate him was necessary. He helped to provide the theological rationale for those plotting against Hitler.
 - **Count Helmut von Moltke** – equally opposed to Hitler – but regarded it as a judgment upon Germany that Christians must endure. He led a community that discussed how to reestablish German society on a Christian basis after Hitler.
 - Both Bonhoeffer and von Moltke were executed by the Nazis.

The Part Prayer Plays (continued)

Bonhoeffer & Von Moltke

- Both knew they disagreed on the course of action to take.
- Neither escaped with his life because of his choice.
- Looking back it is impossible to determine which choice was right.
- Both died deeply comforted and sustained by the promises of Christ.
- In the midst of their disagreements, they did not understand their differences to divide the Church, to divide them as Christians.

Our differences in matters of morality may be profound

– but not divisive of the church.

- Only denial or persecution of the Gospel affects the unity of the Church.
- To leave the church because our position in this or other matters of morality does not prevail is to silence our voices in the church's prayer – that is, to stop praying on this matter...to withdraw from the church's prayer.
- Confessional documents of the Lutheran Reformation can help our praying.

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way

- Fear and Anxiety
 - About the possible break up of the ELCA
 - About the survival of congregations
 - Fear that homosexuality is a danger to children and youth.
 - The pedophilia scandal in the Roman Catholic Church.
 - The basic response to fear and anxiety must be simply – the Christian gospel. Not arguments.
 - Jesus is Risen! Death & everything less threatening has no dominion over him. When we do not trust this, we are consumed by fear & anxiety.
 - No need to ask what people fear – but, need to respond first with the gospel.
 - If this fails, then it must be made clear that ONLY the gospel can address this.
 - If this fails, they need to hear that they are not trusting the gospel.
 - The congregation is a major resource in the way denominations address controversial issues. (there is a common bond even with divisions)

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **Fear & Anxiety** (continue)
 - Congregation can discuss this without splitting.
 - Synod can...but not the Assembly may not be the best place.
 - Pastoral gatherings need to give it serious attention.
 - Special gatherings for lay leadership
 - Above all: avoid taking votes

 - Hostility has been focused toward leadership in ELCA, “gay/lesbian lobby” – trying to impose their agenda, or a minority is bending the will of the majority.
 - There is anger and resentment here that makes addressing the issue difficult.
 - Since the Churchwide Assembly is almost wholly political – its capacity to be deliberative and pastorally sensitive is limited.
 - Best place to do serious work is in the congregation and then...the synod level

 - There is room for compromise rather than schism – as part of a prayerful step.
 - L. C. in Bavaria ordains g/l persons living in committed relationships: 2 conditions
 - Congregations have a right to refuse to call g/pastor
 - The partner may not live in the parsonage (though all pastor live in parsonages)

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **Why does this issue evoke such passion?**
 - There is a huge network of people connected by means of the internet. Those in opposition are vocal, large in numbers, and well-organized.
 - Minds are not open on this issue
 - Those committed to a cause are being fed scripts for speeches that are supplied via the internet. Handouts at events are also pre-printed and available before conversations begin.

 - Homosexuality is a “minor issue” in the Bible. (Richard Hays –a conservative)
 - This is a core issue (Robert Gagnon)
 - He is influential – but Bouman knows of no biblical scholars who agree with him.

 - The Lutheran approach to Hermeneutics is vital.
 - One bishop told people threatening to leave the ELCA, “ they should do it for the right reason.”
 - **Not hearing the Gospel**
 - **Not being allowed to celebrate Holy Communion**

 - **To leave on any “moral” issue is to be un-Lutheran and schismatic.**
 - **These tendencies must be defined, admonished, & in the end repudiated.**

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **The Discipline of Attending to a Topic**
 - There is a difficulty for some to address a presentation on this topic. There seems to be an inability or unwillingness to hear the presentation before entering into counter arguments.
 - It would be good for us to consider James Glasse’s article “On Learning How to Fight like Christians in the Church.”
 - Critical Rule: one is not allowed to disagree with someone until one can state the position with which one disagrees to the satisfaction of the person who holds the position.
 - This discipline is frustrating because of how much we listen to often to “talk radio” where people are simply allowed to “spout off.”
 - The Church is called to a high quality of discourse – a discipline that can be learned.

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **The Scriptures of Israel**
 - Not many people have a sense of the diversity and conflict in these Scriptures.
 - They come from more than 12 -15 centuries of story-telling, oral tradition & writing
 - Clergy learn about this in seminary but it is difficult to discover how much becomes operative in the laity’s understanding and use of the Bible.
 - Sunday sermons are not occasions for instruction in the origins of scriptures
 - Fundamentalism has no sense of this
 - TV religious ignores it.
 - The New Testament confronts us with fewer problems.
 - Written over 50 -60 years
 - 1 Thessalonians (49 A.D.) – 1 Peter (as late as 110 A.D.)
 - There is a high degree of unity in terms of message – despite the diversity.
 - There must be an acquaintance with ancient history and culture.
 - Three Major strands of theology/perspective in Scripture of Israel
 - Nationalistic Traditions – Torah, Joshua, Judges, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah
 - Challenge to Nationalistic Traditions – patriarchal narratives, Abraham, prophets
 - Wisdom Literature
 - Jesus & Paul identify with the Abrahamic covenant and Prophets and against Nationalistic and to some extent Wisdom.

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **The Scriptures of Israel** (continued)
 - The Holiness Code, Leviticus 17-26, requires special attention.
 - It is about return to the land of Israel & about not defiling the land.
 - “Abomination” has to do with defiling the land.
 - The Point: Warning Israel that they will again lose the land if it defiles it.
 - Jesus challenges the Holiness Code.
 - Some commandments and prohibitions have enduring character
 - The enduring character of prohibition having to do with homosexuality is now on the table.
 - Very little else in the Holiness Code has continuing applicability.

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **Hermeneutics**
 - One of two key dimensions of our attention to this issue
 - Not only about the principles of interpreting a given text.
 - Above all, about what kind of authority a text has for us today.
 - For example: All five of the explicit references to homosexuality in the Old & New Testaments are negative
 - The Question: What kind of authority do these texts have.
 - Every Christian (most liberal to most rigid fundamentalist) comes into play here.
 - Lutherans have a principle articulated in Art. IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession – *the distinction between Law & Gospel*.
 - Lutherans teach that the Bible has authority because of the gospel
 - The Bible serves the gospel.
 - The Bible gives us access to the gospel
 - Since we trust the gospel...we pay attention to the Bible.
 - This does not make us anti-nomian (anti-law).
 - The law is also respected
 - But...it is SUBORDINATE to the gospel, and must remain subordinate.
 - Not even the decalogue (10 Commandments) is absolute.

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **Hermeneutics** (continued)
 - The distinction between Law & Gospel is the finest feature of the Lutheran confessional tradition.
 - Without the distinction between the law and the gospel and its correlates of the adaptability of the law we would have
 - Oppression, anarchy, chaos, rebellion or total capitulation to the values of the culture.
 - This is not widely known or operative in the thinking of the large majority of the Laity. This is an occasion for such teaching.
- **The Issue is pastoral**
 - We have a pastoral responsibility to those who are gay/lesbians
 - These may be 2 – 3% of the ELCA
 - Some are known and some are unknown or know only to the pastor.
 - Some are troubled about what they know of themselves
 - Some may have low self-esteem
 - Families are drawn into the dynamics of this reality
 - **These are baptized members of the Body of Christ –to whom the whole church is committed - we cannot repudiate that commitment.**
 - *“A religion which really has the effect of dehumanizing people – in whatever way – is either a false religion or a religion which understands itself wrongly. (Edward Schillebeeckx)*

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **The Issue is pastoral** (continued)
 - A ministry not just “to” them; it is “with” them.
 - We all are called to be witnesses to the Reign of God
 - to God’s peace & justice, compassion and care for all that God has made
 - We must share in the exploration of how they are called to be witnesses.
 - We cannot insist that every expression of their sexuality is sinful.
 - Not anymore than N.T. prohibitions against violence –fighting in the armed forces.
 - How do we live our lives in the Reign of God.
 - A ministry to those directly affected by the sexual orientation of gay/lesbians
 - Parents, siblings, relatives, friends, spouses and children.
 - How in our relationship to each other do we witness to the Reign of God.
 - A ministry to and with all the members of the congregation
 - Those in opposition to the ELCA’s study.
 - Those in opposition to any change in the church’s traditional position.
 - Those consumed by fear & anxiety and unsure of ways to express feelings.
 - Those being misled by strident voices in the church, religious TV or talk radio
 - We need the patience not to give up on anyone.

An Appendix – Things Learned Along the Way(continued)

- **The Issue is pastoral** (continued)
 - The Character and range of our pastoral responsibilities must be made known to all the members of our congregations.
 - Pastoral ministry is our obligation as well as our privilege.
 - Being pastoral doesn't mean avoiding conflict.
 - Pastoral means giving leadership in the most difficult and controversial of circumstances.
 - There is a great need for pastors to support one another rather than undercut colleagues for their own advantage.

 - **Next week:**
 - **The Gospel as the Basis for the Authority of the Bible**