

## Human Sinfulness in the Lutheran Confessions

*Therefore the root and source of sin is unbelief and turning away from God, just as, on the other hand, the source and root of righteousness is faith. (Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis")*

*As nothing but faith justifies us,  
so nothing but unbelief causes us to sin.  
If adultery could be committed in faith, it would be no sin.  
(Martin Luther, "Theses on Faith")*

*Therefore since these things (contempt for God, doubt about the Word of God and about its threats and promises) cling to human nature, people truly sin even when they do respectable works without the Holy Spirit, because they do them with a godless heart, according to the text (Romans 14:23), "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."  
(Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4)*

## Sin is a Theological Matter

- A note before we begin our look at sin.
  - Our given creaturely sexual orientation does not mean that all sexual acts are permitted to persons with a heterosexual orientation.
  - The question is whether all sexual acts of persons with a homosexual orientation are contrary to God's will and thus sinful in and of themselves.
- According to the Lutheran confessions **marriage and the ordering of sexual relations are civil matters, not religious matters.**
  - The church is called to bless the sexual relationships (marriage) with the state orders and establishes.
  - This has implications on how the church recognizes sexual relationships.
- According to the Lutheran confessions **"sin" is not a civil matter. It is a theological matter, because sin always has to do with God.**
  - Opposite of sin is not being law-abiding, but "having faith," that is, trusting God's justification of sinners in life and death. (Romans 14:23)
  - "Faith" in the confessions does not have to do with God's existence, God's Law, or God's will, but with trusting the gospel, "betting our lives" that Jesus is risen and that he alone justifies the sinner.

## Sin is a Theological Matter

- This understanding of sin...means that good behavior & evil behavior can be the occasions for sin.
  - Good behaving persons that trust that their good behavior justifies them
    - They make an idol of the Law
  - Evil behaving persons justify their behavior
  - **Both good behaving persons and evil behaving persons refuse to be sinners**
    - **And just that is our sinfulness.** (again Romans 1:18-3:22)
- Another possibility according to the Lutheran confessions
  - Evil behaving persons really acknowledge that they have done evil.
    - When they do so apart from the gospel, the confessions describe their non-faith in the gospel as *despair*.
  - Today...we would also recognize that persons who think badly of themselves because they are oppressed or despised or denigrated are in despair.
    - Those who justify themselves and those who despair have a common link
      - They do not trust God's justification of them and their existence.

## Sin is a Theological Matter

- The Great Insight & Contribution of the Lutheran confessions
  - The recognition that sin is really about not believing the gospel.
- Medieval theologians
  - Focused on desire as the primary characteristic of sin.
  - They believed that the most intense desires had to do with sex.
  - They understood "lust" or "concupiscence" as sexual
    - And it was at the heart of human sinfulness
- **This Medieval view** is a reflection of our contemporary custom
  - So we speak of persons "living in sin."
    - And we mean...living together without the benefit of a marriage ceremony.
    - **It would never occur to us to think that they are living in unbelief of the gospel!**

## Sin is a Theological Matter

- The Lutheran understanding of sin is evident already in Article II of the Augsburg Confession.
  - *All human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination.*
    - This sounds like the medieval theologians
  - But Melancthon continues:
    - *They cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God*
    - *They are born with sin, that is, without fear of God and without trust in God (Latin version)*
  - The argument with the medieval tradition take place in the Apology
    - The emphasis is that sin is about the absence of trust in God
    - The consequence of the medieval view
      - Abstinence & celibacy were regarded as more holy ways of life
      - Marriage was, at best, second best.

## The Meaning of “Original Sin”

- Most of the explicit teachings on sin in the Lutheran Confessions is contained in the article on “original sin.”
- Confessional Lutherans thought of original sin in terms of Adam and Eve as historical personages, and of their “fall” as an historical occurrence.
  - This is no longer possible
    - Because of the literary character of Genesis 2-4
    - The paleontological/archeological evidence.
    - On the basis of human remains and artifacts that have been discovered
      - No way to identify pre-fall human beings or a pre-fall state.
  - The literary character of Genesis 2-4 as etiological story requires us to ask
    - What original sin means if we cannot access a historical first sin or “fall.”

## The Meaning of “Original Sin”

- To speak about universal sinfulness or fallenness of human beings
  - **Universal drivenness of human beings to seek or engage in justification of themselves and their existence before that which “always accuses”**
    - As the Apology describes the **LAW**
- What drives us is that we are in a double bind – from birth/origin
  - On one hand
    - We are in the grip of two brackets which we cannot control: birth & death
    - These brackets would seem to make us victims because we have no choice about them.
  - On the other hand
    - Between birth & death – we must make choices.
      - We have no choice about choice
    - Making choices makes us subject to evaluation
      - And because we die, we experience death as a verdict.
      - The verdict on our choices as on ourselves is ultimately negative.
        - » **The totality of our existence is not and cannot be justified.**
        - » **Except by Christ the justifier**

## The Freedom of the Christian

- The Freedom in Christ is not from other...but **for** others.
- The other person is no longer the limitation of my freedom, but its extension.
  - *The Spirit is the very life of God, as that life is personal and communicative. A spirit is simply a person, insofar as the person is present in other lives to open new possibilities there; thus a synonym for “spirit” is “freedom.” God the Spirit is God’s freeing Presence, for and in himself and around and among us.*
- Because Christ justifies – we are free from the dreadful drivenness to justify ourselves.
  - **For Christ is the end of the law** (Romans 10:4)
  - Although we do not know whether our choices are right, whether our deeds are righteous, whether our motives are pure – Luther’s famous advice is to **sin boldly and believe in Christ more boldly still.**
    - We act in the best light available to us & entrust ourselves to Christ’s justification

## The Freedom of the Christian

- As Christians we are called to be witnesses to Christ – his way of being in the world – grounded in Christ's death & resurrection.
- The Greatest commandment according to Jesus:
  - You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you mind.
- The second is like it:
  - You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
- Apostolic exhortations in the N.T. as well as the adapted Decalogue are **guides** in living out this love.
- We are free to struggle with what this means in the concrete situations in which we live.

## The Freedom of the Christian

- The issues before the E.L.C.A. today are requiring us to ask how we witness to Christ in our sexuality.
- Some expressions of sexuality repudiate Christ's way of being in the world:
  - Sexual violence, sexual exploitation
  - Sexual infidelity in marriage, sexual molestation of children
  - Knowingly spreading S.T.D.s
- The vision Christians are to uphold in regard to our sexuality:
  - Mutual care, commitment, fidelity (Ephesians 5:21-33)
  - For people with heterosexual sexual orientation, Christians teach that the context for this expression of sexuality – is marriage.

## The Freedom of the Christian

- Question: How gay and lesbian Christians are to express their sexuality as witnesses to the Kingdom of God – Christ’s way of being in the world.
- Key passage is 1 Corinthians 6:9.
  - Those engaging in male same-gender sexual activity will not...
    - *“inherit the kingdom of God,”* along with *“fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers”*
- Does this mean that homosexual males cannot under any circumstances be witnesses to the Kingdom of God?
- **THE DISAGREEMENT IN THE CHURCH COMES DOWN TO THIS**

## The Decision Facing the E.L.C.A.

- On one hand – some think the Biblical prohibitions are absolute
  - Christian homosexual (12-15,000 in ELCA) must change their orientation
  - Or live celibate lives
  - In addition to OT “Holiness Code” & 1 Cor. 6:9 they cite medical studies which indicate that some male homosexual actions are physically dangerous.
  - Celibacy is the only way to be physically, as well as morally responsible
- On the other hand
  - G & L Christians “made” by their Creator, have, (as Paul Jersild writes)
    - *“a stable erotic sexual drive directed toward persons of the same sex”*
  - They do not experience the expression of this sexual drive in a committed relationship with a person of the same gender as the “perverted” activity of a heterosexual person.
  - They would have the same “standards” around violence, exploitation, infidelity, molestation...
  - They believe the church of which they are members could and should recognize – in some way –faithful committed relationships.

## The Decision Facing the E.L.C.A.

- The question includes asking whether we today have greater insight into the nature of homosexual orientation than did our ancestors in the faith.
  - Are we confronted by changed circumstances that may require us
    - To adapt the church's traditional teaching & practice ( as it has in other areas)?
- This decision needs to be made not **about** sisters and brothers who have a homosexual orientation...It needs to be made **with** them.
- Romans 14:1-6 is a good way to look at such a consultation.
  - Paul refers to who in conscience break with the dietary commandments of tradition "weak" ...but he does not judge them.
- Our consultations and conversations with each other may result in different conclusions or some sort of compromise.
- Acts 15:1-35 – evidence that compromise has always been a part of our life
  - We need not only **listen** to each other,
  - But to try to think along with each other
  - To love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

## The Decision Facing the E.L.C.A.

- Advice from Martti Nissinen:
  - For those of us who are heterosexual persons to love our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters means to put ourselves in their place,
    - To "*put ourselves at risk for another being*"
    - To ask "*why the other person's different gender identity is a problem for me and my society.*"
- We need to ask how they understand offering themselves in the service of the Kingdom of God (Romans 12:1-2)
  - Some may want to struggle against their given sexual orientation and they can request and require our support in this struggle
  - Some may want to remain celibate and they can request and require that we assist them in discerning whether they have the gift of celibacy.
- The question is whether the E.L.C.A. can **require** the practice of celibacy of its members with a homosexual orientation.

## Required Celibacy in the Lutheran Confessions

- Augsburg Confession, Article 23 is an attack on the decision of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Lateran Council (1139 A.D.) to require the celibacy of ordained priests.
  - In evangelical territories – there was a call to let priests/pastors to marry
  - This is from the firm conviction that heterosexual expression is “natural”
  - *Can those same arguments be supportive of Christian persons for whom homosexual sexual expression is “natural” and “normal”?*
- It says – without the supernatural gift of celibacy, one cannot please Christ even if one remain celibate in a constant struggle against one’s sexual desire.
  - The matter should be let free...traps should not be set for the weak
  - **Need to ask ourselves:**
    - *What is the ELCA requiring of our Christian sisters and brothers who have a homosexual orientation when we require celibacy of them.*
      - *We are asking them to give up the love and companionship of a life-long partner.*

## Required Celibacy in the Lutheran Confessions

- How the church should assist gay and lesbian members to discern the will of God for their life (if neither the ability to change nor the gift of celibacy has been given to them) requires our careful attention.
  - In Lutheran tradition, both marriage and celibacy are understood as **callings**.
  - How do persons discern whether and whom they have a call to marry?
  - The same needs to be asked of gay and lesbians and their call to enter into a relationship intended to be life-long.
    - **In both cases it is more than falling in love** as every pastor knows.

## Required Celibacy in the Lutheran Confessions

- We are dealing with persons here who want to be faithful Christians.
  - Must we say – that the calling to enter into a relationship is in of itself sinful?
  - Is it possible to consult with one another on whether and how entering into a committed relationship can be understood as witness to the Reign of God?
  - One thing is clear – it is certainly an alternative to promiscuity.
  - But in regard to 1 Cor. 6:9, *Is it Paul's judgment that life-long relationships between two gay men or lesbian women can never have anything to do with witness to the Kingdom of God*
  - Martti Nissinen:
    - *The modern concept of 'homosexuality' should by no means be read into Paul's text, nor can we assume that Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 condemn all homosexual relations in all times and places and ways. The meaning of the words are too vague to justify this claim, and Paul's words should not be used for generalizations that go beyond his experience and world.*

## Conclusion

- This is not a “neutral” presentation.
  - I have tried to indicated how the Lutheran confessional resources – can help the ELCA decide to recognize the committed relationships of gay and lesbian Christians in some way. (Faithful attention)
- I have not said the ELCA **must** recognize gay and lesbian partnerships. I have simply tried to point out that it **may** do so...
  - That there are good Lutheran confessional convictions and principles which can allow it to do so – with Lutheran confessional integrity.
  - To recognize gay and lesbian partnerships does not mean we are repudiating either the Bible or the gospel.
  - It means only that we are engaging in something that the church has already done, namely, we are adapting the law.

## Conclusion

- Of equal importance is that ***we must ask what it is that we fear if the E.L.C.A. does recognize the committed relationships of persons with a homosexual orientation.***
  - *Is this a cause so important that it should divide the church?*
- The threat to divide the church over this issue is to reject not only the exhortation of the letter to the Ephesians (make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” 4:3).
- It is to also repudiate the conviction of Article 7 of the A.C.
  - That - the church is constituted by the gospel in proclamation and sacraments alone.
  - If we break the unity of our small segment of the church over any issue other than the loss of the gospel, then we are truly schismatics.
- Luther: “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none” and therefore “a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all subject to all.”
  - Treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 1520
- Philippians 3:4-21