

A Turbulent Summer

Introduction

Even for someone who would rather ignore denominational and church politics, this summer in the United States saw two major church bodies take hard votes on issues of sexuality. The Episcopal Church, much smaller in numbers today but long the church of the old WASP elite with cultural significance much larger than numbers, and the other body carrying the Lutheran name, the ELCA, both voted to recognize homosexual clergy and monogamous homosexual relationships. Those votes by those church bodies to adopt policies that are in opposition to historic Christian teaching are tough to ignore. What I intend to do in this note is to fairly and clearly portray the action taken and also to state the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod’s teaching on the same matters.

One of the great refrains to come out of the Reformation was “Word Alone” or “*Sola Scriptura*”. Although these can have different meanings – the first being rooted in the living proclaimed Word such as a Sermon or an absolution and the second being the written Word in the Scriptures - the spirit that they captured was Martin Luther at Worms saying “Here I stand”. In more modern language, when “asked how do you know” or even “how do you know you know” the Lutheran answer is God’s Word tells me. You ultimately have to trust something to know anything. The Lutheran by grace alone has faith alone in the Word alone. That understanding and foundation have always been the real sticking point with Rome and with most other Christian traditions as well as the secular world. Rome has always understood that the church hierarchy, ultimately the pope, are if not equal to the Scriptures then they are the sole valid interpreter of scripture. Rome will talk of the ‘deposit of faith’ (i.e. the witness of the apostles) that has been entrusted to the bishops and the pope. The Anglican Communion of which the Episcopal Church in the USA is a member speaks of a quadrilateral – scripture, creeds, sacraments and hierarchy – that are the foundations of the church. The fundamental truth of original sin is that we do not trust God’s Word alone. As sinful humans we always want something more. We always want our word to have the same standing as God’s Word. It may be simplistic but that children’s song the B-I-B-L-E captures a wonderful truth – I stand alone on the Word of God.

So why did we take that apparent detour if this is about human sexuality? It is not really a detour, but the crux of the problem. The church bodies that voted this year are voting out of a different understanding of the foundation of the church. Even though the ELCA has Lutheran in their name, this quote from their statement on sexuality gives the foundation of the statement.

As we determine how to love and serve the neighbor in a complex world, Lutherans rely on the Scriptures. We also are guided by the Lutheran Confessions, and we bring to this task a particular appreciation for the gifts of knowledge and learning. We believe that God also provides insights to us through reason, imagination, the social and physical sciences, cultural understanding, and the creative arts...Thus, we recognize that this church’s deliberations related to human sexuality require our best moral discernment and practical wisdom in the worldly realm...¹

¹ Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust – A Social Statement, ELCA 2009, p6

That is not Word Alone but something much closer to the Roman or Anglican understanding. Alongside the Word are the Lutheran Confessions and also a long list of God's gifts to us elevated to the foundational level. While these votes and the discussions are nominally about sexuality, they are really about how we answer – How do you know?

ELCA reasoning

Simple reason by anyone with a warm heart would love to agree with the outcome of ELCA's position. As a minister I would love to be able to bless monogamous same sex partners. Even the lurid accounts of unrestrained homosexual behavior would not shy me away from that affirmation. What it would really do is place the minister in the same position vis-à-vis the vast majority of heterosexual couples that present in his office for marriage. Most of them are living together and if not already sharing a house have long ago begun to share a bed. The person they end up with in the minister's office just happened to be the one they were with when the timer went off (be that time an extra 10 pounds, a receding hair line, a wrinkle or some other *momento mori*). Being able to point to the normative nature of monogamous relationships and sexual love within what are to be safe and trusting bonds is a strong wish. While human sexuality is complex, based on current scientific gifts it appears a large portion of sexual orientation is genetically determined. It is hard to believe that anyone would freely choose to be a homosexual. Even today that is not an easy life. Given that people were not given a choice about their innate sexual desire, and the wish to emphasize love and lasting relationships, encouraging, regularizing and blessing homosexual unions would seem to be the correct course.

That warm hearted use of simple reason is not the only argument. The interpretation of scripture, 2000 plus year old documents inspired by God but written by men from a different culture, is not as easy as quoting Lev 18:22 [Do not practice homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman. It is a detestable sin.] That would seem to be a "slam dunk", but as Christians we have set apart large portions of the Levitical code as being fulfilled in Christ and no longer applicable and other parts as decided in Acts 15 as not binding on the freedom of the Christian. The immediately preceding chapter contains commands about where to sacrifice animals (i.e. only at the tabernacle). The immediately following chapter contains commands such as – do not plant your field with two kinds of seeds (so much for the creation of hybrids), do not wear clothing woven from two kinds of fabric (get rid of the polyester-rayon jump suit), do not trim off the hair on your temples or trim your beards and do not mark your skin with tattoos. Why do we feel safe abandoning those "laws", but quote Lev 18:22 as the end of the matter?

ELCA's social statement in its conclusion would say that such statements as Lev 18:22 in scripture should be set aside as God's continuing work in creation has led us to a more complete understanding of our sexual nature. Quoting that statement, "We also understand that creation is God's ongoing activity and not yet complete...For believers, it is hope in God's future, not in an idealized past, that inspires participation in God's changing, open and inexhaustible creation. Christians believe that God's promised future includes the transformation of the whole creation. Guided by this vision, Christians anticipate and live out the values of God's promised future concretely in the present."² God is still at work in this world. He is still creating, inspiring and changing. Our understanding of human sexuality has changed. As Christians, guided by that gift

² Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust – A Social Statement, ELCA 2009, p4

of vision, we need to live out God's values in the present. "The dignity of the human being reflects God's deep love and stand against all forms of violence, discrimination and injustice... We are called to participate in God's continuing creation... strive[ing] to lead lives that uphold relationships and a social order where human beings can thrive and to support one another in those endeavors."³

A Critique of ELCA's Arguments

ELCA's arguments are not weak. In fact they are some of the best arguments that man can produce. And the summary above does not in fact address many of their arguments. Although they are strong arguments and persuasive, there are two elements that must be acknowledged as significant changes in theological understanding before accepting the conclusion that monogamous gay sexuality should be recognized as valid and acceptable to God. The first of those points is that while using scripture in their argument, scripture is not the only foundational basis. To accept this social statement means a rejection specifically of *sola scriptura*. The basis for the statement is the best theology that man can produce based in part on "the insights God provides through reason, imagination, the social and physical sciences, cultural understanding and the creative arts."⁴ Accepting the social statement means turning against Luther at Worms foundation statement and in a very significant way rejecting the Lutheran understanding of how we know. The ELCA statement understands this at some level as it feels forced early in the statement to establish its own understanding of those reformation *solas* notably not including *sola scriptura* and with only a nod to Word alone with special care given to understand that as "the living Word" which should primarily be the "oral proclamation of the Gospel."⁵ While claiming to be a distinctly Lutheran approach to human sexuality, and it does attempt to discuss human sexuality in Lutheran theological terms, the ELCA statement must be seen as a fundamental break with foundational Lutheranism of scriptures being the sole norm of our understanding, of how we know.

That first break is substantial and has far reaching effects on many areas of Christian life. The second element of argument that should be refuted is a misinformed understanding of God's creative activity. There is a creaky old political-left phrase, "immanentize the eschaton" – big and obscure words that seems best to be mocked by placing them on a T-Shirt (which is in fact the first place I ever read them). While knocking around pretentious speech is all in good fun (and I can imagine this writing producing some of that sort of fun), that phrase is at the heart of a theological error in the social statement. That phrase means this. We as Christians believe in the resurrection of the dead. In that resurrection God is with his people and makes everything new and good. That is the eschaton – a fancy Greek based word for last things. Immanentize means to make real or bring into existence. To immanentize the eschaton mean to make real and present that perfect reign of God at the resurrection right now. In what is essentially utopian politics and religion of both the right and the left that has long been the vision – to create and make real the reign of God on earth right now or to prepare the way for God's arrival in very American evangelical language. The ELCA social statement says it this way, "For believers, it is hope in God's future, not in an idealized past, that inspires participation in God's changing, open, and inexhaustible creation...guided by this vision, Christians anticipate and live out the

³ Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust – A Social Statement, ELCA 2009, p4

⁴ Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust – A Social Statement, ELCA 2009, p6

⁵ Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust – A Social Statement, ELCA 2009, p2

values of God's promised future concretely in the present.⁶ In other words by how we live we make real God's future in the here and now – we immanentize the eschaton. That is a very tempting and profound misunderstanding.

A simple biblical example in fact deals with marriage and sexuality. In Mark 12:18-27 Jesus answers a complicated question posed by the Sadducees. His answer includes the line – “When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven.” The ELCA statement also cites this passage and with a correct understanding that “even marriage is an earthly blessing this side of heaven.” If we were to live life today in light of what we know about that coming world, if we were to “anticipate and live out the values of God's promised future”, should we not all be celibate? In fact that seems to have been the exact reasoning of some in the church in apostolic times. Paul addresses just this issue in 1 Corinthians 7. The Corinthians had sent a letter to Paul with some questions including some about sexual relations. (We have Paul's answers, but unfortunately not the original questions.) Paul answers these unknown questions with, “Yes is it good to abstain from sexual relations, but because there is so much sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband...I wish everyone were single just as I am. Yet each person has a special gift from God, of one kind or another...it is better to marry than to burn with lust.” Paul recognizes the virtue of the life to come, but does not require that while we live in this fallen age. Paul does not attempt to bring the next world into this one.

What we do here in this world does not “create” the kingdom of God – at least not as envisioned in the ELCA statement. In fact, living our lives in this age with that understanding of participating in the creation of the kingdom leads to all kinds of errors. Luther wrote in the small catechism under the Lord's prayer petition of “Your Kingdom Come” that “The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also” and “God's Kingdom comes when our heavenly Father give us His Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.”⁷ We do not lead lives here “to participate with god in his inexhaustible creation” to create that new world. We lead godly lives here because we have been lead to believe His Word.

The better understanding of God's ongoing creative activity would be sustaining. The ELCA sexuality statement asserts, “We also understand that creation is God's ongoing activity and not yet complete.”⁸ God certainly sustains this current fallen world. Luther explaining the first article of the creed says as much when he says “God...still takes care of them.”⁹ God's providence sustains the fallen creation, but the work of creation stopped when God rested. At the end of the sixth day, everything was very good and “so the creation of the heavens and the earth and everything in them was completed. (Gen 2:1)” The new creation – the one that we live in hope of – is not finished. It has already been realized in the first fruits, Jesus Christ, but we watch and wait for it final unveiling. Nothing we do here and now will hurry or delay that unveiling. Nothing we do here and now builds that new creation. ELCA's statement confuses this present fallen age which is already passing away and our activity in it with God's new

⁶ Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust – A Social Statement, ELCA 2009, p4

⁷ Luther, Small Catechism, CPH 1991, p19-20

⁸ Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust – A Social Statement, ELCA 2009, p4

⁹ Luther, Small Catechism, CPH 1991, p16

creation. In this age the only activity of that new creation is God's activity of creating and forming it residents by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We are passive in regards to the new creation.

A Statement of LC-MS Teaching

While my heart is certainly with ELCA's outcome, their path to that outcome breaks the bedrock of our understanding of anything and confuses this world and our activity in it with the world to come. That heart is a fallen and fallible instrument and must be checked and rechecked against God's Word. The result is a hard teaching, yet our Lord did not shy away from hard teachings. Even when it appeared that all would desert him (John 6), Jesus stuck to the Word of His Father. As followers of Jesus we must do the same.

The pattern of human sexuality and marriage are both established and set before the fall. As such they are part of that "very goodness" of God's creation. They are divinely given good gifts. They are how we are to live. In Gen 1:27 we are told, "God created human being in his own image. In the image of God he created them, male and female he created them." That image of God is not exclusive to one gender. Instead the account goes out of its way to assert complementary sexuality both in God's image. Part of that pre-fall goodness was the command to be fruitful and multiply. Genesis 2 expands on that pre-fall condition of human sexuality. One could possibly imagine a state where Eden was a garden of delights, as people multiplied so might sexual partners. But that is not what Genesis 2 records as the pre-fall order. God created the woman, brought her to the man, and the two were united into one. Human sexuality before the fall – the ordained pattern of an uncorrupted world – was monogamous partnership deep enough that the two persons were one. That two-into-one partnership was to be fruitful and multiply. That picture of human sexuality and marriage in Gen 1 and 2 reveals the intention of the divine order that is still binding on us even though we find it impossible to live out in a fallen world.

Paul in Romans gives us the clearest Biblical language of the far reaching effects of sin on the very good creation.

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles. So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved. Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things

that should never be done. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. They know God's justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too. (Romans 1:18-32 NLT)

High up on that list are the trading of normal (i.e. the pre-fall pattern already looked at) sexual relations for all sorts of shameful ones.

Paul's argument in Romans is not one that is culturally bound. He in fact argues that all people should have recognized God from natural revelation. This Word is not dismissed as a cultural artifact like long hair in worship. Neither can it be simply written off like large portions of Leviticus as law superseded in Christ. Rooted in the moral law, God's intent and design for his creation, in confronting human sexuality from a biblical perspective there is only one God ordained relationship – 1 man and 1 woman in lifelong marriage. Everything else falls under the 6th commandment and is a breaking of what God intended.

That is a hard teaching for most heterosexuals today when all sorts of sexuality is found and celebrated in our culture. That is especially a hard teaching for those with homosexual inclinations. What that teaching in practicality demands from them is celibacy and a life of denial of something that feels very innate and part of their being. If we are fearfully and wonderfully made, why would such a desire be woven into that make-up? The answer is that it is a fallen world. All kinds of things are reality that should not be. Nobody was designed to get Alzheimers at 50 in the original plan - no child to die in infancy, no 18-year old to be sent to a foreign war or a mother of two to get cancer. The medical community talks of chronic and acute disease. The acute disease is short duration leading to healing or death while the chronic condition is one that is never healed. Sin has lead to both effects. That inclination to sin is a chronic condition of humanity. Some have a more difficult existence under that burden. That is an answer, but it is cold comfort to the homosexual coming to grips with God's law.

The Gospel to be found in all of this discussion is that God does not place on us any temptation that we are not able to bear. Later in Corinthians Paul answers those same people who had been questioning appropriate sexual behavior that, "the temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure. (1Co 10:13 NLT)" All Christians are called to a life of heroic virtue. Because of our inclination to sin that is impossible, but "despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. (Rom 8:37 NLT)" We are all asked to abandon our own life and to pick up the cross and follow Christ. From some God asks more than from others. Why that is so, we cannot answer more than God has a plan and a purpose for everyone. A plan and purpose he knew long before we were made. A plan and a purpose in which nothing, not even our sinful desires, can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus. This teaching on sexuality, especially on homosexual inclinations, may be hard, but it is in fact a very real and specific example of renouncing ourselves for the cross of Christ. A call to find our meaning and purpose not is our sexuality but in Christ. In that struggle sins are forgiven. We become overwhelming victors.

Conclusion

The ELCA social statement says that “we recognize that this church’s deliberations related to human sexuality require our best moral discernment and practical wisdom in the worldly realm, even though these matter are not central to determining our salvation.¹⁰” In many ways that is a great summation of the statement. It is the best moral discernment and practical wisdom in the worldly realm that man can offer. It seeks to separate these matters as things that do not impact our salvation, essentially saying sexuality is a trivial matter so disagreements do not get in the way of the larger unity and our hope of salvation. What it fails to recognize is that in searching for that practical wisdom, they have given up the very basis of our knowledge of salvation – namely the authority of scripture. In giving up the scriptures it offers no hope to those bound in sin. They are not overwhelming victors, but merely capitulants to our basest desires. In giving up the scriptures it confuses just what this mortal realm is – a realm that is passing away – with the realm for which we live in hope. Sin is serious. Unacknowledged sin is deadly. Far from not pertaining to our salvation, this statement strikes right at the core of our knowledge of salvation in Jesus Christ and offers nothing but a soothing and easy false path to those in darkness.

¹⁰ Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust – A Social Statement, ELCA 2009, p6