

ELCA Publication on Homosexuality – Short on Promise, Long on Law

Colleagues,

This week's offering is a book review by TIMOTHY HOYER. Timothy is a graduate of Christ Seminary-Seminex. He now happily serves as pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York. His email address, if you want to respond to him, is gloriadei@alltel.net. Peace & Joy!

The ThTh desk

Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality

Edited by James M. Childs Jr.,

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What constitutes a "Christian perspective?" Even more, what makes any Christian perspective a "Lutheran perspective," which this book claims to offer? There is no agreed-upon answer among Lutherans today on this. The several writers in this book make that perfectly clear because of their differing perspectives.

The Lutheran Confessions propose a specific "perspective" for church life and theology. Perspectives are stand-points. When you stand here, you see this. Stand over there and look at the

same thing and you will see something else. A Lutheran perspective is a statement saying, "Here I stand" when one looks at the Bible, at the world, and at God. In Lutheran code words that original Lutheran perspective was bifocal, a "Law and Promise" perspective.

That bifocal Lutheran perspective has two perspectives by which we are to view God. They are the same two perspectives by which God views us! The first perspective is Law; the second is the Gospel's promise.

The perspective of the Law makes us see our disobedience to God and God's wrath against us. The Law is never a moral code by which we please God. The Law is there so that no human has an excuse before God.

Thanks be to God there is also now the perspective of the Promise, the good news that "we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God regards and reckons this faith as righteousness" (Augsburg Confession, Article 4).

The book "Faithful Conversation" says that it gives a Christian perspective, which, of course, means the perspective of the Promise of Christ. However, that Promise, which can be summarized as "justification by faith in Christ alone," is named a few times but never used. Worse, the Promise of Christ is destroyed by making it the same view as the Law.

The forward states, "All of these authors are seeking to be faithful to the witness of Scripture" (p. vii). What is that witness? For Lutherans, the witness of Scripture also has two perspectives-Law and Promise. Only by reading Scripture with the perspective of Law and Promise can the Scriptures witness

to the defining event of Christ AND be heard as good news that gives us faith, the benefits of Christ, and comforts our conscience. But that perspective of Law and Promise is melted into the right-sounding phrase of "the witness of Scripture" throughout the book. When the Law and Promise are melted together into "the witness of Scripture," both Law and Promise are lost and some weak alloy is formed, an alloy that can be called morality. The Law is lost as that which makes us guilty before God. Instead it becomes a guide that we are to try and follow with Christ's help. God's wrath is lost because God is now seen as trying to help us do our best by giving us Christ. The Promise is lost as that which has saved us from God's wrath and that frees us from the Law's accusation. Instead, the Promise-maker is changed into someone who helps us do our best to please God by obeying the Law.

When we read "Only God's Holy Spirit joins righteousness and mercy in Christ Jesus" (p. viii), that may look like a Christian perspective, but it does not clearly proclaim that our righteousness before God is faith in Christ. Therefore it fails to give us the Promise, which is the only Christian perspective.

The introduction talks of being faithful. "First of all, our discourse must be faithful to the mission of the church to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world" (p. 1). That gospel of Jesus Christ is not defined. Without that defining moment actually proclaimed, that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake we are forgiven (AC 4), then the gospel of Jesus Christ remains unheard, and unheard it cannot give the faith which God regards as righteousness.

The introduction tries again to speak of faithfulness. "Second,

faithfulness means faithfulness to the Scripture, the Word of God, through whom we meet the Word, Jesus, the Christ, who is the grand finale of God's revelation in history" (p.1). Faithfulness to the Scripture, in Lutheran language, is to rightly distinguish between the Law and Promise so that the benefits of Christ are clearly heard and faith can hold them. That kind of faithful perspective is never told to the reader. Also, this second attempt does not make Jesus Christ good news, only a revelation, as if Jesus was only a clearer view of how God wants us to behave better. That makes Jesus a morality teacher, not a mediator and propitiator on our behalf before God.

"Being faithful, then, means maintaining continuity with Christian teaching in general and with our Lutheran theology in particular" (p.2). Christian teaching, so varied throughout the centuries and so diverse presently, is usually equated with values, which is again, morality, not Promise. Lutheran theology can be presented as legalism or Biblicism instead of as Promise. That is the perspective on page three, "So Scripture and tradition bulk larger than the rest, for they are the repositories of authority in the church's teaching." To say that Scripture is authority, without referring to the good news that faith in Christ alone is our righteousness before God, leaves out the very message that makes Scripture an authority.

Childs, on page four, writes, "the two basic doctrines of the Bible are the Law and the Gospel, which flower fully in the person and work of the Christ. Given this orientation to the Bible, it is clear that the paramount themes of Lutheran theology drawn from the Scripture, will, in turn, guide Lutherans in their approach to understanding the Bible." Law and Gospel (Promise) are not two "doctrines." Instead Law and Promise are the two distinct perspectives that Lutherans use to read the Bible. And to put Law and Promise together in Christ

does not keep them distinct as one of the first witnesses to Christ does, "The law was given through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus Christ" (John 1.17). Without keeping them distinct, the good news of Christ as our righteousness cannot be proclaimed clearly in order to give us faith.

Then the "premier doctrine of justification by grace through faith" (p. 5) is mentioned. But immediately justification is said to be derived from the correlation of law and gospel. By no means is justification derived from a mixing or an equaling of law and gospel. Justification is through faith in Christ alone. The Law cannot be correlated to the Promise any more than death can be correlated to life. Law and Promise are not being kept distinct, so that the real Christian perspective of Christ as our righteousness is lost like a pair of misplaced reading glasses.

"Culture is the lens through which God's revelatory message is viewed and understood" (p. 6). That revelatory message of God comes in two perspectives-Law and Promise-and cannot be lumped together. Childs has again mingled Law and Promise so that God's message is muddled. The mud is said to be made clear by calling the mud "norms." Norms are general rules and people like rules because by them they think they can do what is right to God. So with his mud of norms, Childs continues with, "We fear that without agreed-upon norms all will be relative to different cultural biases and prejudices" (p. 7). The norms here refer only to rules or customs and make no reference to the Christian norm of righteousness by faith in Christ alone. When Christ is given as the perspective by which God views us, then other norms should not be followed because then Christ is no longer being trusted to lead us. He is made unnecessary and we lose the benefit of his cross and the benefit of consciences that have peace with God.

Childs continues to play in the mud. "Placing the vexing issues of the day in the framework of meaning and values at the core of the Christian faith is central to the church's engagement in moral deliberation" (p. 9). That sentence equates the Christian core with meaning and values, as if a Christian perspective is morality. When the Christian core is morality, then the Christian life becomes how to live right according to certain prescribed morals, often labeled "Christian values." People are urged to live trusting that their conformity to those rules is how they are doing what God wants, as in "It's the Christian thing to do." Thus, trust is placed in people's actions and not in Christ. Consciences are agitated by not knowing for sure what God's will is, as the two sides on any issue prove. Consciences are also troubled by not conforming completely to those values or by not knowing if they have done enough. To put Christ as the only value God desires gives all the honor to Christ, makes Christ's suffering for us good news, and then consciences can be at rest with God because of what Christ has done for all people. That is why Luther and the Reformers insist that the Christian core is that we are right with God "by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake we are forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us" (Augsburg Confession, Article 4).

To say "and how the moral principles derived from our faith should be applied" (p. 12) makes Christianity another legal system instead of something new and good given to us by the suffering of Christ for our benefit.

The center of a "Christian perspective" is God's promise in Christ. There is absolutely no Christian perspective of God's promise in Christ in the forward and introduction to the book. That absence of Promise continues in the first author's essay. Powell on "The Bible and Homosexuality" begins with a mention

of justification by faith in Christ alone but ends up with only condemning questions. In Powell's list of principles for interpretation of Scripture on page twenty, Powell adds justification by faith in Christ as just one of several points more important than other points. Thus, he starts using phrases such as, "The Bible indicates" (p. 29). That makes the Bible an authority without the Christian perspective, without the Gospel of justification by faith in Christ as witnessed to by Scripture. Powell urges, "the church must think carefully about whether it really wants to require people to live in a manner that its Scriptures and its confessions maintain is displeasing to God" (p. 31). To "please God" is a big theme in Lutheran theology and in all people's lives. God has proved that the only way to please God is to have faith in Christ as the one who makes us pleasing to God. God has proved this by raising Christ from the dead! That is the view the Law and Promise perspective gives us. Powell's urging statement uses Scripture and the confessions as rule books, rules that have to be followed in order for people to be pleasing to God. That is a complete forsaking of faith in Christ as the only way to be pleasing (justified) to God.

Powell keeps using terms such as "Scriptural teaching," and "The goal is to be faithful to all of Scripture" (p. 37). Scripture is here again being made to be an authority without the Lutheran perspective of distinguishing Law and Promise, which is necessary so that the Gospel's own witness to Christ as the one who suffered for us to make us right with God is clearly heard. At his conclusion, Powell asks his two big questions that are completely without the Christian perspective of Promise, for they have no reference to Christ and give no honor to Christ. "For me, the question becomes: Do we require homosexual people to sacrifice the experience of sharing life intimately with a partner in order to fulfill God's standards

of holiness as perfectly as possible? Or do we allow a merciful exception to those standards in the belief that God would not want such sacrifices imposed on people in burdensome and harsh ways" (p.38). "The question, rather, ought to be 'How can I please God, whom I love and want to serve?'" (p. 39). The question of "How can I please God?" is the salvation question, not a question about morality or what is right to God. To be concerned about pleasing God through morality was what the Reformers denounced in the Augsburg Confession. If morality pleases God then Christ is not needed, his death and rising as the pleasing act of God become unnecessary, and Christ then died for nothing.

The perspective of the second author, James Nestingen, "The Lutheran Reformation and Homosexual Practice," is better. But it could be even better yet. Nestingen defines sin very well. "The desire to justify the self, to gain control of the sources of life and bend them to personal purpose, to become one's own project determining one's own significance and value" (p. 44) is the opposite of being justified by Christ. It is trusting another instead of Christ for righteousness before God.

The next step for Nestingen is the Two Kingdoms, but he has the death and resurrection of Jesus regaining God's rule over people so that people are not ruled by sin, death, and the devil. Nestingen has not prognosed his own diagnosis that "the law works wrath" (p. 43), as in God's wrath against us. The death and resurrection of Jesus overturn God's own judgment of death against us. That puts the kingdom of God's law in its proper place, the place of not only order, "making the provisions necessary to approximate justice and peace," (p. 45), but to preserve and protect people so that the promise of Christ by his death and rising can overturn God's judgment of death for all people. Nestingen's omission of the law's purpose to preserve and protect people so that the Gospel can be given

them results in his implication that the law “still has a word about the shape of life” (p. 47). He had just quoted Romans 14.23, “Anything that does not proceed from faith is sin.” Yet he wants the law to shape the lives of Christians. He wants Christians to follow the law instead of following Christ. This is called the Third Use of the Law, a use that the Law cannot perform because of its accusatory nature that God gave it to hold us all accountable and guilty to God. The Third Use of the Law fails the Lutheran hermeneutic of distinguishing between Law and Promise because the Third Use of the Law is not based on Christ, makes Christ’s death mean nothing, and it gives no comfort to consciences and instead troubles them. So Nestingen’s Christian freedom is limited to the Law’s ordering of society. He describes that in having tenderness break “through the hostilities that have divided people, for example, or in a quiet reassurance granted amid suffering” (p 55). He has Christians working in the realm of the law, bringing order, but neglects to give them the freedom to make people right with God through Christ, which is the real Christian freedom.

Thus Nestingen concludes by echoing Wolfhart Pannenberg that “a church that rejects the traditional teaching on homosexual practice can neither be evangelical nor Lutheran, no matter what it calls itself” (p.57) That conclusion makes the church of Christ and its traditional teachings to be only a moral dictator that people must follow as the means of righteousness instead of faith in Christ. The Reformers also practiced the Law and Promise perspective on “traditional teaching” in Augsburg Confession 28. They said that certain traditional teachings, actions, ways of life, “new fasts, new ceremonies, new monastic orders, and the like were invented daily. They were fervently and strictly promoted, as if such things were a necessary service of God whereby people earned grace if they observed them or committed a great sin if they did not. Many

harmful errors in the church have resulted from this. In the first place, the grace of Christ and the teaching concerning faith are thereby obscured. The gospel holds these things up to us with great earnestness and strongly insists that everyone regard the merit of Christ as sublime and precious and know that faith in Christ is to be esteemed far above all works. For this reason, St. Paul fought vehemently against the Law of Moses and against human tradition so that we should learn that we do not become righteous before God by our works but that it is only through faith in Christ that we obtain grace for Christ's sake" (Augsburg Confession, Article 28.2-5). The Reformers insisted that what makes people and their behavior right with God is the Gospel of Christ. To make a person's righteousness dependent upon following traditional teaching makes Christ unneeded and just burdens consciences and causes them to despair of ever being right with God. That is not the Gospel's mercy but the Law's condemnation.

The third essay by Martha Stortz, "Rethinking Christian Sexuality: Baptized into the Body of Christ," though it talks of baptism, uses Scripture only as a law book. "Scripture guides us in what to do and what not to do" (p. 61). "Sometimes biblical counsel requires that we examine the contours of a parable and shape our own lives accordingly" (p. 61). Here Scripture is being used without its connection to the gospel of Christ being our righteousness by his suffering for us. Scripture is being used as an authority or guide or counsel as if it had authority on its own without the gospel. Stolz uses baptism into Christ as our new identity, that we are owned by Christ, but she does not differentiate between ownership by Christ's mercy and ownership by God, even God's grace in the law.

Richard Perry Jr. and Jose Rodriguez use culture as that which reflects "their condition in life" (p. 81). "Culture serves as

a way of organizing the world" (p. 83). "Culture, we suggest, is a meaning-giving system created by a particular group of people that expresses, forms, and transmits, in culturally specific forms, how the people and all living things are connected to God" (p. 83). That is the same as Nestingen's law is for order and provision. In Lutheran hermeneutics, culture is totally in the realm of Law. So whenever discussing culture that distinction must be kept clear to be done in the Lutheran way of giving glory to Christ and comforting consciences. Perry and Rodriguez do not make that distinction between Law and Gospel when they correlate Christ and culture: "Christ and culture are authorities the Christian is called to obey" (p.84). "We can all agree, as Christians, that universal ethical wisdom is shared through the Ten Commandments, biblical proverbs, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, and stories about biblical heroes and heroines" (p. 85). Here the two authors have made Christ another guru of ethical wisdom, and so have crassly not kept Law and Promise distinct. They have made Law, as in culture, the means of righteousness, which is only the work of the Promise. Christ's death and rising are not even mentioned, are of no consequence, and are not good news for us in how we are connected to God. Christ connects us to God in mercy, mercy for disbelievers who use culture to justify our lives, as Perry and Rodriguez do.

Lastly, even in the Authors' Forum, the use of Scripture as only Law is stated several times, "the great majority of people in the ELCA want to do the will of God on this matter. They want to know what the Bible does say" (p.129). "As Lutherans our authority does not lie in our experiences or the experience of others but in Holy Scripture, the Word of God" (p.132). The will of God is seen as Law, right behavior, and in no way is the will of God seen as mercy given through the death and rising of Christ as how we are justified and so please God and

do God's will. To believe in Christ as the one whom God has sent is how we do the works of God, as the gospel writer John says (6.29).

The "Christian Perspective" is completely missing in "Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality" because it views Scripture as Law and ignores the Promise, which is the real Christian perspective. To recommend the Law as people's perspective on God makes them guilty and condemned and so is of no comfort. Only that which gives peace to the conscience is gospel. People are comforted and given peace with God when the Promise is proclaimed: We are right with God by grace, for Christ's sake, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. That is finally the only Christian perspective, for it is based on Christ whom God raised from the dead for us.

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