

Grounding One's Theology in the Gospel, when the issue is Homosexuality – Part 2

Colleagues,

I do so wish that we could move to some other topics. Some of you (many of you?) may well wish the same. And there are other topics for ThTh postings. E.g., Marie and I have been here in New Haven, Connecticut at the Overseas Ministries Study Center for three weeks and in the course of that time I've been working on mission stuff that I'd like to pass on to you. So for "just one more time" let's look at homosexuality again. Here are some responses received to last week's posting and my thoughts about what you responders tell me. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. AN ELCA PASTOR IN CALIFORNIA I am sorry but I just have to respond to Ed's response. It sounds to me like if we just all love Jesus that my understanding of Gospel and your understanding of Gospel can stand side by side because one's understanding is equal to everyone's understanding. What happened to the understanding of "revealed truth" that we as followers of Christ are called to conform to? At its base, Ed, your Gospel is just another liberal way of saying "if my belief does not hurt you, it is okay". All through the history of the Christian era the church has had to stop and say what Gospel they are going to

proclaim. Thus the Ecumenical Councils came into being to safe guard the right from the wrong Gospel. The problem with the ELCA is that we have adopted a gospel of tolerance to the degree that I can not tell you that your understanding is wrong because I am not allowed to judge your experience.

I am sorry Ed, but I think your gospel is human centered and not God centered.

EHS comments:

You may be right.

Yet I don't think so. Thus I anticipate coming before the judge on the last day confessing what you call "Ed's" Gospel, to wit, God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself—making Jesus to be sin for us (though HE knew no sin) so that we might become the righteousness of God in him—and has committed to us folks so reconciled the ministry of reconciliation.

If that Gospel won't pass muster on the last day, I'm lost. I hope it is YOUR gospel too, since any other one is indeed an OTHER gospel—one that won't pass muster when the "final exam" comes.

My thoughts on homosexuality, I've tried to show, are grounded in that Gospel as the law/promise hermeneutic finds it in the scripture. My point in ThTh188 was to challenge my buddy, Pastor S, to show how his alternate position was grounded in that same hermeneutic for getting to THE Gospel. His position on the issue sounded to me to be grounded "just" in the Bible—the "revealed truth" (your words)—which can be read through a variety of lenses. We see already in the NT Gospels where most of Jesus's arguments with his critics are arguments about just what

God is saying in the revealed truth of the OT. Perhaps your lenses are similar to S's—lenses that read the Bible for revelation: telling us what we are to believe, how we are to behave, and how we are to worship. If so, and esp. since you are a Lutheran pastor, your ordination vow commits you, seems to me, to a different way of reading the Bible. It's a hermeneutic articulated, for example, in the opening paragraphs of Article 4 of the Apology to the Augs. Conf.—and in other places as well in the Book of Concord.

In THAT Gospel and in the hermeneutic that goes with it,
peace & joy!

Ed

To which he replied [and the inserted numbers indicate my response below]:

Ed, First of all, thank you for your thoughtful reply. Yet I think you make my point. Of course I read the Bible for revelation. I know you do too. 1) What I am more than a little concerned about is your "other" sources. 2) The danger here is that if there is not a common source, we end up building our hermeneutic on our own feelings and experiences. 3) Yes, biblical understand[ing] is all over the board, but is not the confessions and ecumenical councils an attempt to find a common belief for the sake of the churches witness and unity? 4) And do not those same councils and confessions become bold and call "other" gospels wrong? 5) We can not do that today because we are not all understanding our authority coming from the same source. 6) I pray for the ELCA, but am not very encouraged for its future. 7)

1. *Maybe I do. But quite possibly not in the way you seem to do. I read for a double revelation, not a generic one: a revelation of God's diagnostic x-ray of our human condition (a.k.a. Law in the Lutheran hermeneutic of Apol iv.) and for revelation of God's good news fulfilled in Christ (a.k.a. Promise in Apol iv). Seems as though you may be reading for revelation of Godly information, and not for the revelation of law and the subsequent exposure of the sinner, and then the promissory revelation in Christ that reveals Christ-trusters to be God's beloved kids. I hear "dear S." doing such reading for generic revelation.*
2. *What "other" sources do you see in my professed law-and-promise reading of the scriptures?*
3. *Once more what of my "own feelings and experiences" do you detect in the hermeneutic I'm seeking to practice?*
4. *For sure in the Lutheran Confessions—and possibly in the Nicene Creed too—we have a proposed hermeneutic for reading the scriptures aright, and through that hermeneutic confessing the "single doctrine [not doctrines (plural)] of the gospel" as the Augsburg Confessors put it.*
5. *Indeed they do, but they do that – so they claim – via their rightful reading of the scriptures, which puts us back to the hermeneutic question again.*
6. *And that source is the Gospel, the "single doctrine" of the Gospel (Augsburg Confession), not the Bible. And the Luth. Confessions are a proposal for the right way to read that Bible so that the Gospel not be lost—or as Melanchthon puts it umpteen times—so that a) the merits and benefits of Christ not be wasted and b) sinners not be deprived*

of the good news God wants them to have.

7. If our ELCA would get hooked on this hermeneutic, its future would be bright. At least so was the claim of the confessors at Augsburg.

II. AN ELCA PASTOR IN INDIANA Can you explain how God wires people differently? Can you share your source of information –on this regarding homosexuality?

EHS: *I don't know how God does sexual wiring in anybody. My hunch is that it comes from a combination of factors—biological, social, etc. I don't know "how God did it" for my own hetero-sexual wiring (and probably yours too), nor of that seminary student who told me:*

"Ed, women generate no sexual magnetism for me, but men do. I wish it were otherwise. I've wanted to be a pastor in the LCMS since I was a kid, but being gay rules me out. If I could choose to be otherwise, I'd jump at the chance. But the fact is God has wired me different. Nothing I've tried changes the wiring." He didn't know how nor why. Neither do I. And he's just one example of many gay and lesbian friends—most all of them fellow Christians—who have convinced me that God does indeed wire some folks different. It's a mystery, but I'm convinced it's a fact.

Just as I think the Copernican world view is valid (earth goes around the sun) and the Ptolemaic one (sun goes around the earth) is not. I have that Copernican conviction from the testimony of many others, including astronauts, though I've never been out in space to "see it for myself." So I say: Copernicus shows us how God has "wired" our solar system. I sense that the jolt that came for people back in the days of Copernicus, when he

proposed that the Ptolemaic picture was not correct, is the same kind of jolt (as it was once for me) to say: God wired these G&L folks that way. It was not the devil, nor their own perversity, as I had once thought was true. For me it was a Copernican revolution. But it is linked to Copernicus' proposal in that it is a different point of view on God's creation. Same God, same creation—but an aha! about how God has organized some segments of it.

III. A CROSSINGS COLLEAGUE[Here my comments follow the respondent's text as indicated again by the numbers. From this colleague's response I did get more clarity about the usefulness of Luther's notion of God being ambidextrous, working with both the left-hand and the right-hand.]

Ed, I agree that Brother S [in ThTh 188] did not ground his anti-homosexual stance in the Gospel, at least not consciously (or "clearly"). The question is, Was Paul wrong in Rom 1 or did he simply not ground his condemnations clearly? If the former, someone needs to do a lot of work to convince "the many" of Paul's error; 1) if the latter, someone needs to supply the evidence for Paul's correctness. Now there's PC for you!

I have written to you earlier about this, 2) putting the onus of proof on the pro-fessors of homosexuality. On the principle that "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin," all human activity, including all the good stuff, is sin because we are still old-agers. 3) But insofar as we are new-agers motivated by faith (really, this is the presupposition of the question, isn't it?), 4) What is there about homosexuality that makes it "OK," not of course sin-free, but as "relatively OK" as heterosexuality (under auspices of a covenant of fidelity) or playing basketball? 5) Frankly, this is the wrong question!! 6)

Any answer will tend to spill-over into old-age categories even if a new-age category can be demonstrated. 7) Therefore, since the question cannot be answered adequately in respect to any sexual activity, 8) it cannot be answered adequately in respect to homosexuality. I don't see anything about faith-in-Christ that makes sexual activity OK in the general sense. 9) Homosexual activity, like heterosexual activity is intrinsically eros-driven. I can think of nothing at all that makes sexual activity agape-driven. If you can, please tell the world. 10) "Caring for one another sexually" as you put it is not "sufficient grounding" in the gospel (but it may be sufficient under the law). 11) The gospel's implication is not about caring but about love. Caring is still eros. 12) In no sense does sexual activity of any sort assist in proclaiming or in demonstrating the gospel. 13) A homosexual may be as easily loved (agape) 14) as any heterosexual without engaging in sexual activity to do so. As to your comment that God "wired" homosexuals that way: this is all old-age sin-inspired stuff, 15) even under the best of circumstances. You will need to come up with better arguments if you are to convince "the many" that homosexual activity is relatively OK, faith-wise. 16)

1. So what else is new? The theology of the cross—a.k.a. law-promise hermeneutics—has always been a "thin tradition" (ala John Douglas Hall) throughout the history of Christian theology.
2. Yes, you have. Now first I may be catching on to what you say and to where we disagree. Read on.
3. Sounds to me like you designate old age (a.k.a. old creation) as synonymous with sin. Not so our confessional heritage that sees old creation stuff as the "good stuff" of God's left hand. "Godly

stuff” even, though not yet “Gospelly stuff” from God. According to my lights the left-wing reformers were the ones mostly inclined to see everything in the old creation as under the jurisdiction of the devil, and thus synonymous with sin. If you’re not saying that—and your subsequent stuff in this posting seems to sound that way to me—then what are you saying about the God-givenness (God-giftedness) of the old creation, the old aeon?

4. “Motivated by faith” = living my God-given turf in the old creation as one now under Christ’s ownership. If God’s left hand has given me homophile wiring, then I seek to live that given the same way as the heteros “in Christ” strive to do likewise. Celibacy is no more a “you gotta” for G&Ls than it is for hereros.
5. If homo- is a left-hand God-given for some as hetero- is God’s left-hand given for others, then the question is irrelevant. We probably disagree on the God-givenness, and therefore left-hand “OK-ness” of homo- wiring. For if you assent to that, the consequences are patent.
6. And that’s why I answered it as I just did, though your subsequent sentences show that we come to that conclusion for quite different reasons.
7. Old-age categories are Godly categories—left-handed though they be. So they cannot therefore be made synonymous with the category of sin, Adamic-Evefic rebellion.
8. Not so. The OK-ness question is answerable under God’s left-hand rubrics. Hetero-sexual care of one another patently stands under the blessing word of its creator—even when the participants are not God-in-Christ-trusters. It is thus indeed “OK,” but that

OK-ness is always under the rubrics of ethos under God's law—law of preservation, law of equity justice. I'm proposing that if this is true of hetero-care-taking, it applies also to homo-care-taking. And if you don't think so, how do you ground that in the theology of the admittedly "thin tradition" of the Augsburg reformation?

9. Right. It's not initially faith-in-Christ that makes sexual activity OK. It's God's left hand rubrics that speck out the OK-ness of whatever is "right" in God's old creation. You know about that left-handed righteousness, classically spelled out by Luther in his essay on "Two Kinds of Righteousness." Both get God's approval; only one is good enough for salvation.
10. Methinks your eros-agape contrast here signals one basic diff. in our perspectives. Sounds like for you eros=bad, sexual eros too. Don't think so. Eros in my view of the reformers' view of things is "OK" in God's old creation. Why else did God put it into the fabric of it and of us?
11. Which is what I've been hollering about all along. Things warranted by God's law are not therefore bad stuff. They're good stuff, but not Gospelly stuff. Why even want to "ground" sexual activity in the Gospel? Especially since God didn't do so?
12. And both caring and eros come under God's words, "behold it is good" of Gen. 1—granted spoken from the left side of God's mouth.
13. When did I, or would I ever want to, say that?
14. I wonder if the Lundensian theologians—who were avant garde when I was a theological youngster 50 years ago—have gotten to you on this eros/agape stuff. Lutherans though they were, they didn't

attend to Lutheran hermeneutics. Even so, old Doc Caemmerer showed us that in the N.T. 'agape' —both noun and verb—was not the language of motivation (a self-giving motion) contrasting to eros motivation (self-grasping), but the language of "concrete help." Ergo Jesus could call us to love [Greek term: agape] our enemies, folks for whom we have no "warm fuzzies " in our gut whatsoever since they are out to get us, but still folks who needed "concrete help." Ergo, Jesus says, if you're my folks, help 'em with concrete good-stuff that they need.

15. Here again you are equating old age with sin-inspired stuff. That's not in synch with your Augsburg-Confession-linked ordination vow, I'd say.

16. And you, friend, will, as you can see, need to come up with 'better arguments' to convince me.

IV. A FORMER SEMINARY TEACHING COLLEAGUEEd. I didn't intend to add my two cents worth to the conversation about homosexuality until I read your last piece. In that you said something that I keep reading and hearing from good theologians and wonder why the "myth" is so widely accepted. The "myth" I'm referring to is the idea (conclusion?) that people are "hard wired" for homosexuality (or heterosexuality for that matter). The fact is that no one yet knows how and why sexual preferences develop. We do know that there is a fairly wide continuum and a lot of people fall (pun intended) in the middle somewhere. I agree that we have the testimony of many people (in my experience I hear it mostly from males) that they knew early on that they were "different". But that doesn't necessarily prove that their sexual preference was/is biological. 1)

Much more research needs to be done on this, though a part of me is not eager for a final answer. Why? Because if a

cause is found, that will lead people to look for a "cure." And if a method to change sexual orientation is available, then moral theologians will have to really decide what to recommend to the "faithful." 2)

Permit me to carry the discussion a step further. Even if research provides hard evidence that sexual orientation is "hard wired" that doesn't decide the moral question. 3) The fact is that there is just as much (probably more) evidence that alcoholism is biological based. And a growing number of us are beginning to suspect that pedophilia might be also. In neither case can we use the "hard wired" argument in favor of "letting people be as they are". 4) So the theological issue for me is one of sanctification not justification. And I do believe the Church has an obligation to make those kinds of moral judgments. That's especially so when it comes to the clergy and other leaders, which is what the discussion in the ELCA is about primarily. 5) Well, now that I got that off my mind, I will let you get back to what you went to New Haven to do. Hope it's going well.

1. I don't think I've ever used the term "hard wired." I learned the term "wired" from the gay seminarian mentioned above who may also have been your student when we taught on the same faculty. His claim, as I understood him, was that now in his mid-twenties he knew he was "wired" gay. How that came about, how much was DNA, how much the home he grew up in, etc. he didn't know. But that was his wiring now. In electrical terms it was DC-wiring, you might say, and he could see no way to make it AC. The juice was there, but the flow-chart was different.
2. Are you sure you want to turn this over to such theologians? Why not turn it over to the folks whom

God has wired different? It's their calling to fulfill, not that of the heteros, and even less that of the moral theologians. They might well consult with whomever they wish. But I bet you'd not sit still (very long) if your hetero married life were turned over to moral theologians "to really decide what to recommend to the faithful."

3. Who decides the moral question is the one to whom God has given the assignment. Thus I actually ought not to be writing on this subject at all. But "some of them" have asked me, so I do it. They are the ones who have the calling. I guess I'm a guy on the bench with a collateral calling, since they ask me for counsel.
4. Those are sticky wickets. Yet I think there is considerable help even here in our Lutheran hermeneutic for reading the world as God's left-hand operation, and all of us called to be participants in the work of that world. Starting with two articulations of God's law in that first creation world: the law of preservation (of people and of the planet) and the law of just recompense, whereby creation-destroyers get their retribution and creation-care-takers—including folks taking non-destructive sexual care of one another—get commended.
5. Well, I'm not so sure that Christ assigned his church the "obligation" of making such moral judgments. There is no hint of that in any of the great commission texts in the four gospels, and "obligation" is hard to bring to the grammar of Gospel-freedom. And the reason why that is so, I suspect, is that God has given such assignments to other agents—left-hand agents—in the creation. But

even if one would say yes, the Body of Christ ought to do something on this turf, who in the church is called—by God!—to do just that? For me it's quite a stretch to answer: Higgins Road in Chicago (ELCA headquarters). Despite all the clamor for Higgins Road to “say something definitive” about homosexuality, I'd contend that it's the folks whom God has wired with that calling.

V. AN LCMS PASTOR IN COLORADO Dear Professor, It is amazing that after thousands of years of church history there has finally arisen among us one who can slot homosexual activity into the gospel. I would not be surprised if the folks at NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) will be giving you their man of the year award as you “slot-in” their particular proclivity. I am sure they do it in faith too.

EHS: If so, God's ambidextrous work in the world will have been misunderstood from their side, as much as it possibly is from your side.

Grounding One's Theology in the Gospel, When the Issue is Homosexuality

Colleagues, My swan song for 2001 – ThTh 185 posted Dec. 27 – carried this retrospective paragraph:

“A number of you ThTh readers I have disappointed by not

responding to your emails this past year. I'm thinking right now of one very long and intense and thoughtful rejoinder from a dear Seminex student to the homosexual postings. He's a pastor 'out west.' You heard me, brother S, 'giving away the store' as I talked about that issue—and I never got back to you. What I thought I was doing in those postings was socketing that hot potato issue into the Gospel hub—just as we did in Seminex theology classes. So if we were still together at Seminex, dear S., I'd ask you to show me how you socket homosexuality into the Gospel we both hold dear. And we'd check our two versions out side-by-side for their gospel-groundings. Even though it seemed to you, as I recall, that I was concluding from my Gospel-hub that 'anything goes,' we both know that's not so."

No surprise, Brother S responded. [I have inserted bracketed numbers into his text at places where I want to say something.]

Dear Ed,

I read your Thursday Theology from last Thursday, and I am assuming that in connection to the homosexuality comments that you were talking about me. I have to admit, I wondered what happened to the follow-up on your homosexuality comments. But I can understand. There are so many issues to deal with. Even I as a pastor do not always know where to begin, where to end, and which deserves additional attention. Needless to say, I agree with much of what you say, especially since you are pointing out "in the big picture" that the gospel is at stake in our ELCA. But to get back to the issue of homosexuality, you said that if we were back on Grand Ave. you would ask me how I would socket homosexuality into the Gospel. To put it simply, it does not "socket" so I have to throw it out. [1] It is like putting a square peg in a round hole. Why do I throw it out?

Because homosexual behavior is not the proper response to the gospel. [2] Those who are changed by the gospel, put the Old Adam to death in baptism, do not go on sinning. As St. Paul said, "Do we go on sinning so that grace may abound? God forbid!" And St. Paul makes clear in Romans 1 that homosexual behavior is unnatural intercourse. He says in 1:27b, "Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error." This is clearly sin in which God judges and condemns. [3]

So where do we link up homosexuality? It fits into another hub called sin—i.e. the condition that we call lack of trust in God, or idolatry if you will. It is sin along with all other sin, which God cannot tolerate.

Others will argue with me that we are talking about a different kind of homosexuality in the present day. Such argument does not make sense to me. How is going to bed with someone of the same sex different in our society today than it was in Biblical times? It is still clearly unnatural,[4] and even further, is contrary to the orders of Creation which God set forth.

I do understand that it is easy for us to get sidetracked into moralisms, and end up teaching a new form of law rather than gospel, which you were emphasizing in ThTh of a few weeks ago. And that I agree with you 100%. But at the same time, the gospel does bring about a proper response. [5] St. Paul had to remind Christians of this all of the time. He especially was on the Corinthians' case for such things. I believe we referred to this at Seminex as paranesis. The response is motivated by the gospel, by faith, by the Holy Spirit. Homosexual behavior on the other hand is motivated by sin and the power of the devil. [6] It falls under the acts of the Old Adam and not the New Man.

All of this is very clear to me. I just can't understand why the ELCA or any Lutheran Christian would understand it otherwise. I think that one of the problems with the ELCA is that we are so afraid of being labeled as "unloving" that we are afraid to follow the will of God. And the will of God is to live according to the gospel and not the way of sin. But even the way the ELCA is dealing with this issue is not even in accordance with the gospel. [7] One of our voting members from our Synod gave a report to our cluster of how we congregations, and voting members were being scolded over and over again for not being more open to gays and lesbians, and how we are not ordaining practicing g/l's. It sounds to me that even in the approach, this is being dealt with legalistically rather than looking at this issue through the "gospel" lens. [8]

It is my impression that the ELCA is going to hell in a hand basket. As I see it, the liberal political agenda has become the message of the ELCA and the gospel is being thrown to the winds. But I thank God that we still have pastors who get into that pulpit Sunday after Sunday and proclaim the gospel clearly. [9] This is probably the only thing right now that keeps me in the ELCA fold. [Signed S]

Brother S,

[1] What I intended with "show me how you socket homosexuality into the Gospel," was to ask you how your negative view about homosexuality can be a spoke socketed into the Gospel hub. I know from earlier exchanges that you do indeed think "it does not socket." But I was now asking for evidence, for you to "show how" the Gospel of the crucified/risen Messiah makes homosexual intimacy an absolute no-no. My words were: "we'd check our two versions out side-by-side for their gospel-groundings."

In your response above it seems quite clear to me that you do NOT socket your position into the Gospel hub. Instead you socket your position into Bible passages that speak negatively about homosexual intimacy. That is not yet socketing them in the Gospel. Back at Seminex I wouldn't let you get away with that as "sufficient grounding" for any position claiming to be Christian. My earlier postings on the subject were precisely to show how intimacy between Christ-trusting homosexuals can indeed be Gospel-grounded. Quoting Bible passages—without filtering them through the Gospel's own hermeneutic—is what created the "time for confessing" movement we shared at Seminex.

[2] The "proper response" to the Gospel is faith. Any action that "proceeds from faith," says Paul, is not sin. When gay Christ-trusters care for one another sexually, on what grounds can you—or anyone claiming to be Christian—call that sin, aka un-faith? Your constant answer to that seems to be: The Bible says so. I'm asking you to show that "the gospel says so."

[3] I'm not going to enter the debate as to just what did Paul mean, though I understand the text and its context to be not easily unpacked. If Paul did mean what you take him to mean, namely, that homosexual intimacy is an absolute no-no for Christ-trusters, then I'll be so brash as to say: Here Paul is wrong. Here Paul is not applying his own law-promise hermeneutic—which he spells out in many places in his epistles—to this issue. Seems to me that Paul was wrong about women, wrong about slave-holding, and also here. My grounds for that are not that I am smarter than he is, but that I'm applying the Gospel's "new" hermeneutic, which he proclaims, to these issues.

[4] Unnatural. Clearly male and female biological machinery is designed to fit. But what do you do when God "wires" some

people differently? That is as much the work of the creator—and thus “natural” for those so wired, seems to me, as the natural “fit” of female/male anatomies. Exegetes I’ve recently read show that “unnatural” as Paul uses it, is not at all speaking about biological fittings, but about gluttonous behavior versus behavior in moderation. Thus a heterosexual marriage where one or both partners binge on sex is “unnatural” in Paul’s use of this technical Greek expression.

[5] “Proper response” to the Gospel is faith. Whatever proceeds from faith is righteous behavior—hetero or homo.

[6] Just what motivates anyone’s behavior, yours and mine too, is not easy to specify. Your and my heterosexual behavior is just as easily “motivated by sin and the power of the devil,” as that of any homosexuals. Since you and I have difficulty in getting clarity about our own motivations, how can we possibly get inside other folks and claim they are “motivated by sin and the power of the devil?”

[7] I too am unhappy “with the way the ELCA is dealing with this issue.” But Biblicism is not a “better way” either. Gospel-grounding is.

[8] Liberal legalism is just as bad as conservative legalism. Both undermine the Gospel. Both thrive on Bible-quoting. Our Lutheran hermeneutic says no-no to both. I’m pushing that alternative, at least, I think so, in what I’m saying to you here.

[9] “Proclaim the gospel clearly.” That means “clear” of legalisms to the left or to the right. If the ELCA is hooked on a liberal legalism, it too will pass away. So will denominations hooked on conservative legalisms. In fact, all institutions in “heaven and earth”—even very good ones—says Christ, will indeed “pass away.” So you and I need to keep

checking that the Gospel we are promoting is “clear” of this infection. It is “my Word,” says Christ, his law-free Gospel, and only that one, that has permanence.

Yours in the never-ending contest to keep it that way.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Hildegard of Bingen by Robin Morgan

This past semester I wrote a paper about Hildegard of Bingen for a seminar I participated in on Medieval Mystics. A mystic, by definition, is one who experiences union with God and writes/teaches other how to achieve this same experience. Though Hildegard cannot technically be classified as a mystic since she wrote to expound on the doctrines of the church, rather than to describe or teach of mystical union with God, nonetheless, her unique visions set her within the medieval mystical tradition.

Even if you don't really know anything about her, you've probably heard the name because she's become the darling of many groups in the 20th and 21st centuries. Gay and lesbian pride, herbal medicine, creation spirituality and feminism are all directions, which Hildegard has been carried in the endeavor to recapture the richness of her thought and work in our time.

What I found most useful in studying Hildegard was the way she

was able to fulfill her calling as a leader and reformer in the church while staying true to orthodox teaching and even keeping within the strictures of the prescribed roles for women at the time. It always amazes me how God manages to work around and through our institutions to get God's work done.

Hildegard was born in 1098 into a wealthy aristocratic German family at Bermersheim bei Alzey where she was the tenth child of her parents. As was common at the time, when she was eight years old her parents dedicated her to God and sent her to stay with a sixteen-year-old anchoress [according to the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, an anchoress is a person who withdraws from the world to live a solitary life of silence, prayer and mortification.], Jutta of Sponheim, who was to be Hildegard's mentor until she was nearly forty years old. For the first few years of their pilgrimage together, they lived an unvowed religious life in the house of Lady Uda, widow of Goellheim. After the widow died, they moved to the monastery of St. Disibod and on All Saints' Day, November 1, 1112, they were enclosed as recluses and took their monastic vows.

Though Hildegard did not offer any public exposition of her visions until she was commanded to by God in her early forties, she was having such visions from the time she was a very young child. In an 1175 letter to Guibert of Gembloux who was to become her secretary during the last two years of her life, she explains what these visions were like:

"From my infancy, when my bones and nerves and veins were as yet imperfect, I have always enjoyed the gift of this vision in my soul, up to the present time, when I am now more than seventy years old. Indeed my spirit, when God wills, ascends aloft to the heights of the firmament and to the changing aspects of different climes and spreads itself through diverse peoples though they are in far-off regions and places remote

*from me. And as I see things in this way I perceive them in the changing clouds and other creatures. And I do not hear them with my bodily ears, nor with the thoughts of my heart, nor do I perceive them through a combination of my five senses, but ever in my soul, with my external eyes open, so that I never suffer debilitating ecstasy. And I am continually constrained by illness and hedged about with heavy pains that threaten to be my undoing. But until now God has sustained me.” [Sabina Flanagan, trans., *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen*, Boston: Shambhala, 1996, 175.]*

Hildegard goes on to explain how she was able to write down what she saw and heard so that others could learn from her experiences:

“I retain the memory of whatever I see or learn in such vision for a long time, so that whatever I once see or hear I remember. And I see and hear and know at one and the same time; and in a flash that which I learn, I know. And what I do not see, I do not know, since I am not learned. And the things which I write, I see and hear in that vision, and I do not put down any other words than those I hear, and I offer whatever I hear in the vision in unpolished Latin, since I have not been taught to write in the vision as philosophers write. And the words which I see and hear in the vision are not like the words that sound from the mouth of man, but like a sparkling flame and a cloud moved by the pure air. I cannot in any way ascertain the form of the light, just as I cannot properly discern the sphere of the sun.” [Ibid, 176-177.]

The idea of “going public” with the knowledge she had gained from the visions God had given her, caused Hildegard to take to her sick bed and stay there for an extended period of time. Her own self perception as a weak vessel, “a poor little female,”

ran counter to what seemed to be the overwhelming task of speaking for God. Such illness was a recurring pattern in the lives of many medieval women who felt called to write or speak for God and yet who also believed in the inferiority of women, particularly within the hierarchy of the church.

Eventually it was only in the writing down of what she'd been called to speak that Hildegard was restored to health. Over the next almost forty years of her life as she wrote theology, fought heresy and called popes and kings to account, she clutched her untutored, female status to herself while driving home the word which God had given her to speak. As she revealed at the beginning of the *Scivias*, her first full scale work,

"I saw a great splendor in which resounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me, 'O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth! Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not by a human mouth, and not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God. Explain these things in such a way that the hearer, receiving the words of his instructor, may expound them in those words, according to that will, vision and instruction. Thus therefore, O human, speak these things that you see and hear. And write them not by yourself or any other human being, but by the will of Him Who knows, sees and disposes all things in the secrets of His mysteries.'" [Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop, trans., Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias, New York: Paulist Press, 1990, 59.]

While she was in the midst of dictating the *Scivias* to Volmar, her teacher, secretary, confessor and friend, Pope Eugene III

who was presiding at a synod at Trier, sent two legates to St. Disibod to get a copy of her work. He was so impressed with her writing, especially in light of Bernard of Clairvaux's recommendation of her, that Eugene read part of her book out loud to the prelates assembled at Trier and sent her a letter, encouraging her to continue writing. Such high praise from the pope was to set Hildegard on the road to fame and the ongoing development of connections with other important people all over Europe.

Another result of Eugene's praise was that so many postulants began flocking to St. Disibod that the monastery couldn't hold them all. Hildegard petitioned to be allowed to leave the monastery with the women under her care and found her own community, but the monks at St. Disibod were loath to lose their newfound source of prestige and funding. Hildegard had a vision of the property which she was to buy at Rupertsberg, which was opposite of Bingen. While the monks struggled with Hildegard about this move, she took "to her bed with a paralyzing sickness that she ascribed to her delay in fulfilling God will." [Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1987, 9.] When the abbot finally agreed, in light of this new medical development, to let her go, she was able to rise immediately from her bed and move her sisters to the new site.

Hildegard continued writing throughout her life. Besides the *Scivias*, she also wrote several major works including, *The Book of the Rewards of Life* and *The Book of Divine Works*. She wrote works on natural history and herbal medicine plus songs and plays. She corresponded with abbots and abbesses, laypeople, priests, monks, princes, popes and emperors. Though consistently plagued by poor health, her literary output was voluminous.

Hildegard reminds me that God walks into the middle of our lives and calls us to act on behalf of God's kingdom regardless of our

own self perception of acceptability or worthiness for the task set before us. God spoke to Hildegard in terms she could understand because of her context and yet pulled her beyond that world in which she lived to see a greater vision of God's kingdom.

Book Two of the Scivias opens with her vision of the Redeemer. The first image in the vision is of humanity born as clods of mud, touched by the fire and light of God. In the midst of that light was a delicate flower, which the human was to pluck, but he refused and walked away from the light into the darkness. However, dawn approached even in the midst of such darkness and within the light of dawn was a "serene Man" who was driven back by the darkness, but finally prevailed at the price of his blood. The person lying in darkness was brought back to life by the "strong blow" which the serene Man struck at the darkness.

God exhorted her to speak even though so many around her who had the education and the authoritative position refused to speak the truth given to them. "You are...touched by My light, which kindles in you an inner fire like a burning sun; cry out and relate and write these mysteries that you see and hear in mystical visions... .Therefore, O diffident mind, who are taught inwardly by mystical inspiration, though because of Eve's transgression you are trodden on by the masculine sex, speak of that fiery work this sure vision has shown you." [Hart and Bishop, 150]

None of us ever lives in a world that is perfectly set up, either externally or internally, for us to do our ministries without interference. But God consoles us in the face of fightings without and fears within, as Paul says, by bringing people like Hildegard into our lives. We can be encouraged to persevere knowing that we are part of a long line of people, those who have come before and those who will come after us, who

Speak as God calls them to speak. We are not alone.

If you're interested in reading more about Hildegard, here is a partial list of her works and works about her that you can use as a starting point:

- Baird, Joseph and Radd K. Ehrman, trans., *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol. 1, New York: Oxford Press, 1994.
- Flanagan, Sabina, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, London: Routledge, 1990.
- ., trans., *Secrets of God: Writings of Hildegard of Bingen*, Boston: Shambhala, 1996.
- Fox, Matthew, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen: Book of Divine Works with Letters and Songs*, Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1987.
- Hart, Mother Columba and Jane Bishop, trans., *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, New York: Paulist Press, 1990.
- Hozeski, Bruce W., trans., *Hildegard of Bingen: The Book of Rewards of Life*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1994.
- Maddocks, Fiona, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age*, New York: Doubleday, 2001.
- Mahoney, John L., ed., *Seeing into the Life of Thing: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, New York: Fordham Press, 1998.
- McGinn, Bernard, *The Growth of Mysticism*, New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994.
- Mooney, Catherine M. Mooney, ed., *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, Philadelphia: U of Penn Press, 1999.
- Newman, Barbara, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*, Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1987.
- ., ed., *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1998.
- Silvas, Anna, Jutta and Hildegard: *The Biographical Sources*, University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1999.

Mission and Tradition

I feel like I've spent the last few months in a personal war with "Lutheran Lifestyle". This fall I've been interim pastor at a congregation whose pastor of 22 years passed away suddenly last summer. They are a small group of mostly elderly folks who had been inching their way toward looking at their collective future until July when their future was thrust upon them with this drastic change.

Since last spring I had been working as a consultant with their council (at the invitation of their pastor) trying to help them look at a variety of future possibilities, so I was willing to accept the interim position temporarily to help them continue that process in a more accelerated fashion.

What I have seen played out through numerous discussions, both formal and informal, as well as in all the other details of being together in a parish setting, is a distinction I discovered in a little book by David Luecke called *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance*. In this book, Luecke distinguishes between village churches and camp churches. He says that Lutheran congregations are, for the most part, village churches, which are "the result of stability in community relationships. Being born into a given church is the natural first step in the pattern of growing up, living, and dying in one locality. The pattern assumes that one's parents were part of that community and in due time one's children will be, too. The church community was usually there before its current participants came along, and the church's task is to help them find their appropriate place in it."

Camp churches, which Luecke claims to be of a more evangelical stripe, are “the result of instability or impermanence in community relations. It happens among people on the move, who have little common history. A camp church has to start its community of faith over and over again.”

Finally, he simplifies the distinction between the two styles thus: “In a village church, belonging comes before consciously believing. That can happen through Baptism, when someone is born into an established community of faith. In a camp church, consciously believing comes before belonging. That is important when the community of faith has to establish itself each time anew.”

Now instead of veering off into an argument about infant baptism versus believer’s baptism, I’d like to explore this village/camp distinction and look at how village church Lutherans might be involved in mission to the world instead of merely protecting our lifestyle turf.

If I were to quote from the Augsburg Confession, article seven about the church [“For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places.”] I know that the folks I’ve been working with would say, “Yes, absolutely, we believe that. We also believe that our traditions, our ceremonies are right for us. We’re not asking anyone else to do what we do, but, by the same token, nobody can tell us to do something else.”

True enough. But is a congregation in mission to the world when its primary concern is to preserve the traditions that have been

passed down? While Word and Sacrament are embedded in the middle of the traditions, and the congregation is church, their ceremonies, which surround the essence of what is church, nonetheless seem to choke off the joy of the Lord, which is our strength.

I bring all of this to your attention, not to criticize the people I've been working with and have come to love. I bring these things to your attention because I see these people suffering for their commitment to traditions that are choking the life out of their congregation and I wonder why they keep pursuing this painful course. What is it about village church life that they're willing to, literally, die for as a congregation?

I'm going to make a guess here, not having grown up as a village church person myself, and I'm sure if I'm way off base plenty of you will let me know about it soon enough. I believe that village church life offered a kind of integration of life into a cohesive whole based in the congregational community that gave people a sense of security and wholeness that no options they see around today come close to. Luecke says that "each [congregation] was a rather self-sufficient center for the social and economic life of families that lived in that same area for generations." If such a way of life worked for you, how safe you must have felt! And it is easy to understand that in these times of upheaval and uncertainty you would hang on to even the remnants of such a community with the last ounce of strength in your body instead of letting go of that last little bit of security in the face of so much chaos.

The only time I experienced anything like this was during a two-week trip to Israel/Palestine a couple of years ago. Our tour group consisted of cradle Christians, mostly Lutheran. We prayed together in the morning and the evening, we communed together

and we read the Bible when we went to particular landmarks. There was some danger involved with some of the places we visited, but somehow, being together and knowing that we had prayed for safe passage, the whole experience was awe inspiring rather than terrifying.

I noticed something about myself as our time together progressed. My personal prayer life seemed to drift away. I felt so well cared for inside that web of Christian community that I didn't feel the need to pray by myself. When I was alone in my room I listened to music, read my novel or wrote letters home. I didn't need anything else because it was all provided in the way we were living.

I can see how that unintended consequence of living together in Christian community, dependence on the community faith life at the expense of your own, could leave you unprepared for a time when that particular form of community was being eroded. If your faith life is Rally Day, the church picnic, Christmas tree decorating, singing particular hymns with a pipe organ accompaniment, how can you let any of it go if your faith is important to you? You can't.

Yet our foremothers and forefathers risked excommunication and death standing for the right to trust Christ alone as our savior and the justification God offers us through faith in Jesus. Their lives changed drastically, and not all for the good, to live in the joy of this freedom.

As one who never had the option of being a "DNA Lutheran" even when I desperately wanted to be one, I know that it is possible to live an integrated Lutheran life via the Gospel. It's not particularly easy, but as I live day by day, I find that the Good News of our Lord gives me a center and an anchor that frees me to move among the myriad of cultures of which our world is

composed. I don't have to be afraid that somehow my faith in Christ will be diminished by contact with traditions "not like ours." No, I don't feel comfortable a lot of the time, but the peace our Lord gives us isn't the absence of any friction in our lives, it's the right to walk up to the throne of God and say, "Mommy/Daddy, I need to talk to you."

And I find that when I keep my focus on what we're called to do (making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free), I don't worry much about which setting in the Lutheran Book of Worship we use. Is the way we worship important? Absolutely. Is the way we conduct ourselves in community important? Beyond a shadow of a doubt. But it's also important to realize that our traditions need to serve our mission, rather than the other way around.

Robin J. Morgan