

Another Look at the “ELCA Study on Sexuality: Part Two”

Colleagues,

Response to ThTh 275 (=my own examination of the recent ELCA study of sexuality a fortnight ago) was modest in number. The opinions expressed varied from one ELCA pastor slapping my wrists for breaking the 8th commandment in my critique of the Task Force’s work, to another’s: “Hooray!!! Yes, yes, yes!!!” Another sought to give the Task Force more credit than I did and then cheered my heart by concluding: “I want to thank you for being a reasonable voice in this discussion.” From another: “Thanks for this ThTh – very helpful.” And from a retired ELCA seminary prof this restrained kudo: “Great Thursday Theology today. Made my morning, at least.” Most extensive response is the one I’m passing on to you in its entirety today. Not only extensive, but intensive is Timothy Hoyer’s probing–deeper than I did two weeks ago–to what he finds the Task Force doing, namely, “veiling God’s law.” He borrows this expression, of course, from St. Paul (2 Cor. 3) and rings the changes on it as Paul does with the Corinthians. The veiling goes with a specific way of reading the Bible–in that day “reading the old covenant.” Paul’s angle is that despite their love affair with the law, Bible-legalists are compelled to “veil” the law. Why? For self-preservation. Lest in facing the law’s full force they would have to confront their “Terminator” (as folks in California might say these days). Needed, of course, is You Know Who to terminate the Terminator. “Only in Christ is the veil set aside.” From which follows this result: “Wherever the Spirit of [this] Lord is, there is freedom.”

Timothy says it better than I do. So read on. You may remember him from previous ThTh postings. He’s an ELCA pastor in upstate New York. His e-address is <gloriadei@alltel.net> Timothy is not

timid. But he is on target.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE TASK FORCE ON SEXUALITY VEILS THE LAW; CHRIST UNVEILS IT BY HIS DEATH AND RISING

The crucifixion of Jesus teaches us what the law does—it puts us under God’s condemnation of death. Or, as St. Paul says, “The law brings (God’s) wrath.” The law is understood as such only because of the resurrection of Christ Jesus. The resurrection removes the veil from the law so that its full power is seen. The veil can finally be removed because the resurrection of Christ overcomes God’s judgment of death. With that remedy we can face the law’s lethal force. The Apology of The Augsburg Confession puts it this way, “However, the law always accuses us; it always shows that God is angry. Therefore God is not loved until after we grasp God’s mercy by faith. Not until then does God become someone who can be loved” (Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, 141.129).

When the law remains veiled, the law is defined with its lethal force hidden, as is done by the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Part Two, “Journey Together Faithfully.” “God uses the law to reveal our sin, our estrangement from God and each other. The law also provides norms that govern life in this sinful world” (p. 8). “God’s laws are grace filled, manifesting a basic concern for the life, health, and good order of the community” (p.15). “The concerns that generated the law in the first place” have to do “with the life and health of our

communities and not individual rights" (p. 15). "We see the law not simply as judgment but as revealing God's loving will for all creation and for our own lives as God's children" (p. 23). "The law is good and points to God's will for humankind" (p. 24). In the Glossary, law is defined as: "God's goodness experienced as demand upon us, showing us our need for grace; rules that guide our living together harmoniously" (p.49).

The Task Force's understanding of the law is veiled. The crucifixion of Christ is not seen as God's wrath against us that Christ took onto himself for our sake. When the law is veiled it is limited in its power because it does not put us under God's judgment of death. When the law is limited, then the gospel has less to save us from, which obscures the glory and honor of Christ. A limited, veiled law makes Christ less necessary.

When the law is veiled, the law is used to say certain acts are according to God's will and certain acts are against God's will. That implies that Christians are to follow the law so that their lives are "pleasing to God" (p. 14). "Things that are morally wrong and sinful are a violation of the command to love God and the neighbor" (p. 25). From this veiled use of the law come the squabbles and bickering about what is or is not God's will. "Homosexual marriage is wrong. No, it's not. Divorce is wrong. No, it's not. Blessing same gender marriages is against the Bible. No, it's not." Such concern about discerning God's will in order to be in compliance with God's law shows a complete disregard for Christ's death, resurrection, and his new commandment to love one another with his love that makes people right with God. The veiled use of the law makes people think that if they do what is right then they are right with God, that they please God, and that they do God's will. That is simply to trust the law, which is idolatry at worst, works-righteousness at second worst.

The veiled use of the law makes us think that some things we do please God and some things don't. The Task Force almost, almost overcomes this veiled thinking when it writes, "Luther said that sin is unfaith" (p. 25). Luther understood that the law does not say some things are right and others are wrong to God. Rather, the law damns us by showing us that all we do is wrong to God. "All that is done without faith is sin" (Romans 14.23). "Scripture consigned all things to sin" (Galatians 3.22). "The law gives knowledge of sin" (Romans 3.20) by saying that everything we do must be done in faith or it is done in rebellion against God. The law then shows us that we do not have faith, we do not love and trust and fear God above anything else (the meaning of the First Commandment in Luther's Small Catechism). Without faith we are against God. And, as is unknown to the Task Force, God is against us. "This same innate disease and original sin is truly sin and condemns to God's eternal wrath all who are not in turn born anew through baptism and the Holy Spirit" (Augsburg Confession, Article 2).

When all we do is sin because we do not have faith, there is no hope in quacking about what is right or wrong to God. Everything is wrong. And we cannot become right to God by doing things according to God's law, for they are still wrong. We cannot overcome God's judgment of death by having Christ help us keep the law. Christ and the law are opposed to each other. The law brings wrath, Christ brings mercy. The law states all who sin shall die. Christ promises all who believe in him will never die. To say that faith in Christ enables us to keep the law is the same as saying that Christ wants us to damn others to hell. This we do when we say that certain actions are wrong because they are against God's law. Those who have a veiled use of the law think that if the person would only not do that specific sinful action, they are then okay with God, which makes Christ totally unnecessary.

A veiled use of the law is to use the Bible in ways described by the Task Force as “consistent faithfulness to the Bible” (p. 20). “We humbly seek to understand God’s will for our lives as it is expressed in the Bible” (p. 8). Although the Task Force writes, “That experience of justification by grace through faith guides Lutherans’ attempts to understand God’s Word” (p.8), their veiled use of the law makes the Bible, not a witness to Christ and faith in him as our righteousness, but a rulebook to understand.

When the law is veiled it cannot tell us which actions are sinful. If a person kisses their spouse, is it a sin? A veiled use of the law would say it is not a sin because there is no specific objection to it in the Bible. So a person, by the veiled use of the law, does not need Christ. They have not sinned, God is not against them, and Christ’s crucifixion was a useless act. That veiled use of the law does not look at our hearts and whether we have faith or not. But the unveiled use of the law would say that without faith in Christ kissing one’s spouse is a sin. Thus, God is against us, Christ is needed, and his death and rising are what make God merciful to us.

In the same way, the veiled law cannot tell us what God’s will is for us or what is right. If parents are to be honored (The Fourth Commandment) and a child is obedient, has that child done God’s will? A veiled use of the law would say that the child has done God’s will. An unveiled use of the law would say that if the child does not have faith in Christ then the child has not done God’s will. So a veiled use of the law cannot define what is good because it does not get to the heart of the matter, namely, faith.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4, states that if our works are acceptable to God because they are in accordance with the law, then the promise of Christ is

destroyed. "When works are commended, we must add that faith is required—that they are commended on account of faith. For one has to distinguish the promises from the law in order to recognize the benefits of Christ" (Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, 149.184). "For good works in the saints, as we have said, belong to the righteousness of the law. They are accepted on account of faith, not because they satisfy the law" (Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, 159.252). Thus, to look to the law or to the Bible as a rulebook to figure out what is God's will is to not trust Christ that he is God's will for us.

Lastly, the veiled use of the law, with its confusion about what is right or not, cannot give peace to the conscience. When Biblical scholars differ about meanings of words, when theologians differ about interpretation of verses, when some say an act is sinful and others do not, how is anyone to be sure that what they do is pleasing to God? Not by following the law in its veiled use, and definitely not by looking to the unveiled use of the law that brings God's judgment of death. Thus, a veiled use of the law will keep consciences worried about whether they are doing the right thing and whether or not they are pleasing God and get eternal life. The Reformers determinedly dismissed a veiled use of the law to say what was right to God and what was sinful. "Only that which brings peace to consciences justifies before God" (Book of Concord, Kolb/Wengert, 146.179). "However, we have shown with sufficient clarity that good works do not satisfy the law of God; that they require mercy; that God has accepted us on account of Christ by faith; that good works do not bring peace to the conscience" (ibid, 170.358). "In all of these passages, in which works are praised, it is necessary to return to the rule given above, namely, that works are not pleasing to God without Christ because Christ as the mediator must not be excluded" (ibid, 171.358).

A veiled use of the law excludes Christ. So we are not to use the veiled law.

Faith in Christ is what makes our actions pleasing to God. So let us live in Christ's Spirit and give his love and mercy to others. The giving of Christ's love and mercy is the guide that will keep us helping our neighbors, keeping them safe and healthy, and surpassing the law's demands. Rules will still be used to order society so that people are cared for as much as humanely possible, thus, protecting them that they may be given Christ's mercy. And when we are in Christ's mercy, we live, not by the law, but by his mercy and love.

Timothy Hoyer

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