

Augsburg Confessional Theology and the ELCA Sexuality Debate.

Colleagues,

Today is the 479th anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession in the town of that name to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. That document from 1530 is the magna charta of the Reformation and thereby the yardstick for later groups who call themselves Lutheran. In these postings you've often heard references to the "Augsburg Aha!" Which being summarized is:

1. there is really only one "doctrina" in the Christian faith, namely, the Gospel itself.
2. that Gospel is fundamentally God's promise in Christ crucified and risen to be merciful to sinners from here to eternity.
3. Promises don't "work" unless they are trusted. Therefore "trust alone" [=faith alone] is what brings sinners in and under that promissory mercy.
4. All subsequent "doctrines" in Christian teaching are "articulations" of that promissory core as it impacts the other "articles" of Christian faith and life. E.g., after the Augsburg Aha! you see that the doctrine of the Trinity is a way to talk about God and have it come out as Gospel.
5. From that promissory core comes Augsburg's distinctive hermeneutic: (A) reading the Bible through lenses that distinguish God's word of law from God's word of promise, and (B) reading the world through lenses that distinguish the work of God's legal left hand from the work of God's promising right hand.

When laid alongside this Augsburg Aha! the ELCA sexuality

document—coming up for deliberation and decision at the general assembly later this summer—shows that it has other foundations. Not that it denies what's specified above, but that even when articulated in a ten-page opening chapter, it is never used for what then follows.

It starts with “A Distinctly Lutheran Approach,” most all of which is Augsburg-authentic. But then after having confessed “the Lutheran tradition,” it wanders into a far country and never “uses” that “distinctly” Lutheran approach. I imagine that the folks who created the document do think that they are innocent of this charge, and seek to demonstrate that with their final paragraph on “The Necessity of Mercy, Always.” That does sound Augustinian, true.

But after that opening salute to a Lutheran Approach, the document does its analysis and builds its conclusions using other lenses, an other hermeneutic, namely, the hermeneutics of contemporary sociological and psychological research. It jumps out at you from the very outline of the document.

After that 10-page opening chapter on A Distinctly Lutheran Approach, sociology and psychology take over. Look at the chapter headings:

- Sexuality and Social Trust
- Sexuality and Social Structures that Enhance Social Trust
- Sexuality and Trust in Relationships
- Sexuality and Social Responsibility
- Conclusion: Human Sexuality and Moral Discernment. The Necessity of Mercy, Always.

These data that then fill out the document are never run through the sieve of all that Lutheran stuff we heard about when we started reading the document, specifically not the Lutheran hermeneutic for “reading the world (of sexuality) through the

lenses that distinguish the work of God's legal left hand from the work of God's promising right hand."

So much for the official document right now. I want to focus this ThTh on another document that has followed this official one. Actually there are two of them—each one signed by a large number of big-name theologians and church leaders in the ELCA. One urges the delegates to vote Yes when the document comes up for approval; the other one urges a No vote. If the house is divided among the alleged experts, whom shall the delegates believe?

Sadly, in my judgment, not only the official document, but neither the yea-sayers nor the nay-sayers are using Augsburg's proposed hermeneutic for reading both the Word and the World as they do their urgings.

Most obvious, so it seems to me, is the voice of the Nay-sayers published just one month ago: "An Open Letter to the Voting Members of the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly."

Here's what it says:

"The proposals are in fact no compromise. The teaching of the church will be changed."The proposals to be considered by the Churchwide Assembly this summer from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality are perceived by some as compromises that will permit the ELCA to live faithfully with internal diversity on controversial ethical questions. The proposals are in fact no compromise. They clearly imply that same-sex blessings and the ordination and rostering of homosexual persons in committed relationships are acceptable within the ELCA. The teaching of the church will be changed. We should not make such an important decision without clear biblical and theological support. The Task Force did not provide such support, nor has it been provided in statements from some of our colleagues in

ELCA institutions.”

[Comment: If –ala Augsburg–there is only one “doctrina” (=teaching), the doctrine of the Gospel, then the nay-sayers need to link this ELCA proposal to that gospel and demonstrate how it undermines (or replaces) Christ’s promise as the core offering for sinners to trust. The ELCA document does propose a change in “what we’ve always said,” but if that change does not change the one and only teaching, then it is a “ho-hum” change, a change in practice, which the Augsburg Confessors not only allow, but were actually doing in the church-life of their day. Unless it’s “contrary to the Gospel,” they said, any new practice was OK.]

“Indifference to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church

“1. If the assembly adopts the proposed rules of procedure, a simple majority of one Churchwide Assembly will alter the moral teaching on sexuality we have shared with the vast majority of the church past and present. We are concerned that such a procedure shows an indifference to the common mind of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church throughout the ages and across cultures. At the least, a two-thirds majority should be required, if indeed the assembly should be voting on these matters at all.”

[“Moral teaching” and the “doctrine of the Gospel” are not synonyms. In the church’s history “shared moral teaching with the vast majority of the church past and present” has NOT been Gospel-grounded. Even worse, some of it has not even been grounded in God’s own law of equity justice. “Shared moral teaching past and present” in church history has supported chattel slavery, women’s subjugation, apartheid, and homosexual condemnation. “Shared moral teaching” is always up for review. And the first rubrics for measurement of moral teaching and

practice according to Augsburg is God's two-edged law of preservation and law of equity justice. Augsburg is even feisty enough to suggest that church people—yes, Gospel-trusters—have no greater insight into such moral matters as do those outside the faith. In fact, God has appointed vast numbers of such outsiders to be guardians of his law of preservation and equity justice. Even more shocking, perhaps, is that Augsburg designates sexuality as a “secular matter,” not the church's agenda at all. God's secular magistrates are God's authorized agents for managing the matter, for administering God's preservation and equity-justice agenda in that realm of godly secularity.

On “indifference to the common mind of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church throughout the ages and across cultures,” the nay-sayers are not telling us the full story. Marriage and sexual matters have not been characterized by a “common mind” throughout the ages and across cultures.” Augsburg Lutheranism—because it locates these matters in God's secular regime—acknowledges and anticipates diversity and difference in the way different cultures with different histories formulate and then carry out God's preserving and equity-recompensing operations. If polygamy can be (as it is in many an OT story) “godly” practice in the secular realm, then homo-/hetero-practice might conceivably have “godly” variety too.]

“The church is founded on the whole Word of God, both law and gospel

“2. The proposals claim that the ELCA can live with profound differences on sexual questions because our unity is centered exclusively on the gospel and the sacraments. This claim separates law and gospel in a way contrary to both Scripture and the Confessions. The church is founded on the whole Word of God, both law and gospel. The Task Force texts seem to permit

variation on all ethical questions, no matter how fundamental. How Christians behave sexually is not a matter of indifference to our life in Christ."

[Here's where the nay-sayers depart most obviously from Augsburg's Aha!—even from Augsburg's verbatim text. The ELCA proposal is actually quoting the Augsburg Confession when it claims that our ELCA unity is centered exclusively on the Gospel proclaimed and the sacraments administered according to that gospel. To tell us that that affirmation "separates law and gospel in a way contrary to the Scripture and the Confessions" is simply not true. The AC comes to that conclusion about the church's unity as an explicit articulation of the Gospel-core, God's free promise in Christ to forgive sinners and render them righteous as they trust that promise.

To claim that this "separates law and gospel" is to talk about law and gospel in a way that is alien to Augsburg—possibly even worse, a contradiction of what Augsburg means with law and gospel. When the next sentence then tells us: "The church is founded on the whole Word of God, both law and gospel," we get a clearer picture of the nay-sayers' intent. Their argument is biblicist. "If it's in the Bible, you've got to believe it and practice it." And their talk about God's law and God's Gospel is not what the Augsburg means when it proposes Law/Gospel as the hermeneutical lenses proposed by the AC for reading the whole Bible. Instead the nay-sayers turn law/gospel into the two major teachings in the Bible. Gospel = Good News for sinners, and Law = rules and regulations for living—also after you become Christ-trusters. And, of course, the "law of God" they are talking about is those texts on homosexuality in both the OT and NT—all of which allegedly say NO on this topic.

Au contraire Augsburg. The church is NOT founded on the Bible and its two major teachings about how sinners are saved and how

the saved should behave. The church is founded on the Gospel, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. Claiming the Bible as the cornerstone is the proposal of many a so-called "conservative evangelical" these days. It is however an "other" confession to the one offered at Augsburg. At root it is an "other" Gospel. How could all these signatories not see that? That I cannot comprehend.

The last two lines: "The Task Force texts seem to permit variation on all ethical questions, no matter how fundamental. How Christians behave sexually is not a matter of indifference to our life in Christ." call for authentic law/promise sifting. THE fundamental ethical issue, the one that creates the Christian ethos, is faith in Christ. This (ueber)fundamental question always HAS TO BE considered when supposed "fundamental" ethical questions arise. For that is THE fundamental ethical question, as Jeff Anderson so brilliantly articulated in last week's ThTh posting. That is the item that is not "a matter of indifference":to our life in Christ, namely, faith in Christ. Already in the first generation of the church's life-in-Christ there were two HUGE behavioral issues that were finally rendered "indifferent" when measured by the Gospel-core-circumcision for male Christians and meat offered to idols. "Makes no difference" was what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," they said.]

"It would damage our ecumenical relationships

"3. If the ELCA were to approve the public recognition of same-sex unions or the rostering of persons in such relationships, it would damage our ecumenical relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and Evangelical churches, all of which affirm the clear teaching of Scripture that homosexual activity departs from God's design for marriage and sexuality. Furthermore, it would put the ELCA at odds with many

of our sister Lutheran churches, especially in Asia and Africa. The United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (USA) have also recently upheld scriptural teaching on this matter. These bodies have officially recognized that the biblical prohibitions against homosexual activity remain applicable today to consensual sexual relationships between persons of the same sex."

[Ecumenical relationships that "require" more than Augsburg proposes—"consensus in the preaching of the Gospel and administering the sacraments in accord with that gospel"—are requirements that go beyond the true unity of the church. To then affirm "the clear teaching of the Scriptures"—an actually "good " Lutheran phrase—as applicable to the "biblical prohibitions against homosexual activity" deparrts from what that "clear" phrase has always meant to Augsburg Lutherans, namely, "clear teaching of the Gospel." Even if two of our ELCA ecumenical partners have affirmed the "nay" position, there are other ecumenical partners who have said the opposite. And for the "big" churches—Roman, Orthodox, Evangelical—has anyone checked if their "nay" is basically biblicistic (which falls under Augsburg-condemnation), or is it genuinely law/Gospel-grounded?]

"Our unity will be fractured"

"4. With regard to calling rostered leaders, the statement proposes "structured flexibility," which we believe will lead inevitably to "local option." If adopted, this proposal will mean that the relationship among bishops, candidacy committees, and congregations will become confused and conflicted. Practically speaking, there will be two lists of candidates for rostered leadership in the church. The result will be that not all pastors and congregations will be in full fellowship with each other, nor with many of the pastors and congregations of

those denominations with whom we are in full communion. Further, laity seeking a congregation to join would need to ask about which option a congregation has chosen in calling its leaders. Our unity in the office of ministry will be fractured.”

[“Local option” is approved and Gospel-grounded according to the Augsburg Confession: “Uniformity in church customs and practices is not necessary for preserving the unity of the church.” So whose side are these signatories on when they reject it? “Unity” in the office of ministry is normed for Lutherans by Augsburg Article 5. Some ELCA habits may have to change if the ELCA adopts the proposal, but “fracturing” the office of ministry by validating gay clergy? Come now.]

“Conscience can err”

“5. The social statement calls for opponents in the current controversy to respect each other’s “bound conscience,” referring to Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms. Luther, however, was not merely claiming that he was sincere about the convictions he held; he asserted rather that his conscience was bound to the Word of God. Conscience can err. The Word of God, not conscience, is the final court of appeal in the church.”

[The “Word of God” Luther was talking about at Worms was God’s “Good News” word, the Gospel, not the Bible. When he talked about the Bible he most often spoke of “die Schrift,” the scriptures. Word of God regularly meant Gospel in his vocabulary.

Consciences can indeed err. Including the consciences of the signatories of this petition. Including my own. But what I propose here is not conscience-convictions. Instead it’s a claim that if the nay-sayers’ document, AND the official one to which they are responding, were normed by the Confession

presented this day almost 500 years ago, they would be different. Said more bluntly, they would be Lutheran. Which in itself is no big deal. Lutheran, schmutheran! But were they congruent with Augsburg, then they too could claim, as the Augsburgers did at the very end of the confession, to be genuinely catholic and genuinely evangelical.]

“We are deeply sensitive to the need of the church to provide pastoral care for all people. We are aware that there are some in the church who will disagree with this letter. Nevertheless, we feel we are called to support and advocate the biblical teaching on human sexuality and urge you to defeat all the proposals from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality that the Church Council has forwarded to you. We pledge to you our prayers and we invite you to work with us for the renewal of our church under the Word of God.”

[There is no uniform “biblical teaching on human sexuality.” It undergoes variety already throughout the Bible. Lutheran theology expects that, since the whole matter is under the jurisdiction of God’s secular agents. And in the secular realm of God’s old creation there is wide variety in practices and procedure.

There are 59 signatures on the copy of this “Vote No” document that I have. Half of them I know. Some of them are good friends. I cannot understand how they could put their names to this statement of dissent and encourage a denomination of the Augsburg Confession to follow their counsel.]

Some years ago I was asked by one of the ELCA synods to speak to this hot potato subject with consciously Augsburg accents. That attempt is archived on the Crossings website. Its title is “Reformation Resources: Law/Gospel Hermeneutics and The Godly Secularity of Sex.” The URL

is <https://crossings.org/archive/ed/ReformationResources.pdf>

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder