

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 INDIANACan 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.