

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*