

Homosexuality and Reformation Theology

Colleagues,

An exec from the ELCA Division for Church in Society called earlier this month asking me, his prof in the 70s at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), for some Reformation theology on homosexuality, additional to what I had proposed in ThTh 34 [Jan. 28, 1999]. Here's what I sent him.

Peace & Joy!

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Some Reformation Perspectives for ELCA's Discussion on Gay and Straight.

A. Sex is "Secular"—but that doesn't mean "God-less."

1. When the Lutheran Reformers said "No" to marriage as one of the Christian sacraments, they were giving sex and marriage "back to the world" where God had put it in the first place. That's what they claimed to be doing. They claimed that it was the Gospel itself, the Good News about Christ, that compelled them to do this. What God was doing "in Christ" was something else than what God was doing in creation generally. Sex and marriage belonged in the "creation generally" category.
2. It's not only sex and marriage that belong to God's "creation generally." Also there "out in the world" is all the other stuff of daily human life: child-birthing and child-rearing, families, eating and drinking (digestion too!), politics, economics,

housing, education, health care, daily work, and so forth. All of that is great and godly stuff, but it's not Gospel, say the Lutheran confessors.

3. In their day that was called "secularizing" marriage along with these other slices of life. Nowadays in our language "secular" is almost a synonym for godless, but not so in Reformation times. The "secular" world is God's world, God's "first creation." It's distinct & different from God's "new" creation in Christ. But in no way is it godless. God is very much present and active here in the "first" creation, personally "walking in the garden" as Genesis 3 puts it.
4. To discuss things "secularly," the Reformers insisted, means doing theology on these topics in a particular way. Straight Bible-quotes won't do. What we need is not commands from God about how to behave, but pictures/images/insight on what God's up to in the old creation. That's not just the creation as portrayed in Genesis, but what God's up to in the creation we live in. What is God up to with us who are his creatures right now?
5. From reading the Bible in this "secular" fashion, the Reformers saw God carrying out a "law of preservation" and a "law of recompense." Preservation was God's organizing things so that life—human and all other things living—doesn't die out, but keeps on going. Recompense was God's organizing things so that rightful actions (the preservation agenda) got rewarded and wrongful actions (destruction) got their come-uppance to make them stop. God structures things so that creation gets cared for. Caring for creation does not yet redeem it. But in view of sin's impact if creation

isn't cared for, there won't be anything left to redeem.

6. Another thing they learned is that "creation generally" changes as time goes by. Sex and marriage practices, for example, undergo change as history moves on. God's own hand is in the mix of this movement. In Biblical times there's concubinage, polygamy, monogamy, and we find no criticism that only one was right and the others wrong. Rather, said the Reformers, God carried out preservation and recompense in all three formats. All of them "worked" to carry out God's agenda in the first creation.
7. The same, they saw, was true with governmental systems, economic systems, family and clan systems, all the systems of the "natural" world. If one or the other model was criticized as "not good," it was because the people involved—or maybe the system itself—didn't carry out God's double agenda, both preservation and recompense.
8. From this vantage point they had quite a bit to say about marriage, especially in the face of monasticism that was hyped as superior to marriage. They said very little about sex, and practically zero about homosexuality. The last item was not a hot topic, although the Reformers comment occasionally on homosexual activity in monastic life. The subject was basically "underground." But times change. God's own hand is in these changes too. God has put homosexuality on the "secular" screen that we face today. So how might we take the Reformers' angle about things "secular" and carry forward their good work?

B. It's the Creator's Ordainings, not the "Orders of

Creation.”

9. One component of the secular perspective that has come down to us through our Lutheran history is the expression “orders of creation.” That term is actually not found in 16th century Reformers, although terms almost like that are present. But they come with a particular “twist.” In our language “orders of creation” sound like patterns that God put in place right from the beginning. That would then make them permanent, sanctioned by God, and we’d better not mess with them.
10. But here’s the Reformers’ twist: Better to translate that expression into English as “the creator’s ordainings” rather than orders of creation. “The creator’s ordainings” puts the focus first of all on God the creator and not the creation. Secondly, it accents God’s continuing creating activity. God’s “ordainings” are not the permanent patterns put in place once-for-all, but are what God is continuing to do. And as we noted above in the secular section, as time changes, as history unfolds, God “ordains” changes in the patterns and structures of human life and society. At whatever point in time, whatever place on the planet, in whatever web of relationships that God “ordains” for us to live, these ordainings are the “givens” of our personal biography. They are the “specs” God places on each of us, first setting our lives in motion and then continuing to sustain us.
11. This case-specific focus on each of us as distinct persons created (ordained into life) by God, Lutherans know from Luther’s Small Catechism. What we believe about creation, says Luther, is not the story of Genesis, but the story of ourselves: “I

believe that God has created me, linked together with [his German word is "samt"] all creatures; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil." In this specific way, with all these personal attributes (God-ordained for me) I am called "to thank, praise, serve and obey God. This is most certainly true."

12. Luther doesn't mention sexuality in that gift-list, but today God puts it on the lists we have. If "hetero-" is one of the creator's ordainings, then wouldn't "homo-" also be on the gift-list for those so ordained? Isn't it also "most certainly true" for both that they "thank, praise, serve and obey God" as the sexual persons they have been ordained to be? Both homosexuals and heterosexuals have a common calling to care for creation, carrying out the double agenda in God's secular world—the law of preservation and the law of recompense. If the gifts are different, the pattern of care will be different. What examples are already available within the ELCA of Christians—gay and straight—doing just that—preservation and recompense—with the sexual gift that God has ordained? Despite the current conflict, is it true about sexuality too that "what God ordains is always good?"

C. A "Sinner/Saint" T-shirt for Everybody in the Discussion.

13. You can't avoid talking about sin in this discussion. But we'll be helped a lot if we get the Reformers' slant on this topic too. The debate about

sin in the Reformation era was the flip-side of the debate about justification and faith in Christ. If you don't have sin properly focused, the Reformers discovered, the Good News about justification goes out of focus too. The "other side" in the Reformation conflict said: sin is doing bad stuff, things that God forbids. The Reformers said: doing bad stuff is a symptom of sin, but sin is something else. It's what's going on inside people, what the Bible calls the heart. The second article of the Augsburg Confession says it crisply, "not fearing God, not trusting God, and (in place of these two absent items) with a heart centered on your own self." In Luther's words sinners are people "curved back into themselves."

14. One of the Reformers' favored Bible texts for sin was Paul's succinct sentence: "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." Sinful is any thought, word, deed, that doesn't proceed from faith. And the radical opposite is also true: Un-sinful, yes "righteous," is any thought, word, or deed that does proceed from faith in Christ. Any discussion of homosexual behavior—or heterosexual behavior—as to whether or not it is sin, must pass this check-point, if it is to proceed in terms of Reformation theology. Heterosexual behavior is not automatically sin-less, nor is the homosexual kind automatically sin-full. Can either be done, is either of them done, "in faith?" That is the question. If heteros can live out their sexuality "in faith," is it not an option for homosexuals too? It doesn't take much effort to establish that the opposite is true for both gays and straights, namely, that the gift of my sexuality can be lived "without fear of God, without

trust in God, and with a heart curved back into itself.” If gifts from God can be received and used “in faith,” then this one must come under that rubric too.

15. Lutherans have an expression (its roots all the way back to the Reformation) that Christian people are “simultaneously righteous and yet still sinners.” Of course, that’s not just true of Lutherans. It’s standard Christian experience. New life in Christ has come to us through the Spirit in Word and sacrament. We’ve stepped into God’s new creation in Christ. Yet the Old Adam, the Old Eve, still spooks us. Faith and un-faith are both present within us—sometimes barely seconds apart in our lives. The words of the frenzied father [Mark 9:24] are the confession of all Christians this side of the grave: “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.” That sober confession—“sinner and saint simultaneously”—should be printed on the T-shirts of all of us involved in this discussion.

D. In setting up rules and regulations within the church, where does the Gospel come in?

16. Instructive for this might be AC/Apol 28 in our Lutheran Confessions. The topic in Article 28 is the authority of bishops and the status of rules and regulations within the church. Homosexuality, of course, is not under discussion in AC 28. But we can be helped by what the Reformers say there.
17. How to go about making rules for church life? “Bishops must not create traditions contrary to the Gospel.... They must not ensnare consciences as though they were commanding necessary acts of worship.” “They have no right to create traditions apart from the Gospel as though they merited forgiveness of

sins or were acts of worship that pleased God as righteousness." The drumbeat is for "being a bishop according to the Gospel." No ELCA bishop would disagree with that, I'm sure.

18. But then how to go about being a bishop "according to the Gospel?" And—for our topic here—how can ELCA membership (in our democratically structured church governance) join the bishops in doing so? Two caveats are constant in Article 28: one about Christ, one about a Christian's conscience. The Christ-caveat is: Don't set up any rules that dishonor the glory of Christ's merits and benefits. The conscience-caveat is: Don't burden consciences in their exercise of Christian freedom. The two caveats are really just two sides of the same coin. Rules and regulations that "burden... ensnare... harm consciences . . . crept into the church when the righteousness of faith was not taught with sufficient clarity."

E. But surely the rules laid down by the apostles in the NT are permanent, aren't they? Not really, says Article 28. "Even the apostles ordained (sic!) many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed" [Apology 28.16] Here's an example: "The apostles commanded that one should abstain from blood, etc. . . . Those who do not observe [this] commit no sin, for the apostles did not wish to burden consciences with such bondage but forbade such eating for a time to avoid offense. In connection with the [blood] decree one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is." [AC 28.65]

19. The Christian church has no tradition of favorable rulings for those who are simultaneously Christian and homosexual. It seems that in the NT era no

Christian could even imagine that those two words could be put together. It was just "clear" that those who worship idols also consent to homosexual practice. Since Christians don't worship idols, they also don't behave sexually as idolators do. The two just go together. That's surely Paul's point of view in Romans 1, I think. I imagine it would have "blown his mind," as we say, if Tertius, Paul's secretary writing the words of this letter for him (16:22), had turned to him as he laid down his pen and said: "You know, Paul, I'm gay. Gay, a Christ-confessor as you are, and not celibate."

20. Whether or not Paul ever heard such words, it's clear that such voices are everywhere in the Christian church today. Might it even be God who has brought about the change? Our Reformation roots have resources aplenty to use for such a time as this. Let's not let them go to waste.