

Homosexuality. Demonic Diversion from Gospel Mission and Ministry Today

Colleagues,

My framing the topic above so sharply will come as no surprise to regular readers. The battle to get homo-hetero-deck-chairs on the Titanic rightly arranged is heating up. World-wide Anglicanism is in chaos on this one, so Anglican friends tell us. Some even say “death-throes.” And the homo-hetero-hullabaloo in the ELCA right now is not far behind. Wasn't it just yesterday in the ELCA that we thought the family fight was about requiring historic episcopal presence at clergy ordinations, so that we be congruent partners with the Episcopal Church USA [ECUSA], the Anglican presence in our midst? But now we have other glue that binds both denominations—in a very sticky wicket. The homo/hetero hassle. Seems to me it's a “Tar Baby and Br'er Rabbit” story. The more you poke at it, the more immobilized you get. There are other metaphors. Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Fiddling while Rome burns. Or Jesus' own imagery: “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You tithe mint, dill and cummin, while neglecting the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith.” (Matt. 23:23) Was he talking about us? I think so.

What are the big antitheses to the Christian Gospel's “justice, mercy and faith” in the USA today?

It's not homo/hetero. Is it not the plethora of other gospels pounding into our ears? [And I'll use “-ism” to signal their pseudo-Gospel pitch for us to trust them.] Hedonism (our pleasure society across the board), national imperialism (re-

creating the whole world in our own image), just plain capitalism, which hypes “enough is just a little bit more,” in an “ownership” society. [Au contraire the Bible’s “tenancy” society—i.e., managing “in trust” the planetary goods of the Real Owner according to that owner’s management model.] And many more “principality and power” proposals urging us to trust them for life. Those aren’t mint, dill or cummin. They’re other gospels.

That’s just thinking of a few other gospels down-home . What about global ones? For instance, just this one: What about Islam as a growing missionary-minded religion, world-wide, with now something like one billion adherents? Also growing within the USA, where Islam, now with more adherents than Judaism, is the #2 religion in America. That’s hardly a mint, dill or cummin item either.

Where are the national or international church task forces at work to aid Christians in the hard face of these icebergs? Not only for assistance in exorcizing the home-brand false gospels from the turf they already occupy in our own hearts, but also for strategies on offering the real Good News in the mish-mash of all these altars surrounding us on the Mars Hills of today? Where are such church-wide task forces? Nowhere that I know of—and surely not anywhere near the top of denominational agendas nowadays. Yet those are the icebergs that will scuttle our church-wide Titanics—even if we did finally get the homo/hetero deck-chairs rightly arranged.

But homo/hetero is the church-wide agenda that ELCAers and ECUSAers are stuck with right now. What to do?

Timothy Hoyer, today’s guest writer, pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Jamestown, New York, has a proposal: If deck-chair scramble is what’s given us, let’s start there and

still help folks survive even on the Titanic. If that's the lemon we're given, how to make lemonade? Timothy's thoughts come in response to a new tar-baby poke in the ELCA, a March 1 statement by 17 ELCA theologians saying no—three times no—to the ELCA task force report on sexuality. Timothy's theological/pastoral axiom is simple: When confronting anything less than Gospel in theological statements, proclaim THE gospel. Below you have the statement of the 17, and thereafter Timothy's alternative.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

***A STATEMENT OF PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCERN
A RESPONSE TO THE REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM
THE TASK FORCE FOR ELCA STUDIES ON SEXUALITY***

We are grateful to every member of the Task Force for their time, commitment, and effort, and accept the invitation welcoming the “prayers, responses, and admonitions of all our partners.” In response to that request, and based on our careful review of the Report and its recommendations, we maintain that the third and primary recommendation of the Task Force, contrary to its stated intention, threatens to destabilize the unity and constitution, as well as the historical, biblical, and confessional teachings and practice of this church. Further, this final proposal places the first two, although in principle containing some assertions that are indeed admirable and commendable, into an interpretative context that makes them objectionable as well.

The most conspicuous logical inconsistency in the Task Force's Report is that in the name of a "no change in policy" it advocates a fundamental shift in policy. It asks the church "to refrain from disciplining those who . . . call or approve partnered gay or lesbian candidates whom they believe to be otherwise in compliance with Vision and Expectations and to refrain from disciplining those rostered people so approved or called" (7). Unable to make a recommendation that would resolve the issue of gay/lesbian ordination and/or blessings through legislative action based on Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, the Task Force proposes that permission for such activities be granted on the basis of "conscience" and a "pastoral approach" in lieu of the traditional criteria employed by this church. This proposal, in our view, suffers from several flaws. We offer the following theological observations:

Ecclesiology

By using the language of "this approach" (8) instead of "this change in policy" the Task Force advocates that the ELCA should "trust congregations, synods, candidacy committees, and bishops to discern the Holy Spirit's gifts for ministry among the baptized and make judgments appropriate to each situation"(8). In the New Testament, however, the criterion for the discernment of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is a broadly based, ecclesial determination and not an individual, local preference. If the Report before us were to be implemented, the ELCA, as a national church body, would abdicate its theological and moral constitutional responsibility by relegating the decisions for which it alone is responsible to regional and local components. Far beyond transforming the polity of the ELCA into a congregational one, such an action would so fatally extend the boundaries of diversity in matters of doctrinal and ethical substance that this church would no longer be an

effective collaborator either in the communion of the Lutheran World Federation or in the multiple dimensions of ecumenical dialogue. The proposed shift of matters of such enormous import from the national to the local levels will have two adverse consequences: 1. structural dissolution of the ELCA as it currently exists, and; 2. creation of intense division and disunity at the local level, thus effectively undermining “ways to live together faithfully in the midst of our disagreements” (5).

Conscience

The Task Force imposes a subjective understanding of “conscience,” one bound only by private judgment, upon Scripture and Luther, thus misrepresenting both. Whenever conscience severs itself from faith in Christ and fidelity to the Word it is no longer conscience in the true sense. Indeed, some in the Corinthian church wanted to solve their disagreements by applying precisely such a therapeutic model of conscience, an approach that Paul unequivocally rejects. Weak consciences, led into error by social pressures and alien ideologies, can never be ultimately determinative sources of truth or unity. For Luther, the holy and righteous conscience of the Christian must agree with God’s Word; an erring conscience, separated from Scripture, can react only in accordance with selfish desires resulting from weakness in faith.

Pastoral Care

In Scripture the term “pastor” is never dissociated from the standard of sound teaching. Much like the term “conscience,” “pastoral concern” must be governed by that which is righteous and holy in the eyes of God. “Pastoral concern” is not a neutral category and cannot, therefore, be determinative in

discerning the correctness of actions or behavior. Since pastors can either teach sound or false doctrine, Titus is urged to “teach what is consistent with sound doctrine.” Neither Scripture nor the Confessions entrust the theological or ethical teaching of the church to pastoral “discretion” (5). In listening to the contemporary “voices of the baptized children of God” (9) we cannot and must not disregard the voices of the church universal over the past two millennia; Scripture can never address us independently from that communal history.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons given we urge that all three recommendations of the Task Force be rejected since, if adopted, they would alter fundamentally the ecclesiology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and that, in turn, would threaten not only the unity and stability of this church but, as a consequence, its ability to proclaim the truth of the Gospel.

[Seventeen signatures. All prominent professorial names in the ELCA. About half a dozen from the “old” ALC, another half dozen or so from the “old” LCA, and a couple more whose provenance I do not know. ehs]

March 1, 2005

A Response to “A STATEMENT OF PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCERN”

The assumption is that if there are seventeen of them, namely theologians, then people should listen to their statement. And since they are big name Lutheran Theologians in the ELCA, then the ELCA should pay attention. But no statement has authority

in churches of the Augsburg Confession, such as the ELCA, unless it is Gospel-grounded in the authority that comes from Christ, which is that we are justified by faith in Christ alone.

Over and over again in the Lutheran Confessions, to make sure that authority of Christ is present in any theological statement, two questions are asked—one about Christ, the other about his intended beneficiaries. Here is how the two questions are used in Apology of the Augsburg Confession in Article 4, Justification, “. . . this controversy deals with the most important topic of Christian teaching which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ [that’s question #1] and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need” [#2] (Book of Concord, Wengert/Kolb, 120-121.2). Either Christ is illumined and consciences consoled, or the teaching of justification is contaminated and you “obscure the glory and benefits of Christ, and tear away from devout consciences the consolation offered them in Christ” (ibid., 121.3).

To easily remember and refer to those two questions, they were given the nickname the “double-dipstick,” [a Semtex shibboleth (ehs)] and they are used to test anything that claimed to be Christian. 1) Do Christ’s merits and benefits get used or wasted? 2) Does it give the benefits of Christ to people so their consciences are comforted?

Those two questions are the two measuring sticks the Reformers use throughout The Book of Concord. And the Reformers got those two questions from the eyewitnesses of Christ who got it from Christ, the one who died and rose from the dead for the salvation of all people. The death and rising of Jesus is the reason the first question is asked. The salvation of all people is the reason the second question is asked.

The statement of the seventeen theologians is concerned that the Recommendations of the Task Force of the ELCA on Human Sexuality threaten “the historical, biblical, and confessional teachings and practices of this church.” Their statement bases the feelings of threat on what the recommendations of the Task Force do to ecclesiology, conscience, and pastoral care. There is no mention of justification by faith in Christ alone. There is no mention of the death and rising of Christ, and no mention of giving the benefits of Christ to people so their consciences are comforted. That fails the double-dipstick test.

The supposed threat to ecclesiology is that the national church would abdicate “its theological and moral constitutional responsibility relegating the decisions for which it alone is responsible to regional and local components.” And it would “fatally extend the boundaries of diversity in matters of doctrinal and ethical substance” so that the ELCA could no longer collaborate in The Lutheran World Federation and other dimensions of ecumenical dialogue.

However, every congregation is responsible to proclaim to people that all are justified by faith in Christ alone. Every Christian person is called to give Christ’s forgiveness and love to others. The authority of the gospel is not in the number of theologians but in the forgiveness Christ offers people. Thus, even only one person proclaiming that Christ forgives people is greater than all other powers, dominions, hierarchical structures, and constitutions. The objection fails the double-dipstick test.

The imposition on the conscience is that it will be severed from “faith in Christ and fidelity to the Word.” The conscience, say the seventeen theologians, “must agree with God’s Word.” However, the conscience is comforted by Christ’s forgiveness alone and not by fidelity to God’s Word. (Here

“God’s Word” means the whole Bible—law and gospel, especially those passages about this topic of human sexuality.) But that sort of Bible usage also fails the double-dipstick test.

The “must” in their statement, because it is applied to consciences, is significant. Christian consciences are not subject to a coercive “must,” but are freed to live in the forgiveness of Christ (Galatians 5). If consciences are subjected to a “must,” then the gift of the benefits of Christ are contaminated and obscured, and no comfort is given, another failure of the double-dipstick test.

The seventeen theologians write that “pastoral concern must be governed by that which is righteous and holy in the eyes of God,” which has been voiced by “the church universal over the past two millennia.” This is a vague allusion to the church teaching for the past two thousand years that homosexuality is sinful. But that too fails the double-dipstick test. It fails because pastoral concern has been freed by Christ forgiving all people so that they in turn get to give (out of pastoral concern) Christ’s forgiveness and love to all others. Also, the phrase, “that which is righteous and holy in the eyes of God,” is a Christian statement and so is to be defined by the double-dipstick. When defined by the double-dipstick, “that which is holy and righteous in the eyes of God” is faith in Christ, as Paul testifies in Romans 3, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”

The church gets to do the work Christ has given it, namely, to proclaim forgiveness in his name. When the church proclaims that Christ forgives people, then the church has the ability to proclaim, not the “truth of the Gospel,” but the Gospel itself, the forgiveness that Christ gives to all by his death on a cross and rising from the dead. All who trust Christ are the church (ecclesiology), have their consciences at peace with God

because of Christ, and they give the pastoral care of forgiveness from Christ. This way of talking (using Christ's benefits to comfort consciences) about ecclesiology, conscience, and pastoral care, was once the yardstick for what qualified as Lutheran. The statement of the seventeen really needs to go back to using Christ so that he is glorified and consciences are comforted with Christ's benefits.

Timothy Hoyer

[FYI. Pastor Hoyer writes the lead article in the upcoming Easter edition of the Crossings print-medium newsletter. Shortly after publication it will also be available on the Crossings website. Should you want to see it sooner, contact the Crossings office to get a copy. <info@crossings.org> (ehs)]