

One Lutheran's Agenda in Today's Homosexuality Discussion

Herewith a copy of a letter I wrote yesterday (Jan 27/99) to a bishop in my church, the ELCA.

Hi!

It's been 2 months since you sent me that packet of 3 readings on homosexuality. You asked for "input." So I'm long overdue in my response. For me it seems that getting older means getting slower. There doubtless are other weakenings. Probably I should first remind you what those 3 essays were:

1. a "Report to the ELCA Division for Outreach Board from the Gay & Lesbian Outreach Study Team,"
2. "Pulpit Fiction: The Gifts and Burdens of Gay Men and Lesbians Serving in the Ordained Ministry," and
3. "Non-Heterosexual Clergy Experiences and Issues in Ministry."

This topic continues to be prominent in my life. For one thing, Marie and I recently participated in the formation of the St. Louis Gateway chapter of Lutherans Concerned. We meet monthly at Bethel. #2 Both of us (for a couple of years already) have been on the board of OTHER SHEEP, an int'l Christian ministry with and for "sexual minorities" as our brochure says. And then #3, even tho the pope was in town yesterday and today, we ELCAers had former ELCA bishop Herb Chilstrom and his wife Corinne here doing a workshop on this topic for the eastern section of our Central States synod. About 50 folks showed up.

The two of us didn't attend the Chilstrom thing because of family complications. Robin Morgan did and summarized it this way: "Yesterday with the Chilstroms was interesting/frustrating. Their stories about people they've met and learning about homosexuality they've acquired as they ministered were fascinating. But the theology [in the discussions] is always so shallow at these things." Her last phrase capsules my thoughts after reading the three pieces you sent me. No one of the three explicitly proposes to "do" theology per se, but theology is there aplenty, especially when the word "Lutheran" is dropped—as it often is. It's usually specified as "the Lutheran emphasis on grace, grace alone" and that then gets slimmed down to "God's unconditional love and acceptance" punkt!

If it were just bureaucrats or sociologists promoting such shallow theology, it would be bad, but not SO bad as it is when, as in #2 and #3, the respondents are all ELCA clergy, a number of whom say things like "Move to another denomination? Impossible. I couldn't be anything else than Lutheran." But look at what passes for Lutheran. When that "unconditional grace, love and acceptance" gets mentioned in these pages, I don't think there ever is a Christ-connexion made for grounding God's favor toward sinners—gay or straight. God is always generically—by definition—gracious. A nice guy. That's it. Now I'm not saying that we ought to give equal weight to God not being "nice guy." Not at all. But you know what's missing: there's no "necessitating Christ" in order to get access to that divine acceptance. Forget about being Lutheran. Is this even Christian?

Throughout these pages the term "Lutheran" centers on the epithet you've heard from me before: "God's sloppy Agape." I don't think I once read in those umpteen pages that THE Lutheran pivot is faith alone, faith in Christ alone. It's always grace alone with no mention of faith. One exception is the brief quote

from one respondent [p20 in paper #2] "In spite of all these problems, Christ is there for me, and most importantly the hope of resurrection. So I suppose if you go deeper [into my theology] it's the theology of the cross." That is the most evident piece of Lutheran theology I found in all those pages, a real breath of fresh Gospel air. (I wonder if that was a Seminex grad. One of the respondents mentions being at Seminex [p.23 in paper #3].)

While reading these pages I was listening for words like those from a gay member in our local Luth. Concerned chapter: "You know, I wonder if we're not just reading those Bible passages to make them say what we want them to say, and not letting the Bible call us gays & lesbians to repentance?" Brilliant, I thought. But there's scarcely any such theology in these three documents.

Pp. 28 – 31 in paper #3 captioned "Lutheran Identity" and "Faith Anchors" provide similar discombobulating quotes: "I'm Lutheran. It's an identity thing. . . I'd say I stand in the center of Lutheranism in terms of the core theology of being saved by grace. That is what has sustained me. So in that sense I'm just dead-centeredly (sic!) Lutheran." [You can guess my nasty question: just how dead is it?] Apparently this respondent doesn't know that the Pontifical Confutation (1530), seeking to refute the Augsburg Confession within days after it was presented, states "No one of all the Catholics has ever disputed sola gratia [the doctrine of grace alone]." So being "saved by grace," was not the "Lutheran thing" that the Reformation was all about. But I don't have to tell you that.

On the two pages of quotations captioned "Faith Anchors" not one ever mentions the name of Christ, even though some of the things said are patently Christian and even winsome. But about "the faith that justifies" they are not, nor about that faith's

object, the crucified and risen One.

John Douglas Hall has that jolting statement—we've talked about it before—in his first big splash book years ago about the theology of the cross, "Lighten our Darkness," when he says: Theology of the cross has been a "very thin tradition" throughout the history of the church. If "faith alone" and the proper distinction between law and promise also are inside the wineskin of theologia crucis (and they indeed are), then it's also a skinny/skimpy tradition (more accurately: an almost unknown tradition) in what we hear from these ELCA clergy too. But here again, I don't have to tell you that either. And you can finish the analysis on your own, I'm sure.

If I were asked to toss out a few theses (only 7, not 95) for us to attend to in the ELCA, they'd be something like these:

1. Let us acknowledge that in human sexuality, some folks are "wired different" [=the term one gay member of Bethel used for himself] from heteros, and that God is the electrician doing the wiring.
2. Let us recognize the Biblicism (and its partner, legalism) so prevalent in Bible-quoters, whether from the right or the left, on this topic. Then let us ask what Luther's criterion for Bible reading, "urging Christ," would do as a hermeneutic for "those passages."
3. After that, move to such items as: where and how do Old Adams/Old Eves manifest themselves in the hearts and lives of those "wired different?" Where and for what do they stand in need of repentance? To answer such questions, those wired different would have to take the lead, I would think, so that the "conversation and consolation of the siblings" [SA III.5] might begin. In specific Lutheran lingo: what forms of "unfaith," of incurvature into oneself, bedevils them?

4. Are there “common places” in both gays and straights where Old Adams/Old Eves take up residence?
5. Are there distinctive/unique ways for Christ’s Good News of forgiveness to cross over into the lives of folks wired different?
6. What is a “right(eous) tune and right text” for gays & lesbians when they sing the New Song as New Creatures in Christ’s New Creation? Ditto for their living out his New Commandment in New Obedience? Etc.
7. What might Christ-trusting gays & lesbians model in their lives—partnered or celibate—that would edify the straights—partnered or celibate—in living an ethos under promise, by faith alone, with Christ as Lord and Master at this time in our culture?

I trust that all of these data do not first of all have to be created, but already exist in Christ’s people among today’s “sexual minorities.” But I know only hints of what the answers might be. These three papers don’t do it. Although they are replete with testimony from such voices, they do not even get close to these issues, these Lutheran agenda items.

You’ll not be surprised that I think these are the primary “Lutheran” questions. And that conviction of mine, which I know is yours too, is probably also a “thin tradition.” But we still ought to pursue it with gays and lesbians who claim “Lutheran identity,” or even more pointedly, as one does in these pages saying that he is “disgustingly Lutheran.” What else could the ELCA be doing on this topic that would be more “Lutheran” and more useful for church and society right now?

I’m not sure what you were hoping for when you sent the stuff down to me end of November. But what you see (here), is what you get.

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed

P.S. I hope you—and your synod too—will properly celebrate Katie Luther's 500th birthday on Jan. 29. The students – 15 of them ages 25 to 70 – in my Thursday evening class on the Lutheran Confessions are planning a wingding birthday party tomorrow [it'll already be Jan. 29 in Wittenberg!] in her honor. I hope we'll also get some theology done.