

Reformation Resources: Law/Promise Hermeneutics & the Godly Secularity of Sex

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1. Intro: Two background issues, deep background issues, are in the current discussion among Christians about homosexuality: How to read the Bible? Where does sex fit in God's creation? They come up in all parts of the current debate, for they are always behind the scenes. For both of these the Lutheran Reformation had some very specific things to say. I shall try to show what the Reformation answers are to these two questions, and then use those Reformation answers—as graph-paper, you might say—to do my scribblings, my sketches, to draw some pictures about the hot-potato stuff we are discussing at this gathering.

I. Law-Promise Lenses for Reading the Bible

2. A former student recently wrote to tell me about the discussion at her (Methodist) congregation on homosexuality. She said: “We have identified the main problem. It's how we regard and interpret the Bible.” Wow! I thought. How fortunate to have gotten to the jugular so soon. Seems to me that she couldn't have been more on target.

3. I grew up in an LCMS rural congregation in Illinois with Biblicism as the way to read the Bible. That may also be true

for many of you. I didn't know the word Biblicism, but thought we were simply doing what Bible-believers all do. We acknowledge the Bible as the inspired Word of God. We take the word of God for what it says—passage after passage—and then seek to be faithful by believing what God told us to believe there, and doing what God told us to do.

4. Later on I learned that Biblicism and legalism often go hand-in-glove. And legalism was a no-no, a wrong way of salvation. So was Biblicism also a bad way to read the Bible? Probably. If so, what was a better way? The connection between those two “-isms” (Biblic- and legal-) get expressed in Bob Bertram's axiom: “Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology.” In nickel words: “How you read the Bible is always linked to how you think people get saved.”

5. In the Reformation Era the two were linked as well in the conflict of that time: in the hermeneutics and soteriology of scholasticism and the hermeneutics and soteriology proposed by the Reformers. The Reformers saw a precedent in the NT itself. The conflict between Jesus and the Judaism of his age, wasn't that a tangle between two conflicting ways of reading the Hebrew scriptures—and two different proposals for God's salvation? Both sides often said so. Ditto for the 16th century Reformation: two different ways of reading the Bible (both OT and NT) and two conflicting notions about the salvation of sinners.

6. Back to Biblicism. Biblicism's way of reading the Bible is also technically called “revelationist.” The Bible reveals the will of God. That will of God is fundamentally informational. It informs us readers of things, very important things, that we would not know apart from this revelation—what God wants us to believe (faith life), how God wants us to behave (moral life), to worship, etc. From that notion of the Bible comes a parallel notion of salvation. Salvation = following the will of God by

believing what God wants us to believe, behaving as God instructs us to behave, etc. Unbelievers ignore what God reveals for us to believe. Immoral people ignore God's mandates for how we are to behave. And where does Jesus fit in? The Gospel of Jesus is one more thing, yes, the most important thing, revealed by God. And, of course, it is at the top of the list of what you "ought to believe." When you believe it you are righteous; when you don't you aren't. And the same applies to God's moral revelation. When you behave as God tells you to behave, you are moral. When you don't, you are immoral.

7. One reason I know this hermeneutics/soteriology well is that it describes the faith-life of my childhood nurtured by my parochial school education. It was subsequently the focal point for the *Kirchenkampf* in the Missouri Synod Lutheran church thirty years ago. I know. I was in it. I've got scars. And I now know that a proper label for this hermeneutics/soteriology is "legalist Biblicism." It is not THE Gospel, not the Gospel's way to read the Bible. As Paul designates it in Galatians, it is an "other" Gospel. It was not until I learned, really learned, what the Lutheran Reformation was all about, that I saw the difference between THE Gospel and this other Gospel that I knew so well.

8. So what is the Lutheran Reformation's alternative for how to read the Bible? In one of his Table Talk comments [WA TR V 5518] Luther tells how he got his "new" hermeneutics. His concluding line is striking: "When I discovered that the law of Moses is one thing and the Gospel of Christ is something else, '*da riss ich herdurch*' [that was my breakthrough]." Both for understanding salvation, but right along with it for a Gospel-grounded way to read the Bible.

9. Christians on either side of the homosexuality issue use the Bible, but all too often are using the same hermeneutic and very

similar notions of salvation: Biblicist hermeneutics and legalist salvation. Both sides—the pro and the con—often concur that salvation is fundamentally linked to doing the right thing, and sin linked to doing the wrong thing. The “libs” find ways of reading Bible passages that prove “it’s okay,” and the conservatives do likewise to prove that it’s not okay. But in both instances “doing the right thing” is the measure of what’s faithful and what’s not. The common view of the Bible is: The Bible tells us what to believe and how to behave.

10. My point here is that this kind of Bible-reading can be heard coming from both sides in this debate. Both are reading the Bible as a law-book of what’s Okay and not Okay. No Christ-component factors in to make any serious difference in how they read the Bible. It’s my opinion that the original hassle between Jesus and his critics was fundamentally the same: Two very different ways “to regard and interpret the Bible.” And the difference was not because one side in the argument had better scholarship, knew more Hebrew, etc. than the other. It was two different soteriologies, two different answers to how God saves folks.

11. Okay, using the resources of the Reformation “breakthrough”

[A] How does God save folks?

[B] How does that give us a hermeneutics?

[C] What help does that give us for “those” passages?

12. [A] How God saves. Sinners are saved when they get Christ-connected. Call it faith. Faith in Christ is the new criterion for what’s righteous and what’s sinful. Faith in Christ is the new criterion for everything that can be called “Christian,” behavior and morals included. It is even the criterion for what sin is: “Sin is that they do not believe in me,” says Jesus in John’s Gospel (16:9). For Paul it is: “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom.14:23). [Imagine for a moment that this

is the concept of sin Jesus was using when in John's Gospel (8:11) he told the woman: "Go and sin no more." Did she, could she, now trusting Christ's word "Neither do I condemn you," have gone back to the same job the next day? Dostoevsky teases us with that prospect in the person of Sonja, a Christ-trusting prostitute, in his classic novel **Crime and Punishment**.]

13. [B-1] Reading the Bible with this soteriology (=how people get saved) is at the very heart of the Augsburg Confession (June 25, 1530), the Magna Carta of the Lutheran Reformation. Philip Melanchthon spells it out in Apology article IV of that document. Summarized, it is a law/promise hermeneutic. Like this: Scripture's law serves as God's diagnostic agent—diagnosis of our malady, not prescription for our healing. God's Law is X-ray, not ethics. The healing for patients diagnosed by the Law is in God's promise, the Christ-quotient of both the OT and the NT. The law's purpose (Paul said it first—after he received his "new" hermeneutics beginning at Damascus) is to "push sinners to Christ."

14. [B-2] Once Christ-connected they come into the force-field of his "new commandment," and it really is new, not a refurbished "old" commandment, not "Moses rehabilitated." Christ supersedes Moses—not only for salvation, but also for ethics. In Paul's language the touchstone for this new commandment is the "mind of Christ" and "being led by, walking by, his Holy Spirit." More than once Paul makes it "perfectly clear" that this is a new "law-free" way of life. Especially in Galatians, e.g., (5:18) "But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law."

15. [B-3] What then do Christians do with all those imperatives—do this/don't do that—both in the OT and the NT? First of all, this new hermeneutic relativizes them. Even though they come from God, they are not automatically universal. Luther often

called OT laws the *Juden-Sachsenspiegel*, the civil law code of the Hebrew theocracy analogous to the civil law code of Saxony. Different peoples have different civil codes, though the same God is active in all of them. The larger picture behind this notion of Luther is the “old creation/new creation” distinction arising from the law/promise hermeneutic.

16. [B-4] God manages the old creation by law, the new creation by promise—in Biblical imagery, God’s Left Hand and Right Hand, respectively. In the old creation, God’s law functions (so said the reformers) as the “law of recompense” (giving people their just deserts, call it justice) and the “law of preservation” (preventing the fallen creation from going directly to total chaos). With the promise God is out to redeem that old creation. Christians are God’s agents for both jobs. “We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made,” as we say in one of the offertory collects. Caring for the old creation is the “preservation and just recompense” agenda and witnessing to the Gospel is the redemption agenda.

17. [C-1] Human sexuality is clearly a component of the old creation, God’s left hand work in the world. Do’s and don’t’s about sexuality are over there. That’s why the Reformers removed marriage from the list of sacraments. Its home is “over there,” not in the “new deal” that Christ has brought. They “secularized” sex. Luther would often use the world “secular” (*weltlich*) for the old creation, not meaning “god-less” (as today’s meaning often signals), but God’s work in the “old seculum,” the “old age,” now being replaced by Christ’s “new age/new creation.” So whatever “those passages” in the OT might have meant in the ancient Hebrew theocracy, they are first of all “left-hand” kingdom regulations. They do not automatically have anything to say to folks who are “in Christ,” any more than the laws of 16th-century Saxony obligate us wherever we are today—unless we live in Saxony! And there is always this

additional item: it is not easy to decipher what “those passages” really meant in the Semitic world of 3,000 years ago.

18. [C-2] What about the NT passages, esp., the “pretty clear” words of Paul in the NT? Once more, what Paul actually had in mind with those two Greek terms is not easy to determine. But even if they were “perfectly clear” and meant what the word homosexual means in our language, then what? In keeping with Reformation hermeneutics, then this: Christians today need to read them with the “new hermeneutic” that comes from Christ. That includes—at the center—the new definition of “sin and righteousness” and above all the “new ethics/new morality” coming from the “Lordship of Christ and the leadership of the Holy Spirit” in any particular believer.

19. [C-3] The Lutheran Reformers practiced this very hermeneutic on the “rules-and- regulations” passages in the NT. “Thus even the apostles ordained many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed.” “The apostles did not wish to burden consciences In connection with the [apostles’] decree[s] one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is” [Aug.Conf./ Apology Art. 28]. So, even if Paul’s words are “perfectly clear” (which Luther Seminary prof David Fredrickson says is “not so”) it might have been valid then in terms of the aim of the Gospel, but not valid now because of “many things that were changed by time.” Re: things “changed by time,” see the following section on Reformation theology of creation.

20 [C-4] It is also possible that Paul could have been mistaken that a Christ-trusting practicing homosexual was an impossibility. His own words about women are conflictive. Could his words about *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* be the same? And once more even if Paul is not “mistaken” here, we today “must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is” as we carry

out our Christian callings. “The apostles did not wish to burden consciences. They did not set them [the rules] down as though they could not be changed.” Christians today must “do theology” at the venues where God has placed us.

II. The Godly Secularity of Sex: “Secular,” but that doesn’t mean “God-less.”

21. 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.

22. 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. And the first thing that says is: this is not the church’s turf.

23. 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 and 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.

24. 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?

25. 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.

26. 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.

27. The same, they saw, was true with governmental systems, economic systems, family and clan systems, all the systems of the “natural” world. They are historical. That means they change. 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.

28. 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. One change here is for sure: God has put homosexuality on the "secular" screen in front of us today. So how might we take the Reformers' angle about things "secular" and carry forward their good work?

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

29. 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. Most talk about the "orders of creation" is like this: God's eternal blueprints for creation from day one.

30. Not so the Reformers: In "Lutheran" German it's *SchoepFER-ordnungen* not *SchoepFUNGS-ordnungen*. In English it's "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 blueprints 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 me to live, these ordainings are the "givens" of MY personal life as God's creature. They are the "specs" God places on me (and you), first setting our lives in motion and then continuing to sustain us.

31. 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."

32. Luther doesn't mention sexuality in that gift-list, but today we're conscious that it's on our gift-list from God. Now to the jugular: If "hetero-" is one of the creator's ordainings, then wouldn't "homo-" have to be too? That doesn't mesh with "blueprint" notions of the orders of creation. But it can mesh with Creator's ordainings. "Ed, I'm wired different," one of my students said. "If I'd had a choice, I'd never have chosen it. But gay is where God has ordained for me to live." From this

spot in creation I'm called to "thank and to praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true."

33. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals have a common left-hand calling from God 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 patterns of care, including patterns of sexual intimacy, will be different. But what about God's law? Remember, for Lutherans that's NOT: Is it right or wrong according to God's law-book. Rather: Is God's left-hand work being done: preservation and recompense—with both gay and straight—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?" How can any Christ-truster finally say no to that?

34. Seems to me: this is the real conversation Christians ought to have about ordination and homosexuals. It is not about the pastoral office. It's whether or not the creator "ordains" that some are hetero, some homo. On the theological grounds presented above, seems to me, the answer has to be yes. When you say yes to that question, the pastoral office question disappears.

More on this in my second presentation.

Lecture #2 REFORMATION HERMENEUTICS IN TODAY'S HOMOSEXUALITY DISCUSSION –

Hetero cohabitation, homosexual intimacy, blessing ceremonies,
gay/lesbian ordination

Review: My first presentation focused on three items from the Lutheran Reformation:

1. How to Read the Bible (and the soteriology always inherent in any specific hermeneutic).
2. Using the Lutheran hermeneutic on those “tough” texts.
3. Sex as God’s secular work, left-hand operation in old creation; a look at God’s Ordainings.

I. Marriage in the Light of Reformation Theology.

1. God’s management of human sexuality is not the business of Christ’s church. God has since the beginning of creation assigned it to other managers. They are all southpaws, left-handed. But their agenda is godly work. How does that connect with marriage?

2. It was from that conviction that the Lutheran Reformers said marriage was not a sacrament (=God’s right-hand work of salvation). So they returned marriage to the secular/civil realm. That doesn’t mean god-less realm, but the realm where God has other agents and authorities on assignment to care and protect human life on earth. It seemed obvious to the Reformers that marriage was not “churchy,” for it happens all over the world—where there are no Christians and thus no Christian church. God has always been involved in marriage in every society with his left-hand care and protection, but nothing “salvational” is involved. People don’t become righteous before God—or unrighteous—by marrying or not marrying.

MARRIAGES “IN CHURCH” AND THE BLESSING BUSINESS

3. Which raises a dicey question about getting married “in church.” Before we address the question of blessing ceremonies for gays/lesbians, our Reformation roots urge us to ask: do even hetero-weddings belong “in church?” And from those roots the answer is not automatic: Well, of course!

4. Nowhere in the Old Testament of the Hebrew Scriptures is there anything like a “church” wedding. Marriage is a secular event, a routine happening of everyday life in civil society. Nothing “churchy” (or temple-y or synagogy) about it. The same is true in the New Testament. That’s no surprise really, since the first Christians were Hebrews. The one instance of a wedding in the gospels (Cana: John 2) is not portrayed as a “religious” event at all. Jesus is present, but does no blessing of anybody. His role at that wedding is to be the “backup caterer.” Using this text at church weddings is a real stretch. I’ve never heard it preached at weddings as John wanted (20:31).

5. If there is a “blessing” involved in marriages (I’m not sure there even are such texts in the OT; I’m quite sure there are none in the NT), we need to understand what “blessing” is in Biblical vocabulary. “Blessing” is godly activity, sometimes with God as the subject of the sentence [God blessed Abraham], many times with humans as the subject, this person blessing someone else [Jacob blessing his sons at the end of his life], and also humans blessing God [Bless the LORD, O my soul!].

6. The content of such blessings (in the first two instances) is vitality, health, longevity, fertility, and progeny. All of them “this-worldly” benefits. None of them “spiritual,” theological, related to salvation. Claus Westermann, big-name Lutheran OT scholar in the 20th century, showed the difference in the OT between God’s “blessing” work and God’s “salvation” work. Luther picked up the same distinction in his own life-long teaching of the Bible (most of his career he’s teaching the OT). He called it the difference between God’s left-hand work and God’s right-hand work. With the former God cares and protects our life on earth—that’s God’s blessing work. With the right-hand righteous relationships with God get restored, aka salvation.

7. A Jewish Rabbi helped me see what “Blessing” is. He told me,

“You Christians have a tough time understanding what the Hebrew word ‘blessing’ means. One example of that is how the Beatitudes are translated in the TEV edition of the New Testament. It uses the word ‘happy.’ That couldn’t be more wrong. Blessing is not an emotion or a feeling. It’s a relationship. It’s almost geographical. It’s being in the right place instead of being in the wrong place, obviously first of all in relationship to God. So the first Beatitude in Matthew 5 would best be translated, ‘You are in the right place when you are poor in spirit, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.’ Try that on all the rest of the Beatitudes and see what new meaning you get.”

8. I’m told (I haven’t checked the sources) that for the first thousand years in Christian church history there were no such things as church weddings. Marriage was understood to be a “secular” thing, something regulated by civil law. When the Western church began to call marriage a sacrament, it started to become “church-ified.”

9. Even though it happens all the time today, it is at best “fuzzy” theologically to talk about a “Christian wedding, Christian marriage.” The participants can be Christian (Christ-connected persons) nurtured by God’s “right hand,” but the marriage itself is something in God’s other hand. And for that “other hand,” God has other agents in charge, viz., the civil magistrates. The work they do is God’s “blessing” work, even if they do not know that or may even deny it. Having a Christian pastor “do the ceremony” is really outside the jurisdiction of a “called and ordained minister of the Gospel.”

10. The most “Christian” way to view marriage is to see it in God’s left-hand realm. In Biblical perspective, it is the “one-flesh” physical fact of sexual union that constitutes the marriage. The commandment against adultery does not create

marriage, but presupposes that marriages are already on the scene, and to this “given” of the old creation it says: “Don’t break into someone else’s one-flesh union; don’t break out of your own. When you do that you are not fearing, loving, trusting God above all things.”

11. It is not the vows, the promises, the ceremonies, not even God’s “left-hand officers” blessing the partners, but the physical fact that makes a marriage. It is not the blessing that gives permission for one-flesh union. It is the one-fleshing that God’s left-hand agents regulate and approbate (aka “bless”). There is no commandment to marry or to refrain from marriage. God gets people married by implanting the sexual electricity that

9

pushes them to do what comes “natcherly.” And in a fallen world, that “naturalness” always needs regulation (God’s law as curb) and blessing (You’re in the right place).

12. Our current secular culture—churchly culture too, sad to say—adds a humongous amount of hype to marriage, not only at the wedding ceremony [how can some of them claim to be Christian?], but also enormous hype to sexual intimacy (all those magazines at the check-out counter today), to personal commitment, personal fulfillment, etc. Even so everybody knows that sex and hetero-marriage is a mess in our society today. The hype doesn’t help, but makes things worse. As a member of our congregation recently said, “A wedding is a terrible way to start a marriage.”

13. Biblical culture, both OT and NT, cherishing marriage and sex as a gift from God, saw it a lot tamer. Remember where Jesus puts it in one of his parables: “I have bought a field . . . bought five yoke of oxen . . . married a wife.” None of them trivial, all of them “natural” in the daily life of God’s

creation, but none of them purpose for existence. Fredrickson links our modern “profligacy” about sex with St. Paul’s own caveats on the subject. “The ideal self in Paul’s world and to some extent in Paul’s own rhetoric is characterized by self-control and the proper (“natural”) use of externals – food, shelter, clothing and sex – with little or no passion.” Biblical concern for moderation does not mean having no fun. It means not letting the goodies coming from God move into the God-spot, the place for our verbs of passion: what we fear, love, and trust. That’s why the NT regularly points to idolatry as the final diagnosis of profligacy, sexual profligacy included.

SAME-SEX BLESSING CEREMONIES

14. To those getting married, who might even grant the left-handed (civil/secular) character of marriage, the question is: What do you expect to happen by having a “church wedding?” Important events of human life—graduations, daily work, signing a contract, getting a driver’s license, birthing a baby, adopting a child, buying a house, etc.—have no “churchly” ceremony to accompany them. Why marriage? Especially if it is not a Christian sacrament? Especially if it is God who has located it elsewhere?

15. So what are we talking about when we ask about the “blessing” of same-sex unions? Even if such unions can be godly—as I think they can—in God’s left-hand workings, what’s a “church blessing” supposed to do? That is the question, seems to me. What can “the church,” its “minister of the Gospel” add to what’s already there? Is it to pray for the people involved? That can be done, and at our parish regularly is done, at the next Sunday’s liturgy. And if the folks are at hand, we make it case-specific.

16. Folks in our local Lutherans Concerned chapter in St. Louis, where I serve as unofficial chaplain, tell me: since at present

in the USA, few states give left-hand “civil blessing” to such unions, the church should do so, at least for the time being. Even so, is this the church’s jurisdiction when you start from the premise of God’s ambidextrous work in the world?

17. Seems to me that the action by the State of Vermont not too long ago, is what we Lutherans should applaud. Here is a left-hand agency of God carrying out the work of God’s law for homosexuals in the legislation it has passed. Whether any of the legislators knew that or not is secondary. Primary is whether or not these laws do the bifocal work of God’s Law in society: preservation and recompense—caring for people’s lives and carrying out reciprocal fairness. If they do, then they constitute the two foci of the “care” component in the “care and redemption” double agenda of that offertory collect. If they don’t, or don’t do it well, then more work is needed to improve them. Policies that do indeed do that for homosexuals, also support them so that they can move on in their own callings of “care”—and if they are Christ’s people also the “redemption”— of all that God has made.

HETERO COHABITATION.

18. Is there any secular legislation on this topic that does anything like the item just mentioned? I don’t know. But doesn’t the Lutheran theology reviewed above give us help here? I think so. Here’s one thought. If “one-flesh” is the fundamental fact of marriage, then these folks are married. Their “sin” (remember sin = unfaith) is not so much a violation of the 6th commandment, as it is in how they are living their married life. Truthfulness and honesty are the first things that come to mind—of all things, the 8th commandment! Is it not the un-faith of not ‘fessing up to the truth that they are indeed married? Not saying yes—out loud in public—that from this physical fact that they are now living God has ordained them into this

specific location to exercise their left-hand callings to each other? Even though there is God-talk in these sentences, it is left-hand regime God-talk, the jurisdiction of God's left-handers. What's the role here of those also working God's right-hand turf? Say it out loud whenever we can and urge the respective parties to do just that.

CLERGY ORDINATION AND HOMOSEXUAL INTIMACY

19. Earlier I sought to show [Lecture 1, #34] that when you say yes to God "ordaining" some of us to be "wired different" and yes to their calling to live that life in intimacy with another, then the question of ordaining such a one to the pastoral office disappears. To live in homosexual intimacy with another while serving in pastoral office is presently contrary to the rubrics of the ELCA. A commitment to celibacy is required. In substance just how different is that celibacy requirement for homosexuals any different from the Roman church's requirement of clergy-celibacy which the Reformers dismantled in their day?

20. The Reformers called on their theology of creation to oppose required celibacy. Common sense, too, they thought was on their side. Since it was God who created the sexual "pressure" that surfaces at puberty, they argued, to "require" celibacy for the clergy—or anybody—is blatantly contradicting God. For those whom God "wired differently"—regardless of how that different wiring came to pass—requiring celibacy for them sounds like the same thing to me. It's God who is being contradicted. Celibacy was fine for the "one in a thousand" whom Luther thought might have such a gift, but demanding it of anyone—and they were thinking only of heteros in those days—was contradicting what God had ordained. They also made much of Paul's claim that marriage was God's gift so that heteros could channel sexual pressure in godly fashion and escape the chaos of profligacy and promiscuity. A corollary kind of homosexual union offers the

same respite. It surely deserves the same commendation. It is no impediment to exercising the pastoral office. Required celibacy surely is more likely to impede.

21. An editorial in THE LUTHERAN earlier this year called for a moratorium on disciplinary action by the ELCA leadership when congregations decide to call and ordain homosexuals “in committed relationships” to be their pastors. That’s happened in at least three—or is it now more?—ELCA synods. If the congregation really is “the church,” such a decision wherein they followed the rubric of Augsburg Confession 28 for church decisions, “one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is,” cannot be countermanded by some supposed higher church authority. Not only do the Lutheran confessions say so, so does the church’s Lord.

CONCLUSION: A “Sinner/Saint” T-shirt for Everybody in the Discussion.

22. You can’t avoid talking about sin in this discussion. We touched on it before. Remember that 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 turned in on your own self.”

23. 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.

24. Lutherans say 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 or even overlapping. The words of the frenzied father [Mark 9:24] are the confession of us all: "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. Right alongside the hermeneutics of law-and-promise for reading the Bible is the hermeneutics of repentance for living our Christian lives.

22. Now finally. Remembering the "Repentance" story I told at the outset about Luther's words in 1529. Isn't that also our

calling today—only three weeks away from September 11? Not just for each of us individually, but vicariously also for those who don't? With Apocalypse Now in the air everywhere, why are we, we Christians in America, even talking about this topic these days—three weeks after September 11, 2001? I know we might say: “‘Cause we haven't got it resolved yet.” Can anyone hear God saying: “You won't get that one resolved in your lifetime. You'll have to live with one another in a posture of repentance on homosexuality. And the posture of repentance is my recommended way for you Christians to be living in the USA after Sept. 11. If not clear before, it should be clear now. From that posture you're ready to work on my major assignments for you: Care and Redemption of all that I have made. Most all of what I have made is outside the church. That's where I send you, not just now after Sept. 11, but always. Go ye into all the world. Go for it.”

Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, MO
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