

The Church's Authority and Homosexuality

Colleagues,

This is the last ThTh posting coming from New Haven, Connecticut. Next Thursday, d.v., Marie and I hope to be home in St. Louis. Our spring semester tour of duty here at the Overseas Ministries Study Center is over. It's a bit too soon for a retrospective summary. Yet today's posting is a piece of it—a report on the collateral work (collateral damage?) I did alongside my official chores at OMSC, this missions thinktank. [For the record: besides teaching, interacting with mission scholars from all over the world here at OMSC, and being a “presence” in the residential community (we're the only Lutherans they've had in years!), I did get two modest paper-pieces done. One's an essay on Luther's mission theology, the other a 40-page study booklet for my seminar “In a World of Faiths, Why Jesus?” Perhaps they can be the grist for postings later this summer.]

Collaterally there were two flights out of town for presentations, a few local Sunday sermons, a Lenten seminar at St. John's Episcopal Church, an ecumenical conversation — “Preaching the Gospel after 9/11” — with a group of Catholics, Lutherans and UCC folks, the hoopla as Yale Divinity School and the three Eastern Region ELCA seminaries signed an agreement for collaborative theological education, and then most recently my involvement with the New Haven area conference of ELCA clergy. Today's posting arises from this last item.

Homosexuality was the agenda for the ELCA pastors' discussion. I got asked for input. My two-page presentation follows. Yes, I think I'm learning some things I didn't know before. But before

my two pages comes a book review. Its author is Christian Batalden Scharen, a young ELCA pastor right next door in New Britain, CT. He's done a major work on homosexuality with specific focus on the ELCA. I'd never heard of it, but I've read it now. And I commend it to you.

What is the linkage, mentioned above, between homosexuality and the church's authority? ThTh 203 & 204 show that Jesus contrasted "Gentile authority over" (Matt. 20) with his own "authority under" and commends the latter while forbidding the former to his followers. Scharen examines the ELCA's model of authority as it deals with homosexuality. He doesn't use my over/under metaphors, but with his scholarly tools he illuminates the clockworks of a church bureaucracy as "authority over." Read on.

Christian Batalden Scharen

MARRIED IN THE SIGHT OF GOD. THEOLOGY, ETHICS AND CHURCH DEBATE OVER HOMOSEXUALITY.

Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 2000, xxiv, 171 pp. paper.

Scharen uses analytical tools proposed by Max Weber and Michel Foucault for seeing what's really going on in bureaucratic structures and applies them to the ELCA's response to the homosexuality hot-potato. And he does so brilliantly, I think, though I am mostly an outsider to highbrow critical social theory. He proposes in his constructive alternative to the ELCA policy a "middle way" between the tradition of what allegedly "we Lutherans have always said," and the lived-experience alternatives of today's American sexual mores.

Scharen does "archaeology and genealogy" (code terms for Foucault's analytical tools) of the near-shibboleth terms in

ELCA rhetoric on sexual issues: “the orders of creation” and the “heterosexual structures of God’s creation.” He traces their origins to early statements from two of the bodies that merged to make up the ELCA, namely, the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church.

[Strangely, it seems to me, he makes no reference to the LCMS during those years, where the same shibboleths were in vogue, not for addressing homosexuality (no US Lutherans were talking about that) but for denying women access to the pastoral office. In those days the ALC, the LCA, and Missouri did indeed interact. Maybe the youngsters don’t know that. LCMS president J.A.O. Preus even appointed me to represent Missouri in one such tri-Lutheran consultation about orders of creation. Strange that Scharen’s social critical archaeology and genealogy didn’t unearth that interaction. I would bet that the “orders of creation” mantra originally came from Missouri.]

We learn how the language to warn women away from pastoral ministry “was dusted off in the 1980s and 1990s to censure homosexuality.” Using the tools mentioned above, Scharen comes to this verdict: “While the ELCA portrays its theology of marriage and related policies as embodying God’s intention for human relationships, in fact the ELCA quickly adopted this theology in an effort to ensure institutional stability, doing unjustifiable harm to many persons in the process.”

Here’s the outline:

Chapter 1. The tools of Weber and Foucault and their promise for this investigation.

Chapter 2. Luther’s threefold revolution in his theology of marriage and its value for today.

Chapter 3. How Luther was used by the predecessor bodies of the

ELCA, beginning with the revival of US Lutheran social ethics shortly after WW II.

Chapter 4 “turns to genealogical questions, [viz.,] ... how the theology of marriage [chapter 3] provided the basis for the ELCA’s response to a crisis over the ordination of ‘openly gay’ seminarians just as the ELCA came into being.” The ELCA’s basic text for that policy is the “Vision and Expectations” document, the iron hand, some say, in the certification process for ELCA clergy. “The process ... clearly developed ... in order to control the clergy population, especially in ways to keep gay and lesbian candidates ... out of the ministry.”

Chapter 5 concludes with the author’s alternative proposal, drawing on “resources in Luther’s work as well as in the work of previous Lutheran statements on marriage and sexuality.” These resources “are sufficient to fashion a sexual ethic that fully welcomes gay and lesbian Christians while also upholding key essentials of the church’s historic position on marriage – a position both faithful to the tradition and to the contemporary moment.”

I think he pulls it off. But he could do so even more forcefully if he were to see Luther’s new hermeneutics for reading the Bible, and thus for reading the world, as the grounding for Luther’s “new view” of marriage. Another assist could come from moving the “orders” discussion away from “orders of creation” to Luther’s own vocabulary of the “Creator’s ordainings.” Both of which are central for the theses appended below, my presentation May 9 to the local ELCA clergy gathering here in New Haven, Connecticut.

Ed Schroeder

Input for New Haven CT Lutheran Pastoral Conference

May 9, 2002

1. My input today is not a liberal view of homosexuality in contrast to the conservative one we heard at our last meeting. My experience in such discussions is that both liberal and conservative Christians often ground their convictions on other foundations. They KNOW it is right (or wrong) even if there were no word of Scripture on the subject. Even so, the debate among Christians is on How you read the Bible. It's hermeneutics.
2. Instead of a liberal view, I want to offer a consciously crafted Lutheran hermeneutics for addressing the issue. I call it "Lutheran" in that it is the one Luther said was his own, and the one the Confessors at Augsburg (1530) articulated as they faced an alternate hermeneutic in the scholastic theology they confronted. It's the law-promise hermeneutic. [See Luther's "breakthrough" statement cited in ThTh 203 & 204 and its parallel in the prolegomena statements of Apology IV in the Lutheran Confessions.]
3. The alternative was scholastic hermeneutics, "reading the Bible as law," said the Reformers. Scholastic theology reads the Bible as a codex of teaching. The whole Bible is God revealing to us what God wants us to know – and what we wouldn't/couldn't know on our own. Thus there was "no qualitative difference between Moses and Christ," as Luther says in his breakthrough statement. The entire Bible is God's own canon for what we are to believe, how we are to behave, how to worship, etc.
4. The new reformation hermeneutic entailed a different view of what the Bible as a whole was. Not a codex of God's specs for human life, not a scholastic textbook of things to learn. Instead it is God's diagnosis and prognosis of humankind in God's world. Today we might say it's a patient's hospital chart. With Dx and Rx entries. Not do's and don'ts, but X-ray readings and therapy proposals.
5. From the Law/Promise hermeneutic for reading the

scriptures comes a corollary hermeneutic for reading the world: God's left-hand and God's right-hand operations. Same God, but two very different works in the world.

6. God's LH = God at work in the Old Creation, the "secular" world, in medieval language. But secular is not "godless," as the term is often used today. Instead it is God at work in the old "saeculum," the old creation. It is distinguished from the new creation, what "God in Christ" is up to. Same God, but qualitatively different operations. Fairness vs. forgiveness.
7. Sex is secular, an item of God's work in the old creation, God's creation-action carried out for eons without any linkage to Christ. God "manages" that segment of creation, in the same way that God manages all of the old creation, via "law," the fundamental axiom of which is fairness, debit/credit equity – the balance scales of justice. There are structures in the old creation, God's secular world, to carry out God's management. They are God's "C2-S2" – as Bob Bertram liked to say, punning on R2-D2 – the "Creator's Critical Support Structures." Each of those four terms is important. It's the Creator on the scene with structures operating to carry out both his criticism and his support of the old creation he has fashioned. Expressed in terms of "law," the C2-S2s enact God's law of preservation, God's law of recompense.
8. God has LH agents authorized for this C2-S2 work. The Body of Christ is not one of them. It has a different calling, a different jurisdiction. So "the church" has dubious warrant in entering this field for pronouncements. At root this is Caesar's realm. "Render unto Caesar..." is also a statement from Jesus about who has jurisdiction in the secular realm. He does that elsewhere as well in the gospels. The ELCA's sexuality study has scant warrant for being "church" business.

9. At our last meeting we were instructed from Robert Gagnon's book [The Bible and Homosexual Practice – Texts and Hermeneutics]. Gagnon is gaining popularity in the ELCA among the folks who know that homosexuality is wrong. At least one ELCA synod featured him a few weeks ago, and later this year the LUTHERAN FORUM folks are featuring him as their keynote speaker for a big get-together in Kansas City. That is not good news – in more ways than one. Gagnon claims no Lutheran heritage, and he shows that to be true. He has no clue about Lutheran hermeneutics – nor of the theology of the cross, nor of hidden/revealed God, the building blocks of our heritage. Augsburg-conscious Lutherans need to instruct Gagnon, not be instructed by him.
10. Gagnon reads the Bible with scholastic hermeneutics, the same hermeneutics of those who declared the Augsburg Confessors heretics. Those scholastics critiqued the Augsburg Confessors for “ignoring the Bible” – especially in those places where the Bible clearly commends “works.” Their hermeneutic reads the Bible as a codex, a canon of God's teaching – what to believe, how to behave, how to worship. Apology IV calls that hermeneutic destructive of the Gospel. If that's right, then Gagnon is wrong. “Augsburg” hermeneutics reads the Bible as God's X-ray pictures and God's therapy for the patients. In its particulars it's a “patient chart.”
11. Thus Luther can say that Leviticus – all of Leviticus – is irrelevant for Christ-followers. It's the chart of some other patient. It's no more relevant for a Christian than the chart of the person lying next to you in the hospital. ML's word for that was “Juden SachsenSpiegel.” Civil ordinances that had jurisdiction for Jews, but with no jurisdiction in Saxony.
12. Another item: Gagnon's notion of sin ignores the new

definition for sin that came with Jesus. "Sin is that they do not believe in me," says Jesus in John. Or in Paul's words: "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." He seems to have no clue on this. Or that with the coming of Jesus anything cosmic has changed.

13. What about Paul? Even if the key terms Paul uses in "those" passages were "perfectly clear" (and it is hard to make that case), even so, the Augsburg Confessors (Art.28) also apply a "patient-chart" perspective to the rules and regulations laid down by the apostles. "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." (Tappert, 283) The Confessors' overarching rubrics are: "not to burden Christian conscience" and "to preserve Christian freedom," and above all (when revising the "rules") "one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is."
14. Paul was wrong about women – that they were created by God to be subordinate to males. He thought that God's Left Hand operated that way, though in the new creation women were not inferior, he said. Paul was also wrong about chattel slavery. He thought God's old creation worked that way, that people could own people as property, although in the new creation chattel slavery was passe'. If Paul actually did understand homosexuality as an "abomination" (Gagnon's favored term) in God's old creation, he could have been wrong here too. Namely, that homos and heteros are placed by God into the C2-S2's – different but equal, just as men and women, slaves and masters are different, but equal. If Paul's view of "old creation" is subject to change concerning women and chattel slaves, then homosexuals might be on the same list. They do have a common bond with women and slaves in that they were, and/or are still are, the oppressed in many societies.

15. The language of “orders of creation” is mish-mashed by many, including Lutherans, nowadays. Luther’s term was “Schoepfer-ordnungen,” not “Schoepfungs-ordnungen.” His term is “the Creator’s ordainings,” not “the orders of creation.” When he used this expression he never meant some original patterns/structures set down in Genesis 1-3, structures that then were “set” and unchangeable. Luther saw creation always changing. The “structures” of C2-S2 are historical, they change, even though the creator’s critique and support continue within them. God’s continuing creation does not replicate what has always been there before. What ML meant by the “Creator’s ordainings” can be seen in his Small Catechism explanation of the First Article of the Apostles Creed. [Look it up.] The Creator’s ordainings are the specific locales/relationships in which God has “ordained” me to live in the unique creation act whereby “God made me.” “Ordnung” functions as a participle – God’s ordaining. It is not God’s organization chart with boxes placed at fixed spots on the sheet, and us in the boxes. Rather it is God placing me on a baseball field, where God says: “You, Ed play second base. And you, Sally, are the pitcher.” Etc. And even here, these ordainings are not unchangeable. God’s work in creation is a process, a work in progress. Though ML was hardly a process theologian, he was “process” about creation. It changes. The Augsburg Confessors were of the same opinion – even apostolic rules could be revised because things change.
16. From this perspective on the Creator’s orderings/ordainings, it follows that a person “wired different” in sexual magnetism is put into creation by God, and thus “ordained” to live as God’s human being with that sexual endowment. There are many variations in homosexual wiring, as Pastor Bill Consiglio showed us last

time we met. Across the board there are differences. Lutheran creation theology's first hunch is to see them as God's ordainings.

17. It is God's "secular" agents, not Christ's church, who are authorized by God to regulate this left-hand world of God, to be at work carrying out God's law of preservation and equity recompense, including equal civil rights. All Christians, of course, are also God's left-hand agents. They were that before they were baptized. They remain left-handers after baptism. Christians never cease to have "secular" callings – from God! Yes, they are "church." But their God-given work in the world is not "church" work. It's "world work." Though additionally animated in those callings by God's RH promise, "Go in peace," they "serve the Lord" in his LH world in the only way that will work in that world, the way God works there: left-handedly.
18. In a heterosexual world (well, mostly), homosexuality is an anomaly. But it's present elsewhere besides in the human species. Human beings are similar to ("samt" is Luther's word in the catechism, "linked together with") other living creatures. And anomalies abound throughout creation. The Hubble telescope brings us new ones from way out there, and so do the creation investigators who work closer to home in the minuscule world. Why God does this is a question to be answered only in the eschato, and we don't need it answered in order to be Christ's disciples in a homo/hetero world.
19. The Christian "take" on the whole topic is to be God's LH agents in caring for the old creation, for its preservation and equity justice in our sexually chaotic world, for folks "wired different" as well as folks "wired same." With fellow Christ-confessors in the new creation they also extend the right hand, commending one another to live out our sexual lives as we do all other segments of

our lives – taking up our cross and following. Wherever “different” folks are treated as pariahs – as they are both in society and in Christian churches – we have a clear word from Christ: “It shall not be so among you.” This may well be a minority opinion. But the theology of the cross has always been such a minority opinion not just in the world, but also throughout the church’s own history. Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Addendum:

Paul Rowold (Seminex '78), ELCA pastor in Montana, with many links to Lutherans in Palestine, sent this:

*I spoke with both Najua and Mitri Raheb [pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem] this morning (Monday, May 13). Here is a synopsis of their comments: **Najua:** “People here are pessimistic about our future. Our 40 days and 40 nights took a lot out of us. For the first 2 days I got dizzy when I went out into the streets. It was a shock. The girls are in school already today. They will extend the school year until June 15 to try to complete the academic year, but I think they should have let them have some time to go out to play in the sunshine for several days first. Tala cried for 2 hours when she brought home so much homework on the first day back. It was very hot today. It was still winter when the Israelis put us in prison. They stole Spring from us too! Everyone is working so hard to repair Bethlehem as quickly as possible. We all expect the Israelis to return in 10 days or so. We repair, not knowing how long our repairs will remain. We had worship services yesterday, and it was so good to be together again. Viola and Mitri’s mother returned to their apartment, across the street from Nativity Church. We feared that the Israeli soldiers would have destroyed everything, but, thank God, only the doors and*

the windows had been kicked in and broken.”

Mitri: *“At worship yesterday there were even some Jewish peace activists. It was excellent worship. They asked me to translate my sermon and post it on the website. It should be there in a couple days. The work by the electric, water, and street crews has been outstanding. So there is also some optimism mixed with our continuing fear of the Israelis returning. We are all afraid of our vulnerability to them. Maybe it is more urgency than optimism. But your prayers have been so important to us! We will be asking for your help to repair and rebuild, to partner with us even more closely in the days to come. The decisions by the Israelis to oppose the creation of a State of Palestine are the most recent blow to Peace. We hope that our sisters and brothers in the USA will reject such a dangerous path for all of us. Please greet all who continue to pray with us for a true and just Peace.”*