

The ELCA Task Force report on Sexuality: Conscience-bound or Conscience-freed?

Colleagues,

Last week the ELCA released its Report and Recommendations on the homosexuality issue. It is to be acted upon at this coming summer's "churchwide" assembly. It addresses the ELCA's "canon law," the denomination's rules and regulations, its operating procedures. It recommends that the ELCA stick with the canon law now in place (no blessing of same-sex commitments, no pastoral certification for non-celibate homosexuals), but recommends softening the edges of the law to admit possible exceptions. These may proceed under the rubrics of local pastoral wisdom for the blessings business, and local congregational wisdom for calling homosexual pastors. But there are two minority reports from the TF. One pushes the fence all the way down. The other calls for stiffening the fence and disciplining those who climb over it. The years of work put in by task force members must have been agonizing. >From the grapevine I heard that one member said at the end, "X-years of my life wasted." Not surprising, it is always agony to formulate canon law and keep it aligned with Christ the cornerstone. Perhaps it can't be done. Such non-alignment prompted Luther to toss the canon law of his day into the bonfire. Wasn't Jesus talking about the same dilemma when he spoke his "Woe!" to the theologians for their laws about "tithing mint and dill and cummin" (i.e., trivia) while "neglecting the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith"? Was he saying it can't be done?

Timothy Hoyer, pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Jamestown NY, offers a theological analysis of the ELCA Report. This venture didn't succeed either, he says, in building on that

primal cornerstone. Here is the case he makes.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE BOUND CONSCIENCE

What assures the consciences of Christians that they are doing God's will? Christians, out of love for God because of Christ, want to do God's will. However, Christians relate to God as the Father of Jesus. They do not relate to God merely as God. Thus, asking about doing God's will with no reference to Christ amounts to omitting Christ. And that disregards what Christ has done to make his Father the Christians' Father. Christians are actually free from worrying about how to do God's will and are free to live following Christ as the incarnation of God's will.

In the issues of blessing the marriages of gay couples and the calling of people in such relationships, the assuring of consciences is a concern of the Task Force on Sexuality Studies. Let us take a look at how the Task Force comforts consciences. Does the Task Force bind consciences or set them free in Christ?

>From the Report of the Sexuality Task Force: "Such calling of a person should be done with respect for those whose CONSCIENCES are BOUND [emph. added] to an interpretation of Scripture that accords with the present policy of this church" (p. 8). "Participants in this debate are disagreeing...because their CONSCIENCES are BOUND to particular interpretations of Scripture and tradition" (p. 11). "Indeed, in his [Luther's] own defense at the Diet of Worms, he declared himself BOUND in CONSCIENCE by the Word of God" (p.11). "In the responses of our sisters and

brothers in this church we heard articulate, good-faith statements of CONSCIENCES BOUND to the Word of God” (p. 11).

Consciences are either bound by God’s law (or whatever words one uses as synonyms for law, such as tradition, an interpretation of Scripture, the word of God) or free in Christ. Consciences are free in Christ or bound by God’s law because there is Christ’s forgiveness and there is everything else. Everything else is what the law encompasses.

The Report and Recommendations have bound consciences by the law. The Report assures the consciences of Christians that they are doing God’s will when they act “in the spirit of this law” (Report p. 13). When Christians ask how they can know for sure that they are doing God’s will, they ask because they have doubts. They don’t know if turning left is to do God’s will or if turning right is doing God’s will. They feel they need something to guide them, to tell them they are right, otherwise they worry that they might do something wrong. The Task Force wants to calm the worries of Christian consciences by using the law. However, godly minds cannot “be fortified against despair unless they think that through mercy on account of Christ and not on account of the law they with certainty have both righteousness and eternal life. This conviction consoles, uplifts, and saves godly minds” (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert edition, 166-167).

The problem with being bound to the law is that the ministry of the law is sin and death (St. Paul), and that “good works do not bring peace to the conscience” (BoC 170.358). Even worse, to trust the law as the assurance for doing God’s will is to deny knowing and trusting Christ as one’s assurance. To trust the law for comfort is to reject Christ’s promise of forgiveness as the way to give peace to the conscience before God. Christ, then, has died for nothing.

“For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but whoever believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 Jn 5.4-5) The “world” includes Christians’ consciences that nag them, bother them, condemn them, or falsely comfort them with the assurance that their allegiance to the law gives them good standing before God. For those who are nagged, bothered, and condemned, the good news that overcomes those things is faith, believing that Jesus is the Son of God.

“Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin [under the law (Rom 6.14)] which leads to death, or of obedience [faith], which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin [under the law] have become obedient from the heart [faith] to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations” (Rom 6.16-19). To bind one’s conscience to “an interpretation of Scripture” is to yield oneself as an obedient slave of sin, which leads to death. For when one is not bound to Christ’s promise of forgiveness, the only other outcome is death.

Being bound to “an interpretation of Scripture” leads to certain behaviors, such as demanding others think the same way, demanding that others be condemned for not being bound to the same interpretation of Scripture, threatening not to share Christ’s peace with those who are not slaves of the same master named sin. A conscience bound to “an interpretation of Scripture” is “that worship which offers God our own merits” (BoC 128.49), such as, “I am a good Christian because I am orthodox,” “I am a good Christian because I follow the church’s teaching that’s been around for two thousand years,” or “I am a good Christian because I say the Bible is the true word of God.”

As it says in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, "It is not enough to believe that Christ was born, suffered, and was raised again" (BoC 128.52), it is not enough to be orthodox, or believe that the Bible is the true word of God, "unless we also add this article, which is the real purpose of the narrative: 'the forgiveness of sins'" (BoC 128.51). Forgiveness of sins is what sets a conscience free from worry and also comforts the conscience that wants to know it is doing God's will.

To give people forgiveness, and to free people from death, from sin, from God's judgment and condemnation, Christ died on a cross and rose from the dead, thereby promising all people that he does forgive them, he is their peace with God, and he assures them that believing him and following him is to do God's will. Christians are now slaves to righteousness, that is, to Christ. Being bound to Christ, the conscience now loves God, truly fears God, truly asserts that God hears prayer, obeys God in all afflictions (BoC, Kolb/Wengert, 127.45).

Paul uses the expression, "slaves of righteousness," because of his hearers' "natural limitations." In his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses Christ's language of freedom. Being bound to Christ is to be free in Christ. "For freedom Christ has set us free." "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters." Paul got this freedom language from Christ, who in John 8 said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8.31-32). Jesus continues by saying that everyone who commits a sin is a slave to sin and a slave does not have a permanent place in the household. The slave dies. But, the son does have a permanent place in the household. "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn 8.36). The Son is the one who overcame death by his resurrection.

So, instead of being bound to worrying about what is right and

what is wrong, worrying about pleasing God, worrying about being judged and not getting to heaven, a Christian is free. To be free in Christ is to have faith, which “arises and consoles in the midst of fears, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies us, and makes alive” (BoC 130.62). “Faith makes alive, because it produces peace, joy, and eternal life in the heart” (BoC 137.100).

Being free in Christ also leads to certain behaviors, such as being forgiving to others, loving others with Christ’s love, being patient, kind, never insisting on one’s own way, understanding, bearing one another’s burdens, sharing Christ’s peace, returning good for evil, loving one’s enemies, doing good to those who hurt one, tending the sick, feeding the hungry. “We also begin to love our neighbor because our hearts have spiritual and holy impulses” (BoC 140.125). All that because of faith in Christ.

The promise of forgiveness is why Luther bound his conscience to Scripture and the Word of God, for to him, Scripture and the Word of God specifically meant the Gospel, the promise of Christ’s forgiveness.

When binding the conscience to the law there will never be any peace with God or with one another, as the Report so clearly illustrates by showing us the diversity of views of those on both sides of the issue whose conscience is bound to an interpretation of Scripture.

Only Christ’s forgiveness gives the conscience peace with God and assures Christians that they are doing God’s will by their trusting Christ. Only when the conscience is free in Christ is the Christian genuinely free—free from the law’s constant accusations that trouble the conscience or falsely assuage it, free from death, and confident of the promised eternal life.

That the Report of the Sexuality Task Force does not offer Christ's forgiveness as the way to free consciences with peace with God is troubling and depressing. Christ died and rose to bind people to him so that they could die with him and rise with him. Being bound to "an interpretation of Scripture" guarantees only death. Being free in Christ promises forgiveness, peace, and eternal life. For Christ is risen.

PART 2

The Task Force's binding consciences to the law is a result of the eyes of the Task Force being clouded by cataracts. Or, to use Paul's image, their eyes are veiled to the fullness of what the law does. I would explain it this way.

People in this country, the United States, are raised by sayings such things as, "If you live under my roof then you will obey the rules of this house." "No one is above the law." "We are a country ruled by law, not by any one person's whim." Everyone is supposed to be a law-abiding citizen. People hear about Christian values equated with the Ten Commandments. Perhaps it is this atmosphere of respect for the law that explains why the Report and Recommendations from the Task Force for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Studies in Sexuality (Report), even when it mentions law and gospel, is bound to the law, and so, like a slave, has to follow the law and completely ignores the gospel freedom of Christ forgiving all people by his death on a cross.

Perhaps the drama of Moses and the Ten Commandments, the "thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled" (Exodus 19.16), is what literally enthralled the Report. Listen to its language:

"Key to our understanding of the Bible is that it is centered in

Jesus Christ and that it speaks to us in law and gospel. (Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2.02) The law not only accuses us of sin; it also points to God's will for humankind. As Lutherans, we understand that God's gracious concern is also present in the law, which expresses God's concern for life, health, good order, and community. (Deuteronomy 5:33) The sexual laws of Leviticus 18 have the same rationale. (Leviticus 18:5)" (Report, pp. 12-13)

"We began this section with the biblical teaching that God's law is given for our good, that we might flourish. It is in the spirit of that law, and in the spirit of our gospel mission, to draw people in rather than to isolate them." (Report, p. 13)

The Report mentions "law and gospel," but then goes on in its teaching using only the law, as if there was nothing better than the law, as if the law is the greatest thing God has ever given humanity.

The Lutheran Confessions also have their explanation for why the law is held in such honor. They say that human nature thinks that righteousness is only through the law. "For human reason only focuses on the law and does not understand any other righteousness except obedience to the law" (BoC, 154.229). Which explains why the writers of many psalms praise God's law, as in, "I will never forget your precepts; for by them you have given me life" (Psalm 119.93).

The death and resurrection of Christ changed how Christians see God's law. God's law was a guide for people until Christ came (Gal 3.23-26). Through Christ the veil of Moses is taken off the law (2 Cor 3.12). "Deceived by human wisdom, they did not see the true face of Moses but only his veiled face" (BoC, Tappert, 139.229). By faith in Christ, God's law is seen for what it

fully is. "The law always accuses and terrifies consciences" (BoC, 126.38). Paul calls God's law "a ministry of sin and death." Paul says that the law "brings God's wrath." The law is the power of sin, and the law came in to increase sin (Rom 5.20). Even more, Paul says, "I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy and just and good" (Rom 7.9-12). The law is holy and good because it kills those who sin.

The Report in contrast says that God's gracious will for humans is in the law, that the law makes life flourish, and that the law was given for our good. That "peachy" view of the law is looking at the law without Christ, as Paul and the Confessions clearly witness. When someone uses the perspective of faith in Christ, the law is always God's deadly wrath against all people. Consciences are bound to this law until faith in Christ frees them by his forgiveness.

But the Confessions then speak good news against those who think the law makes life flourish. "We for our part preach the foolishness of the Gospel, which reveals another righteousness, namely, that because of Christ, the propitiator, we are accounted righteous when we believe that for Christ's sake God is gracious to us. We know how repulsive this teaching is to the judgment of reason and law and that the teaching of the law about love is more plausible; for this is human wisdom. But we are not ashamed of the foolishness of the Gospel. Because of Christ's glory we defend it and we ask Christ for the help of his Holy Spirit to make it clear and distinct" (BoC, Tappert, 139.230).

When consciences are bound by the law, only faith in Christ, not

human wisdom or the work of a task force, can remove the covering from the law, the covering that makes the law look like God's gracious will. The death of Christ, "under the law," as Paul reminds us, obliterates any idea that the law is God's graciousness.

So, what if, instead of "in the spirit of that law" the Task Force were free to use the promise of Christ's forgiveness "to draw people in"? What if the Task Force, and the whole ELCA, were to use the promise of Christ's forgiveness as God's gracious will for humankind? What if they were to use the promise of Christ's forgiveness as the guide for how to love and care for the people of the church, which includes people who are gay? Those questions are asked because Christ's promise of forgiveness has not been used. Christ's promise was left out of the Report completely.

The law and its way of interpreting the Scripture were used by the Task Force to reach its understanding and recommendations. If the people of faith simply follow the Report, then Christ's promise will continue to be left out of the next eight months of conversation and left out of the vote at the churchwide assembly. That is no way to honor Christ. That is to deny knowing him.

There are eight months left for conversation. For the sake of Christ's glory let the church see the law as it truly is: the ministry of sin and death. And then, for the sake of Christ's glory, for after all, he is the one who died and rose for us, let the church base its recommendations on the promise of Christ's forgiveness working through love. For "freedom itself is the goal for which Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). Let that freedom be the Task Force's goal as well, and the goal of the ELCA.

Timothy Hoyer