

# A LUTHERAN HERMENEUTIC OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE BLESSING OF SAME-SEX COUPLES

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What is a “hermeneutic”? It is a filter that each of us has to help us interpret what we read - in this case, the Bible. There are, perhaps, as many hermeneutics as there are readers. But there are some common theological commitments we share, as Lutherans, that form and inform our “hermeneutical lens” as readers of the Bible.

As a Lutheran Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible scholar I find there is a particular challenge in addressing the Old Testament. Within the Lutheran church there are those who would dismiss the Old Testament as irrelevant, often saying that they prefer the God of the New Testament (a loving God) over the God of the Old Testament (a God of wrath and judgment). However, Christians affirm that the Old Testament is Christian scripture as well as Jewish scripture, so dismissing it out of hand is not an option for us Lutherans. The other extreme position (a theoretical position which no Lutherans actually embrace) is that the entire Old Testament in all its particulars is binding on all Christians. (I say no Lutherans actually embrace this since I know of no Lutherans who follow the dietary laws of Leviticus or uphold the Aaronite or Levite priesthoods or various other observances stipulated in the Old Testament.)

Martin Luther himself rejected the split of associating the Old Testament exclusively with law, judgment, and the wrath of God and the New Testament exclusively with love, redemption, and Gospel. Luther found Law and Gospel in both the Old Testament and the New.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Luther’s assumptions and interpretations of the Old Testament reflect his era — prior to the development of the various methodologies and tools that present-day scholars employ in studying the Bible. He interpreted many Old Testament passages as directly predicting Jesus Christ, or as referring to the Trinity — a doctrine not developed until well after the New

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<sup>1</sup>Rather than cite specific (and isolated) passages in Luther’s writings regarding what I believe are fairly well known views of the Reformer, I would refer readers rather to his exegetical writings such as his commentaries on Genesis, Psalms, Romans, or Galatians and to standard secondary treatments of Luther’s hermeneutics and exegesis such as Pelikan (1959), Bornkamm (1969), and Pauck (1961).

Testament period. When Luther speaks of the Gospel in the Old Testament, much of that is his assumption that certain texts refer directly to Jesus Christ. Christian biblical scholars today commonly assume that biblical texts are not coded messages of a future unforeseeable to their first readers. Rather, we approach texts in terms of what they meant to the writers and the earliest readers; we are then in a position to consider how those texts were also sources for the early church in understanding who Jesus of Nazareth was.

If for Luther “gospel” in the Old Testament were limited to his assumption that it predicted a future Jesus, we would have to question whether there is indeed any “gospel” in the Old Testament. Fortunately, we are not limited to finding “gospel” by reading Jesus Christ into various Old Testament texts. For Luther, “gospel” in the Old Testament is much broader in scope; it embraces God’s promises of the redemption of Israel and the nations. It is no stretch for a present-day Old Testament scholar to recognize in the Old Testament its proclamations and promises of redemption by a merciful God. We also recognize, however, that “redemption” or “salvation” in the Old Testament is almost always a worldly and concrete vision of salvation from enemies, from oppression, from slavery, and from injustice — by a God of love and mercy. This is “gospel” insofar as “gospel” is good news of salvation. We recognize, however, that this “salvation” is not identical to Luther’s understanding of salvation as salvation from sin through Jesus Christ alone. But such promises are sufficiently present throughout the Old Testament that we may confidently reject the view that the God of the Old Testament is solely a God of wrath and judgment.

So if the Old Testament is not a book primarily predicting the coming of Jesus Christ, how is it meaningful to Lutherans today? The God of the Old Testament is our God, the God of Jesus Christ, not some different, foreign god replaced by the Christian God — a view championed by Marcion, a second-century Christian, but rejected by mainstream Christianity of his day and subsequently. The multi-faceted picture we get of God in the Old Testament is the witness of the specific writers and editors, coming from the perspectives of their own time and culture. We may not agree with them on all aspects of their pictures of God. We may not agree that God would promote genocide in Canaan under Joshua — nevertheless the God of whom the writers write is our God. (This is why we will want to argue with the writers on certain points. If it were a foreign, alien god such as those named in the Old Testament, we would not care how this god was portrayed.) The multifaceted portraits of God in the Old Testament are a profound resource for us — whether the creator God of Genesis 1, the redeemer God of Isaiah 40-55, the personal God of the individual lament psalms, the Wisdom of God in Proverbs 8, the God who is angry over the oppression of the poor in Amos, the inscrutable God in Ecclesiastes and Job, or the God who will raise up a wise and faithful ruler in Isaiah 9 and 11. All of these writers speak of our God and provide a wealth of material to help us in our own understandings of God. These are portraits of our God. For Luther, this is the essence of the relevance of the Old Testament: it witnesses to our God and to the God of Jesus Christ.

Another reason that the Old Testament is relevant to us today is that the stories of the people of the Old Testament are like a family history. Common stories unite people. Christians of all cultures and languages know the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac, of Jacob and Rachel and Leah, of Moses and the exodus, of Ruth and Naomi, of Saul, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha,

and so on and so on. Our common stories bind us together. It is not entirely clear where Luther himself would be on this. On the one hand, he accepted these as community stories and illustrations from which Christians could draw. On the other hand, he sometimes identified these stories as the history of the Jewish people, but for Christians such as those in Germany, these were not their history. We cannot usurp these stories from the Jewish people — they are their family stories. But they are also our community stories as Christians and continue to be a great resource for us.

The specific hermeneutical issue most relevant for us as Lutherans pondering and debating the status of same-sex unions is how we understand and use the Old Testament laws. Luther himself may be a great resource on this issue. But before examining Luther's views on Old Testament laws and suggesting what ours might be, this is an appropriate place to address why it is those laws that are most relevant for the topic at hand. Let's consider the Old Testament texts that are most frequently cited in discussions on homosexuality.

1. *The threatened gang rape of male visitors at Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 19:5-8 and the threatened gang rape of a male visitor and actual gang rape and subsequent death of a woman (his concubine) in Judges 19:22-26.*

Both of these stories tell of men of a city demanding that male visitors be handed over to them to be raped. These actions are clearly portrayed as evil. If I am not mistaken, the church is united in regarding rape as an evil—horrendous whether the victim is a man or a woman. Given this unanimity of opinion, these are not controversial texts and need not figure in the current debate.

2. *The creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2.*

This account of the creation of the first man and the first woman says nothing about homosexuality. It is seen as providing a model for marriage as the union of one man and one woman. This text challenged the culture of ancient Israel, in which polygamy was acceptable under the law and procreation the top priority. The text, by contrast, promotes monogamy and the value of women/wives as partners and companions in an intimate relationship. How this text informs our theology of marriage depends on considerations other than what we read in the text itself, such as our overall theology of marriage. The application of Genesis 2 to current discussions of same-sex unions indirect at best, confusing more than it clarifies and also need not figure into our current discussions.

3. *That leaves for us the laws set out in the following two verses from the book of Leviticus: Lev. 18:22. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is something abhorrent. Lev. 20:13. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed something abhorrent; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.*

These laws quite clearly regard male homosexual activity as “abhorrent” and, in the second instance, as in fact worthy of the death penalty. These two verses clearly relate to our discussions of same-sex unions. This is why our “hermeneutic” on Old Testament laws is the one that is most relevant for the discussion at hand.

What might be some options for how Christians read Old Testament Law?

1. Christians should follow *all* of God’s laws in the Old Testament. (No Christians opt for this, although Seventh Day Adventists probably come closest.)
2. Christians need only follow the Ten Commandments.
3. Some laws in the Old Testament are authoritative for Christians and some are not. We decide based on one or more of the following:
  - A. Personal bias — the ones I agree with are authoritative and the ones I don’t agree with are not. (Most don’t actually admit that this is their principle.)
  - B. Decide by category, e.g. sexuality law, *yes*; food laws, *no*; temple practices, *no*.
  - C. Decide on the basis of a larger principle, for example, social justice.
  - D. Old Testament laws are completely irrelevant.
  - E. The law of love decides — see #4 below.
4. Jesus summed up the law by quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (*Mark 12:30, 31; Matt. 22:37, 39; Luke 10:27, quoting Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19.18*).

Luther’s dichotomy of “Law” and “Gospel” is well-known. For Luther the most important function of the “Law” is to convict us of our sins and drive us to Christ as our only source of justification before God. By “law” Luther did not mean Old Testament law or the “laws of Moses.” He used the term in a broad sense referring to all we know we should do (or not do), but inevitably fail to do (or avoid). Luther believed the Old Testament law codes were relevant for the ancient Jews, but not binding on Gentile Christians.

In Luther’s understanding of Law and Gospel, the law of the love of God and neighbour is an important admonition for the Christian life. But, more importantly, it is our judge — as we all fail to consistently love God and neighbour and so stand condemned. This drives us to Christ, to rely on the grace of God alone, and not on our own merits.

How does all this relate to the sexuality issues with which we currently struggle? I believe that a mistake which muddies the conversation is a failure to distinguish clearly between Law and Gospel.

The Gospel — its proclamation and its claim on us — is our first commitment as a church. Our gospel proclamation is that we are all sinners and continue to be sinners every day, so that each and every one of us can rely solely on the radical grace of God. In this community of sinners *all are welcome*. If we are not welcoming, then we are not proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This welcome includes gay and lesbian persons and couples.

The issue of same-sex blessings, is, however, more complicated. As we address it, I don’t think we can ignore the law understood as love of God and neighbour. In the church, all persons are

welcome, but not all behaviours can be supported. We have an obligation to oppose harmful actions and attitudes — economic oppression, abusive relationships, malicious gossip, etc. The church should promote and support healthy relationships. The church should not promote and support unhealthy aspects of human relationships.

I believe the question at hand is whether gays and lesbians in committed relationships are consistent with the love of God and neighbour, or are contrary to the love of God and neighbour. This cannot be decided on the basis of laws in Leviticus. The church promotes, supports, and sometimes even nurtures heterosexual marriage. Should it do the same for gay and lesbian couples? I believe the church should not promote heterosexual relationships which are abusive to one or both of the persons involved. This is how some heterosexual people regard gay and lesbian unions — as abusive and unhealthy to the persons involved. The question is really whether same-sex relationships are potentially positive, or always negative. A related question, however, is how does this relate to our proclamation of the Gospel? Are same-sex blessings an important component of the welcoming that is essential to our proclamation of the Gospel?

Finally, I'd like to offer some thoughts on “local option,” which is part of current discussion of these issues in the ELCIC. Christians disagree over what kinds of unions the church should promote. Some of us believe that a marriage in which one partner is expected to be submissive or subordinate to the other partner is inherently unhealthy. Some Christians believe that a commitment to equality in marriage is unhealthy or foolish. We have not tried to prevent the marriages of those whose understanding of marriage differs from our own. On the issue of same-sex blessings, is it an option to agree to disagree?

It is my hope that as these discussions continue we remember to thank God for the unconditional grace that is offered to all of us as sinners, and that we keep before us the only law that is binding on us, the law of love (*John 13:34; 15:12*).

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## References

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