

A LUTHERAN APPROACH TO THE NEW TESTAMENT – A HERMENEUTIC OF GRACE

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This essay is offered in response to the request from the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

I From the ELCIC Constitution (Article II: Confession of Faith)

Section 1: This church confesses the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – as the one true God. It proclaims the Father as Creator and Preserver; His Son, Jesus Christ, as Redeemer and Lord; and the Holy Spirit as Regenerator and Sanctifier.

Section 2: This church confesses that the Gospel is the revelation of God's saving will and grace in Jesus Christ, which He imparts through Word and Sacrament. Through these means of grace, the Holy Spirit creates believers and unites them with their Lord and with one another in the fellowship of the Holy Christian Church.

Section 3: This church confesses the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God, through which God still speaks, and as the only source of the Church's doctrine and the authoritative standard for the faith and life of the Church.

II Toward a Lutheran Approach to the Bible: A Hermeneutic of Grace

1. We believe that the Word of God is living, active, powerful, and life changing (Genesis 1; John 1:1-14; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 4:12). At its heart, the Word of God refers to the Gospel, the "Good News" of Jesus Christ. Luther put it this way:

What then is the Word of God? ... The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God. (*The Freedom of a Christian*, in *Luther's Works*,

vol. 31, p. 346)

This is why Lutherans place such emphasis on preaching. Luther said that "Christ did not command the apostles to write, but only to preach" and that the church is a *Mundhaus* ("mouth house"), not a *Federhaus* ("pen house").¹ In other words, we come to church not just to read words on a page but to hear God's living Word speaking to us personally. According to Luther, this Word of God – preached, believed and professed – is what makes Christians distinctive and recognizable:

But we are speaking of the external Word, preached orally by [people] like you and me, for this is what Christ left behind as an external sign by which his church, or his Christian people in the world, should be recognized. We also speak of this external Word as it is sincerely believed and openly professed before the world. . . .
. . . (*On the Councils and the Church*, in *Luther's Works*, vo. 41, p.149)

2. Because the Bible contains the Gospel, we believe it is the Word of God in written form. Of course, Lutherans have traditionally used the "Law/Gospel" hermeneutic to interpret the Bible. Within such a hermeneutic, the primary emphasis is the Gospel: we read the Bible always focussing foremost on the Gospel. Whenever we look at a passage of the Bible, we ask: Where is the Good News of God's love in Christ in this text? Put another way, we read the Bible through the lens of God's grace in Jesus Christ. In this way, the Bible is the living, active, powerful and life-changing "inspired Word of God, through which God still speaks."
3. We try to relate the Gospel message found in the Bible to the real-life situations of people today. This is a matter of deeds (living according to the Gospel day by day) as well as words.
4. We try to understand the Bible within the historical context in which it was written. Lutherans have been in the forefront of scholarly historical study of the Bible.
5. We try to read the Bible in keeping with Christian tradition and with the wider consensus of the church. We do not claim to have discovered a "new" teaching/message in the Bible.
6. It is more important to take the Bible seriously than to take it "literally". Indeed, sometimes people who claim to take the Bible "literally" end up trivializing its message. (For example, the point of the Book of Jonah is not whether or not a human being can possibly be swallowed by a big fish; rather, it is to love and forgive our enemies the way God does.)

III Applying a Hermeneutic of Grace to Romans 1:26-27

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged

¹ Sermon on Matt. 21:1-9 (Weimar Ausgabe, Vol. X-I-1, p. 626); on this passage and on "the Word of God" in Luther generally see Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 18-19; *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), pp. 63-65

natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:26-27)

This is the most significant text relating to same-sex relations in the New Testament. It has traditionally been understood as an unconditional rejection of all same-gender sexual behaviour. Just what is Paul saying in this passage?

1. Paul assumes that such behaviour is based on deliberate choice. That is, he does not see it as based in what many, if not most, gays and lesbians today would see as "orientation," a given that is part of their nature. Paul is condemning people who in his view act contrary to their (given heterosexual) natures, choosing to "exchange" or "give up" their "natural" heterosexual behaviours for relations with members of the same gender. Paul also says that these choices and behaviours are connected with insatiable lust ("consumed with passion") rather than with love.
2. In the larger context of this passage (Rom 1.18-32) Paul gives a theological rationale for rejecting such practices: choosing to engage in same-sex relations is the result of idolatry. The immediately preceding verses state:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. (Rom. 1:18-25)

Paul's argument here is (a) that even though there is ample evidence for the knowledge of God in nature (natural revelation) Gentiles have chosen to worship created things rather than the God who created them, and (b) that this has had terrible consequences, resulting in a host of wicked deeds including male and female same-sex relations. Paul's perspective here derives from traditional Judaism in which idolatry (false religion) resulted in all kinds of aberrant moral behaviour (see *Wisdom of Solomon* 13-16:1, for example).

3. Paul then goes on to list the numerous consequences of idolatry:

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged

natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die -- yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (Rom. 1:26-32).

It is significant that Paul lists many types of behaviour here, not just same-sex relations. The all too common tendency to fixate on same-sex relations to the exclusion of the other items referred to here is unfortunate.

4. Rom 1:18-32 deals with Gentiles. Then in chapter 2 of Romans Paul goes on to argue that Jews have no right to self-righteously pass judgment on Gentiles. The larger purpose of Paul's argument in the first three chapters of Romans is to show that all people -- whether Jew or Gentile -- are without excuse before God. All of us are sinners, no one is naturally righteous before God, which is why we need the salvation that God gives freely by grace in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:9-24). Paul's overall goal in the first three chapters of Romans is to show why all human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, need God's grace in Christ. His assessment of Gentile behaviour in Rom 1.18-32 fuels this overall point that the Gospel of God's redemptive grace is the universal answer for all humanity.

One must not lose sight of the fact that Paul perceives same-sex relations not as "the" paramount sin among Gentiles but as one of the consequences of the root of all sin, namely, the refusal to acknowledge God as God (idolatry). Therefore, same-sex relations cannot be singled out from the rest of the context of Rom 1-3: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3.23). Paul has established that there is no single human individual who is not guilty before God. Those who "practice such things" (Rom 1.32) and those who judge people who do such things (Rom 2.1) all stand under God's condemnation.

IV Conclusions

Romans 1:26-27 understands same-sex relations negatively among numerous other forms of behaviour which result from idolatry (false religion). As noted earlier, for Lutherans the most important question is: How can we interpret the Scriptures in relation to the Gospel, the Good News of God's unconditional love? Here interpretations differ.

1. Some Lutherans today believe that because Paul did not think in terms of "orientation" as we do today, Rom. 1:26-27 is not directly relevant to the situation of our church and of gays and lesbians today. In other words, these Lutherans believe that what Rom 1:26-27 deals with is fundamentally different from the reality of gay and lesbian Christians who live in committed,

loving relationships.

In spite of the few Biblical passages that condemn same-sex relations, welcoming gays and lesbians is certainly in keeping with the larger message of the Gospel and with Jesus' radical love for all people especially those who are on the margins of society.

From this point of view it would be possible to affirm that homosexual orientation, like heterosexual orientation, is an adiaphoron (a matter of little or no theological significance). Gays and lesbians are sinners only as all other people are sinners and same-sex relationships are deserving of the same recognition as are opposite-sex relationships.

Romans 1 could lead us (a) to examine the idolatry in our society and in our own lives, the times where we make the things of this world, rather than God the Creator, our ultimate concern and (b) to repent of the harmful choices we make when we consciously or unconsciously deny God. As Christians we know that the Creator God is also the God of mercy revealed in Jesus Christ who daily offers us forgiveness and new life.

2. On the other hand, other Lutherans want to interpret Rom. 1:26-27 as a condemnation of same-sex relations that still applies to Christians today.

For people who hold to this view it is extremely important to remember the larger point of the Gospel. The overall point that Paul makes in Romans chapters 1-3 is essential here: in passing judgment on others we are also passing judgment on ourselves, for we are all sinners who stand in need of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

V Final Thoughts

Paul's conviction that salvation is by grace is not the whole story. Since we no longer need to busy ourselves working for our salvation, we are freed to live in a way that demonstrates God's gift of grace in our life—"faith working through love," as Paul phrased it (Gal. 5:6). Our actions can promote or hinder the reign of God; they can heal or harm our neighbour (the "strong" as well as the "weak"). What those actions will be will depend on the time and place, and may differ in specifics from generation to generation. A hermeneutic of grace is a guiding compass that points unerringly to God's love for all—a love that will undergird how we live in our time and place.

There is a deeply personal dimension to this discussion. There are justice issues involved. By acting or not acting, by affirming one side rather than the other, we are hurting people on the one side or on the other. But even by taking a "neutral" stance we are likely to bring suffering on human beings who are looking for healing and peace. People on both sides of the question are in pain. To whom do we owe a word of comfort, a word of affirmation, an expression of love?

The issue is not likely to go away any time soon. There is little likelihood that we will come to a consensus within the foreseeable future. What do we do in the interim? Can we live together with our differences, as brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ who agree at least on this: that

God deals with us not according to our deserving, but according to divine love and grace?

VI Appendix: Bible Passages Commonly Overlooked by Lutherans Today

The Bible is a huge collection of books: it contains history, poetry, laws, hymns, wisdom sayings, sermons, parables, exhortation, symbolic writings, etc. Are all parts of the Bible to be equally emphasized? No matter what people may say about how they follow the Bible, the fact is no one treats every part of it equally: we all emphasize some passages more than others. Christians have changed their minds over the years and over the centuries about how to interpret certain passages, sometimes by choosing to quietly ignore or pass over them. Here are some passages that most Lutherans in fact no longer follow.

- Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-22: When harvesting crops, enough should be left behind in the field for the poor to gather.
- Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:9-11: One should not sow two kinds of crops in the same field, one should not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together, and one should not wear clothes made of two different materials (for example, wool and linen).
- Leviticus 19:27: No tattoos.
- Leviticus 25:1-12: No crops to be planted every seventh (sabbatical) year and every fiftieth (jubilee) year.
- Deuteronomy 21:18-25: Parents are to request the execution of a rebellious son.
- Exodus 22:25: No charging of interest on loans.
- Exodus 20:8-11, 31:12-17: Worship and rest are to take place on the Sabbath day (that is, Saturday).
- Leviticus 11:2-47: Certain "unclean" animals cannot be eaten (e.g. the pig, hare, lobster, various birds and insects, etc.).
- Leviticus 15:2-32: Purification rituals required for women having their period and for men who have had a discharge of semen.
- Matthew 5:32, 19:9; Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18: No divorce (except, according to Matthew, in cases of adultery).
- 1 Corinthians 11:1-16: Women to cover their heads in church.
- 1 Timothy 2:9-10; 1 Peter 3:2-3: Women not to wear jewelry or hairdo's.
- 1 Corinthians 14:34-36; 1 Timothy 2:11-15: Women are to keep silent in church; if they want to know anything, let them ask their husbands at home.
- Ephesians 5:22 ff.; 1 Peter 3:1-2, 5-6: Wives are to submit to their husbands.
- Ephesians 6:5-9; 1 Peter 2:18: Slavery is unquestioned, slaves are to submit to their masters.