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A Generous Orthodoxy

THE ELCA'S CHOICES ON SEXUALITY: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR GENEROUS ORTHODOXY

Dr. H. Frederick Reisz, Jr.

On the Social Statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust”

The ELCA social statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” was written through an extended process of seeking responses and suggestions. Its conclusions should not be dismissed as being hasty. I hope that many of us will counter persons who are saying that this whole process was a sham, engineered from “above” in Chicago, and the result of a predictable conspiracy of church liberals. I have heard all those charges and reject them.

Although I am not wholly satisfied with the current text of “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” for the most part, I think it is a valuable statement. Our pastors and laity can use this statement of theological wisdom and practical pastoral guidance on the many issues surrounding sexuality and its expressions. The statement has useful sections for counseling and teaching. I hope that pastors and laity will make use of portions of it in their ministries and communities. I believe our communion will be weakened in mission, if we continue to spend a great deal of our time and energy rehashing the 2009 Assembly actions, even seeking to rescind them. We have pressing matters of mission, biblical literacy, Lutheran theological education, deepening spirituality, enthused evangelism, and sacrificial just care of those in need.

I think that the Social Statement is too long. I know both pastors and laity who just throw up their hands at its length. While its length does not bother me, does it serve the Church? Social Statements should put forth clearly principles based on biblical foundations and theological tradition, pushing us to helpful new insights. They should succinctly suggest trajectories for the Church’s life in society. They should provide counsel to the saints suggesting where we can go for further help. Then additional teaching guides and books can provide elaboration and promote further discussion toward specifics in defined contexts. An edited and rewritten version of two to three pages would serve us well for teaching purposes.

The importance of “social trust” in relationships and societies is central to the document. That is a very important dimension of relationships. Certainly, our relationship to God is one of ultimate trust. However, I would have preferred a concentration on the meaning and saliency of deepened love, even love as a social virtue, and our adoration and honoring of God in all relations. Love enables us to act in a trustworthy manner with the other. Love subverts our tendencies to exert inappropriate power in relationships. While Jesus’ faithfulness even to death is a manifestation of his trust of God the Father in the Spirit, yet the mutuality of love in the *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) of the Trinity is more theologically central.

The notion of the “bound conscience” is brought to the fore in a new manner in this Social Statement. It had been previously articulated by Dr. Timothy Wengert in his essay, “Reflections on the Bound Conscience in Lutheran Theology” (see online version: Google, “Timothy Wengert Bound Conscience”). I do not believe that its presentation in this public Social Statement is very helpful. Dr. Wengert’s essay seems to advocate for a pragmatic translation of a strong notion of the conscience bound by scripture before the face of God. It stretches the notion to include “weak” consciences that nevertheless should be considered bound consciences.

I believe the writers may intend a very deep notion of conscience bound by intense biblical and theological engagement and conviction. Unfortunately, in public discourse, it quickly becomes equivalent to sincerely held belief. This notion of bound conscience cannot bear the weight placed on it out in public. It threatens to buy into zero sum games and individuality.

In the 1960s and 1970s as a campus pastor, I often counseled conscientious objectors opposed to military service in any war. There were very strict legal requirements to establish and authenticate one’s conscience publicly. They included past actions and statements, a deep grounding of beliefs, evidence of affiliation with a religious or moral community with a pacifist tradition, non-selective objection, and willingness to suffer consequences, even imprisonment. Not all, but most persons and groups in the discussions over sexuality are not operating at such depths.

Both Luther and Bonhoeffer have theological and practical reservations regarding depending on one’s conscience. To situate our varying convictions, some of which fall short of deep conscientious conviction, on the basis of bound conscience as we relate to one another is deceptive and may merely formalize the barriers to discussion, consensus, accommodation, or common life in the beloved community of Jesus the Christ.

On the Approved “Report and Recommendations on Ministry Policies”—Rostering Partnered Homosexual Pastors for the Sake of the Gospel

The ELCA Assembly has begun a systematic process for working through various levels of commitment to its homosexual members, by welcoming those in committed unions or marriages into congregations, by supporting them through blessings of committed unions, and by welcoming them into diaconal and pastoral ministry.

Because the issue of ordaining homosexual candidates for ministry in blessed or legally recorded unions is one on which there are obviously deeply held, varying convictions in the ELCA, we now are called to find appropriate means of living together and doing Christ’s mission – even when we disagree on that mission. Over other social issues such as slavery, prohibition, women’s leadership, et cetera, we have lived together as “Church” in the past as we sought further clarity.

Reasons for Affirming Homosexual Unions and for Ordaining Pastors in Such Unions

1) My Experience with and Commitment to Homosexual Christians

In my ministries, I have known many homosexual Christians. Some have had to hide their sexuality, live in fear, lie to family and friends, and conceal their sexuality in public. Fortunately, public life is becoming easier for them. In the past, as a seminary president, I have administered ELCA policies on homosexuality and their implications with regard to admissions to seminary, and processes toward ordination. I have walked the hard road of denial with students who felt called to ministry and exhibited faithfulness, commitment to Christ, and talents equal to (and in some cases above) those of their heterosexual colleagues. With my wife, I have attended and rejoiced in blessings of homosexual unions. I have counseled homosexuals who passionately sought ordination as they looked for other Christian communities in which to serve. I have benefited from faithful homosexual leaders in Christian communities in which I was pastor or a member. There have been faithful homosexual teachers in our church colleges and seminaries. The “outing” of some of these people has been vicious! I have homosexuals in committed unions/marriages in my own extended family of relatives. We love and care for them, and they for us. These are sisters and brothers whom I want to be in the faith, and they have talents and leadership capacities not to be lost.

I recognize that testimony to experiencing and knowing faithful, ethical people who are sexually active homosexuals, even those in committed publicly acknowledged relationships, is far from sufficient for changing church policies and ethical beliefs. However, the compassion of Jesus calls us to treat with compassion people who are considered taboo in society and are in need of genuine acceptance.

How deep is the call to repentance and how different is it for homosexuals from the repentance to which all of us are called? My judgment is that a homosexual person can exercise sexuality, commit publicly to an enduring relationship, have it blessed by the Church, be a responsible parent, and serve the Church in ordained ministry. All these can be done without violating ones relationship to the Triune God and ones commitment to live in the style of Jesus Christ. Homosexual and heterosexual Christians share temptation and the need for repentance and forgiveness.

I take very seriously my confession of the Trinity, the Creeds, my commitment to Jesus Christ, and my living under God’s grace in and through the Spirit in the shadow of the Cross of Christ and in the light of the empty tomb. With God’s help, I am enabled to live into the life-style of Jesus. I think about and teach Christian theology with passion. I do not believe that I forsake the Christian faith and its theological affirmations in affirming homosexuals.

2) *The Biblical Witness*

A few biblical texts condemn certain types of homosexual activity (Cf., Genesis 2:18-24; 19:1-30, Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, I Corinthians 6:9-10, I Timothy 1: 9-10, Jude 1:7). The question is whether this condemnation extends to *all* forms of homosexuality and same gender sex.

The Bible does affirm sexual activity within ethical bounds. The structure of family units varies throughout biblical history. Paul and some early Christians seem to counsel celibacy at best and married life if necessary. Within ancient Judaism and its culture, where Christianity is rooted,

there is condemnation of certain types of homosexual activity and homosexuals. However, the biblical texts condemning homosexual acts allude to contexts where it is associated with the worship of pagan deities, idol worship, temple prostitution as part of pagan rites, rape, the use of power over another, particularly the feminization of the other man thus creating an unnatural person, and other forms of violation of Yahweh worship or the creation of “unnatural” persons.

Is it possible to engage in homosexual sexual activity which does not deny or defy God or denigrate the human being God has created? I have concluded that is as possible for homosexual persons as it is for heterosexual persons. Of course, we are all sinners and deny and defy God. We are all in need of Christ’s mercy and help.

Because of our propensity to sin and defy God, we need cultural structures to aid us in exercising our sexuality appropriately, such as acknowledged love relationships, public commitments, structures and expectations of marriage, family, and social and legal structures. These relationships are for mutual love, joy, fulfillment, and family nurture, as well as for the adoration and praise of the Trinity. I believe that homosexuals need these same restraints, possibilities, and supports. The society as a whole and the Church will benefit by these boundaries and commitments under the love of Christ and the care of the Creator.

Will the church’s affirmation of homosexual activity and blessing of the deeper realities of homosexual relationships fundamentally violate the “Orders of Creation” and defy God the Creator? This is a serious theological question. Generally, with Bonhoeffer, I am wary of “Orders of Creation” talk. Certainly, we can speak of the provinces of God’s presence and activity.

The Gospel message of love and redemption is central for me. We all need forgiveness and grace. We do not deny that to homosexuals. I believe that homosexuals can be accepted in the community of the Church, including their sexual activities. I believe that the Bible gives us ample examples of Jesus’ crossing boundaries and touching and relating to taboo persons, drawing them into the realm of grace and love. There are also biblical examples where Jesus acts and redeems without first calling for repentance. The calls for repentance first deal with our relationship to and adoration of God.

3) The Need for Ordered, Responsible, and Joyous Sexual Relations

It is not a zero sum game. Any increase in homosexual relations or sexuality does not proportionately undercut heterosexuality. Homosexuality has been felt to be such a threat. Historically, that cannot be established. There is scant evidence that it leads to the conversion of heterosexuals. Homosexuality has existed throughout recorded history. As with heterosexual relations, it has often been misused for domination, violence, slavery, and pagan rituals. That is not what I am advocating. In our time, there are loving, responsible, ordered, committed, and mutually fulfilling homosexual love relationships. There is not significant evidence that these lead heterosexual persons to become homosexual.

I have reservations about the language which we use to describe persons who are attracted to others of the same gender. Using the word “orientation” conveys that this is a choice which can

go one way or the other. For most homosexuals, as well as for most heterosexuals, that is not true to their experience. Similarly, the word “preference,” connotes a choice which is not constitutive of one's being. Heterosexuals should be cautious about using such terms referring to homosexuality. Even the word “homosexual” is now not one necessarily preferred.

We do not know the definitive causes of homosexual attraction, sexuality, and sex. They probably arise out of a complex mixture of biological, genetic, psychological, and cultural influences. Scientifically, there seems to be a range of sexual attraction in the human population, from homosexuality through bi-sexuality to heterosexuality. Persons feel attraction and express themselves sexually throughout that range. Heterosexuality predominates and has obvious advantages for the propagation of the species. Theologically and naturally, I believe it has a priority, but not exclusionary power. Christian heterosexuals may helpfully model relational dynamics and ethical relations for homosexual couples who are new to a public role.

Homosexuality obviously is constitutively prior for many persons. I believe that they should act on those feelings and drives expressing them in loving, responsible, ordered, and committed ways. Having such sexuality publicly declared through civil and church commitment ceremonies with ethical expectations and within supporting communities would be appropriate and helpful. Congregations that choose to can bless such unions

I respect family structures. I have been nurtured, loved, corrected, educated, and sustained by my own. I have seen parallel fulfilling families among homosexual couples. I do not know of substantive scientific conclusions that children are damaged in homosexual families more than in heterosexual families. Of course, many children of homosexual couples are heterosexual.

4) The Tradition of the Church and Ecumenical Relations

In the 1970s, I was an early proponent of the communion of infants and, at a Churchwide Assembly, introduced an amendment that stated that that practice was not precluded. The amendment lost. I was told that there was no biblical support for such a change in church practice, that it was counter to Western Church tradition, and that it was theologically vacuous and only based on some sentimental feeling about infants. A theologian and bishop whom I very much respected, was very angry with me, and told me that such a thing would tear his synod and the church apart, as well as be irresponsible ecumenically.

I am hearing echoes in my ears in these days. This history points out that our biblical interpretation, the insights given the Church by the Spirit of Christ, and our tradition and practices do and must change in the face of justice issues, lack of past insight, new textual and contextual studies, and the needs and call of God's mission.

The changes in abolishing slavery, fighting racism in the church, allowing women leaders in the church, ordaining women, all had formerly been opposed on the basis of the Bible and tradition. The changes came because the *kairos* revealed to us another way which was within God's mission and faithful to Jesus' style of ministry. Now we are testing if we are at another such moment for the Church. I have remained in the church through times in which I had differences with her beliefs and practices.

Any changes which we make with regard to welcoming homosexuals in sexual relationships and in ordaining homosexuals in committed, enduring, blessed, and legally affirmed unions will have ecumenical implications. I do not take these lightly. However, these issues are also being considered in many Christian communions. Is it likely that, if we make these changes, we will isolate ourselves ecumenically any more than we did by the changes we made in the past decades: the communing of infants, the ordaining of women, the commissioning of deacons and diaconal ministers, the electing of bishops, and the electing of bishops for specified terms, subject to re-election or dismissal? When these changes occurred, they violated the practices of some other ecumenical communions with whom we had agreements. Similarly, we have remained in communion with other Christian traditions that have adopted practices contrary to our own. The larger ecumenical community is always evolving and praying for the guidance of God in the Spirit of Christ. We must balance our ecumenical relationships with our understanding of God's mission.

The Policies on Ministry

I favor the ordination of homosexual persons who are convinced that they have a Call to be ordained pastors, whose Call is confirmed through the procedures of the Church, and who are then approved for ordination, received by their Bishops, and elected by congregations or agencies of the Church to serve as pastors. If such homosexual persons are in or come to be in committed love relationships, I expect those commitments to be monogamous and life-long, within a church-blessed and legally sanctioned and protected union. I believe that within the Church, homosexual couples should not be held to a higher standard than that to which we hold heterosexual couples. The ELCA is in the midst of establishing policies and procedures to enact the decisions of the 2009 ELCA Assembly.

Together we seek faithfulness to our Lord. I persist in charity and hope. This is a church community matter. I consider myself a Lutheran evangelical catholic, courting a generous orthodoxy and living out a creative faithfulness to the style of Christ, the Gospel, and God's mission. Some other Lutherans who use those terms would reject my membership under their tent. Many of them are my friends in Christ. I have grown by their ministries to me. I hope for such continued ministrations even as I yearn for a more public, faithfully honest, fulfilling, grace-enhanced life and ministry for homosexuals within our church. Thus, I write openly and humbly in the peace of Christ.....

Dr. H. Frederick Reisz, Jr., is President Emeritus of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. His email address is freisz1@cs.com.

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<http://www.inclusivenet.com/uploads/newsletters/2009-summer.pdf>

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