

Faithful Discernment in the ELCA: Further Thoughts

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I began my first pastoral call just about a year before the formation of the ELCA, as the pastor in small northern Minnesota town. The upper Midwest was in a bit of turmoil over this new church. There was, I think, a sense that we couldn't really trust those LCA Lutherans from the East. There were a lot of terrible things being said: that Herb Chilstrom, chosen to be the first presiding bishop, was a communist, or a socialist (it didn't seem to matter, as long as he was something unacceptable). The new ELCA was going to actively seek pedophiles to be pastors. We were going to close all the rural churches. We were going to stop funding any missionaries. We were going to stop teaching and preaching from the Bible. None of it, as far as I can tell, was true. Some of it, however, was believed. A lot of the rhetoric I hear these days reminds me of the things said around the formation of the ELCA. I've heard this kind of rhetoric before, and I'm grieved to hear it return.

So, let's beware of false witness, from others and especially from ourselves. Luther's Small Catechism says that not bearing false witness means explaining our neighbor's actions in the kindest way. That doesn't mean ignoring the truth, or failing to call to account when we find error. There can be sharp disagreement. Still, I'm afraid there's a good deal of breaking the 8th commandment going on at the moment. Part of what is called for on all sides is a good dose of humility so that we do not label, dismiss, or cease to listen to each other. If this were simple, easy, or obvious, we would not have spent the last 20 years talking about this, the votes would not have been as close as they were, and reasonably intelligent and faithful people would not find themselves disagreeing. But I'm afraid that we are allowing much of the political animosity that has developed in this country over the past several years to infect our church discussions, and so we allow or even encourage harsh assessments and inflated rhetoric to drive wedges into the church, which results in further fractures and schism. Pastors and other leaders can do a great deal toward helping congregations & concerned members find language for their anger and worries, language which does not distort, deceive, or make continuing fellowship

impossible. I think that leaders are responsible for modeling that. That's the first thing that I think needs to be said.

I'm still not sure why some see the Churchwide Assembly's actions as heresy. Partly, I suppose, I'm just not convinced by the reasons I have heard. The accusations are often general claims, made as though the specifics are obvious and need not be argued, but we should not let vague rhetoric go unchallenged.

I think there are three basic areas of focus for these charges that I want to talk about tonight. The first deals with a supposed abandonment of scripture's authority in making these decisions. It seems to me that one can focus a charge of heresy here only by using a simplistic idea of how biblical authority works, as though deciding that a command in the Bible is not applicable to the church equals heresy. Such an equation may be rhetorically effective in some audiences, but with just a little bit of reflection, it should also be obviously false. Despite what the Bible says, we don't dash our enemy's babies against the rocks, we don't execute those who insist on working on the Sabbath, we don't require women to cover their heads in worship, and most of us don't understand drinking a little wine for the sake of our digestive health to be an eternal truth which we are bound to obey.

Luther, in a sermon titled "How Christians should regard Moses", said that all of Scripture is God's Word, but one must always ask to whom it is addressed. And Luther says that for the most part, the Law of Moses addressed Jews just as German law addressed Germans. Luther made an exception with the 10 commandments, which he said conveyed God's basic will for all human life, but even there Luther's way of reading scripture was not simplistic, and I think is worth thinking about. For example, the third commandment, "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" is explained by Luther in the Small Catechism this way: "We are to fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word and gladly hear and learn it." That is NOT what the 3rd commandment in Exodus actually talks about. There, what is explicitly commanded is rest from work on Saturday. In explaining the

meaning of this commandment in the Small Catechism, Luther says nothing about rest and nothing about any particular day. So, even when Luther affirms the continuing importance of this commandment for the church, it is also clear to Luther that it doesn't address the church in the same way that it addressed Israel.

So, Lutherans have a heritage of insisting that the Bible is God's word, and that it is the Bible which shapes the church's life and faith, but Lutherans have also realized that reading and living by scripture is never a simple matter of finding a rule and doing what it says. Lutherans have known that there are important questions to ask about HOW this text addresses us. That's not putting ourselves over God's word by taking a vote, as some have charged. It is the discernment that the church has done ever since it decided to welcome uncircumcised Gentiles. Let's not allow a rather un-Lutheran and basically fundamentalist rhetoric about the Bible to hijack and confuse this church's conversation.

I'm convinced that the few biblical texts which prohibit and condemn same-sex intercourse in fact do not address the people and relationships that we are actually talking about: gay and lesbian members of our congregations who are in faithful, responsible, monogamous, life-long relationships, and who seek to live out those relationships with integrity and as a part of their discipleship. I'm not going to go through those biblical texts again. I've written about that, it's posted on the synod's webpage, and I think many of you have seen it already.

In that written piece I addressed the biblical passages that I think most people have in mind when they characterize the ELCA Assembly's actions as being against Scripture, i.e. those that seem to be prohibitions. The Genesis 1-2 creation text, along with Jesus' reference to it when he's asked about divorce in Mark 10 (parallel in Matthew 19) needs to be addressed as well. I hadn't done it in the earlier piece because the Genesis & Mark / Matthew texts are a different sort, and need a different sort of discussion. They are not prohibitions, as the texts I wrote about seem to be. How one moves from a positive statement of what God blesses (here, marriage) to an argument that God therefore must condemn something else is not a simple

argument, and I'm afraid that in a lot of the rhetoric that I hear, it is assumed to be more simple and self-evident than is actually the case. The appeal to the "plain meaning" of the text has never simply meant "what the text obviously means" (i.e., "to me and all other right-thinking and honest readers"), because sin can always distort our understanding and confuse the "plain meaning" of the text with the cultural assumptions we carry.

For example, for a long time the creation account was not understood to define or limit marriage to one man and one woman. Polygamy was practiced in the OT with no condemnation. Some parts of the church, especially in Africa, continue to struggle with whether or not the creation account or anything in the Bible prohibits polygamy. I'm certainly not arguing for the practice — I think that one thing the creation accounts do reflect, and is implied as well by the New Testament's use of marriage as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the church, is that there is complete commitment and faithfulness within marriage, and I don't believe that can be lived out in a polygamous relationship, any more than one could love and serve more than one god with all one's heart. My point is that the "clear meaning" of the creation account for how human relationships are arranged has not always been the same as the "clear meaning" that seems obvious to some today.

But, if we can agree that the creation account does point to, honor, and bless the marriage between one man and one woman (which I think IS the best way to read them), what does that mean for the rest of humanity? For much of the church's history, the creation accounts were read as saying that the only valid use, the only natural use, of sexual intercourse was to "be fruitful and multiply", and that if any married couple engaged in sex only for mutual enjoyment rather than for procreation, this was sinful; in fact, it was described as unnatural intercourse. I hardly think that we would condemn as "unnatural" those married couples who choose not to have children (or not to have any more children). In these situations, we read the Genesis account about God's creation and blessing of marriage as the primary model of human family and procreation, without concluding that this means condemnation for everyone else.

In fact it is clear that the Bible refuses to condemn everything except this "primary model". Paul urges people to stay single altogether (1 Cor 7) – a rather startling piece of advice for his time; Jesus seems to say the same thing in Matthew 19:12. Whether avoidable or not,

we don't condemn childless couples or those who choose to remain single. While these ways of life don't match the "primary model" of Genesis 1-2, we recognize that they can still be lived out faithfully, and we don't understand them as an attack on marriage. It seems to me that one can read God's blessing of marriage between a man and a woman as the primary human social unit (and so the Assembly's actions are not an abandoning of marriage and family as basic to creation, as some have charged), but we can also recognize that there may be faithful ways for homosexual people not "to be alone", and to live in relationships which embody the faithfulness and commitment that God calls for in all of our sexual expressions. That, I think, is what the ELCA Assembly actions have suggested is true of some homosexual relationships, provided that they are lived out with the same public accountability, monogamous faithfulness, and lifelong commitment that we expect from marriage. That is not a "redefinition" of love, as again some have charged, but rather it is taking the character of love as declared in scripture as basic for all human life. In doing that, I think the Churchwide Assembly actions are faithful to the biblical witness regarding what God calls for in our relationships and are deeply shaped by scripture's authority.

Heresy is serious language. It has usually been reserved for those teachings which violate and deny the central claim of God's salvation in Christ. One thing that Lutheran tradition affirms is a reading of Scripture that is shaped by those great reformation "solas" ("alone"). But there is not just one sola. It is not just "word alone." It is also Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone. Those other solas guide the way we read scripture so that we keep our thinking and preaching about salvation clear. It seems to me that the Assembly's actions are consistent with those guideposts. It is not sexuality which defines our relationship with God. Our lives and our identities are defined by being united with Christ in baptism, by that happening only through God's grace, and by faith as the shape of our response. If the charge of heresy deals with whether the Assembly actions deny what Lutherans – and the whole church -- have claimed about salvation (and I think this is a 2nd focus for those charges of "heresy"), then the answer has to be a clear "no". The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, one of the foundational documents of the Lutheran church, in article 23 concerning a disagreement about marriage and

sex and the public ministers of the church, says “we are justified neither on account of virginity nor on account of marriage but freely on account of Christ, when we believe that on account of him we have a gracious God.” Salvation does not depend on one’s sexual orientation or on how well we fulfill the Creator’s will for human relationships. That doesn’t mean that these are unimportant matters, but they are not the heart of the gospel. Sexuality is important, and moral issues around it are important, but they are not central. I can’t see any way that the Assembly’s actions contradict or impede the preaching of the gospel, which alone is the power of salvation. In fact I would suggest that they give us new and helpful ways to live out God’s salvation in our lives, in our congregations, and in witness to the world. To equate these actions with heresy seems to me to be either a misunderstanding of what the Churchwide Assembly did, or a misunderstanding of the gospel, i.e., a confusion of what is ultimately important and saving with other important but lesser things.

The third place where I think charges of heresy might focus has to do with the accusation that the ELCA is abandoning the long tradition of the church, and acting without consideration for the rest of the church. There is no doubt that the Assembly’s actions will complicate some ecumenical discussions. But I think we ought to remember a few things here:

(1) Luther faced a crisis over marriage, sex, and the ministers of the church. He looked around and saw pastors who had been forced not to marry, but who had not been given the gift of celibacy. Some of those pastors were living in shame with a woman and a house full of children. Luther saw that they were doing good and faithful ministry, and he insisted that they were already married in the eyes of God, so why could they not be married in the eyes of the church? Luther too challenged the tradition of the church at this meeting point of sex and ministry, and sought faithful change. Such discussions are deep in our roots.

(2) The concern for the tradition of the church with regard to homosexuality needs to be placed in the larger context of how the tradition has dealt with human sexuality in general, and there has not always been an adequate appreciation in the tradition for the goodness of this part of creation. Again, the traditional majority view for much of the church’s history was that

the only purpose for sex in marriage was to have babies. I think that if we've been willing to rethink that part of the tradition and seen that sex can be a good part of how God created us even apart from producing babies, then there may be room to think about what same sex unions ought to be, and ought to be for, and how we might bless and support them. As long as the Spirit is still active, change does not equal heresy or the abandonment of orthodox tradition. And if we can't see the difference, we've fallen into the idolatry of traditionalism.

(3) Let's not forget that the ELCA is not the only, or the first, Lutheran church to ordain openly, partnered gay and lesbian pastors. The Lutheran church in Sweden came to the same conclusion years ago, and others are wrestling with the same issues. We are hardly alone in this.

(4) We have been in full communion agreements with at least two churches who ordain partnered gays and lesbians: the United Church of Christ and, though with its own continuing debates, the Episcopal Church. If the move of the Assembly really were heretical and church-dividing as some have suggested, then these ecumenical relationships should have been repudiated by these same people. We are ecumenically responsible to these other churches, and it seems to me that some negative reactions to the ELCA Assembly end up condemning the churches with whom we have entered into full communion agreements. Do we really intend that?

(5) Ordained women are also an ecumenical barrier and a change to long church tradition. When the ALC decided to ordain women, 42% voted against it – about the same percentage which voted against last summer's resolution about ordination. The leaders at the time recognized that such a move would complicate ecumenical progress, and it was a significant part of why the Missouri Synod stepped away from closer relationships with us. Of course, different views of scripture were all part of that turmoil inside and with the Missouri Synod, and one tragedy is that at the time, the ALC did not try to demonstrate in response to Missouri that ordination of women IS in fact the biblical position. We need to do better this time, and not leave unchallenged and unanswered claims that the Churchwide Assembly's actions simply ignore or abandon scripture.

Would Lutheran unity in the U.S. have been genuine and deep if we had sacrificed the pastoral calls of women for it? I have my doubts. I think the decision to ordain women was a good one – a Spirit-directed one, and I think that even some churches which do not yet ordain women have been able to see and think new things because others have gone down that road. At a recent convention, I actually saw a book published by Zondervan that argues in favor of women pastors! I hope the Assembly's actions this past summer will look similar 40 years from now.

But that will require ongoing and serious conversation as a church. To judge from the story of Peter and Cornelius and the eventual apostolic conference in Acts 15, the Spirit's guidance in our reading of Scripture happens especially when we pray and read the texts together in the context of hearing each other's stories about how God has been at work. After all, Peter had to be willing to go to Cornelius' house despite his continuing questions, and the church in Jerusalem, even though they were very suspicious and unhappy about Peter's actions, had to listen to Peter's story about how God worked there. It seems to me that, though no doubt imperfectly, this is what the ELCA has done around questions about homosexuality for at least the last 20 years. What we've found is (a) we don't agree on what we hear, and (b) some bishops, synods, congregations, and pastors in the church have consistently said that they find God calling gay candidates into public ministry, and that their congregations value, need, and benefit from those ministries. It seems to me that the proposals adopted by the Churchwide Assembly reflect both those realities, and so take seriously the possibility that the Spirit has been at work and has been heard in our conversations with one another. I believe the Assembly's actions are faithful to the model of communal discernment portrayed in the New Testament itself. The Churchwide Assembly's actions are shaped by Scripture's authority, though not in a simplistic "find the regulation" way. What we've found in the last 20 years is not a simple "yes" or "no" to this issue, and what the Assembly's actions attempt to embody is a way to live together in that, with loving disagreement – and that is profoundly biblical.

Now church assemblies can make mistakes. That's why we need this continuing conversation. We have talked about this for more than 20 years. For the most part, those who

were grieved and frustrated over this church's lack of change have stayed with us. Now the same is called for and needed on the part of those who are unhappy with the change. We need each other to discern God's will. Disagreements do not make fellowship and hospitality impossible; remember Peter and Cornelius and the Jerusalem church. Continuing fellowship and hospitality toward one another was necessary for the early church to discern God's will. That's how the Spirit works. It also allows this church to demonstrate to the world a different way of being a community, not by uniformity or by beating the other side, but a genuine unity that might just cause the world to look and say, "behold how they love one another." We have the opportunity to display that. I hope that we will not let the opportunity slip away in the grip of anger, suspicion, and animosity.

That, I think, takes me through the three places where I think those who are charging "heresy" would locate that charge: denial of scripture, denial of salvation, and rejection of the church's tradition. I think in all three cases, the charges are false.

There are other issues that I think need to be part of the discussion as we move forward, and as some try to turn back this decision. I want to mention 3 of them in the time I have left:

(1) In our conversations, let's be clear about what the Assembly's actions do and do not say. They are not a blanket blessing of sin or any promiscuous sexual behavior; they insist on lifelong commitment & exclusive faithfulness. They also do not call for gay marriage, and don't require any ELCA congregation to bless same sex relationships. They allow congregations who want to, to find ways to recognize, support, and hold accountable such relationships. These actions give us the opportunity to publically recognize these relationships which are already among our members, and to make available pastoral counseling and especially the community support needed for remaining faithful in those relationships. The actions open up ways for us to encourage and support faithful, committed, lifelong homosexual relationships. Surely commitment and faithfulness are better, healthier, more God-pleasing, and a better reflection

of the wholeness and salvation which God promises than unstable, disrupted, and promiscuous relationships.

The Assembly's actions also do not require anyone to call a partnered homosexual pastor. They allow congregations who want to, and who believe the Spirit is calling them to do so, to call otherwise qualified and approved gay and lesbian candidates as pastors. The same system of examining candidates' theology, skills, faith, and personal life that exists now will continue to function. The call process remains the same; it is congregations who call pastors. It takes a positive vote of a call committee to send that name to the church council; it takes a positive vote of the council to send the name to the congregation; and it takes a positive vote of the congregation to call that pastor. No congregation is forced to do anything by these actions; no congregation's ministry suffers because of them; but some congregations will find a door opened up that they believe they have heard God calling them through for a long time.

(2) There are already resolutions that call for synods to declare themselves in opposition to the Assembly's actions, and that they and all their congregations will be bound by the unrevised "Visions and Expectations." The NE Iowa Synod Council, I understand, has already drafted such a resolution for their Synod Assembly this year. The bishop there has raised questions about the validity of such a move. The secretary of the ELCA has declared it out of order. I expect we'll hear some response about such moves from the bishops when they meet in April. I also suspect that something similar will come to the SC Synod Assembly. I think this raises several serious issues. One question is whether or not a synod, as a whole, has the authority to take such a stance. It is congregations, not synods, who call pastors. I think there are deep questions about whether a synod can bind the conscience of all its congregations like this. Such a move reverses the whole point about conscience, both in the Assembly's documents and in the Pauline material from which they draw, where the call is that one lovingly recognize the "bound conscience" of the other, not that one should bind them against their will through legislation and parliamentary procedure.

Further, would we really want to give the synod that kind of authority? I'm not sure that many of our congregations, or our pastors, or our bishops, would really want to put the bishop in a role of prohibiting a congregation from calling a pastor who is in compliance with ELCA policies, who is ordained or approved for ordination. Do we really want to suggest that a congregation may issue a call to someone on the roster of the ELCA, but we want to give the bishop responsibility for stopping that call if it involves anyone from a certain group? Standards of discipline for pastors is a churchwide policy, not synodical. Do we really want to set up a patchwork of synods, each with its own chosen set of ministerial standards? If such a declaration of "bound synodical conscience" is going to be suggested, then I think we ought to help people think through its rather disturbing implications.

(3) One more thing: Our conversations too easily and too often sound as though we're talking about someone else, out there, some outsider who wants in. We talk as though gay and lesbian believers aren't already part of our communities. A big problem is that this discussion becomes abstracted from real people. So, let's not do that. This question about homosexuality faces the church not because we have been co-opted by society, or because we want to be nice to everyone, or because we are afraid to say anything negative, or because we have abandoned concern for holiness, obedience, and discipleship, but because we have gay brothers and sisters who are asking the church how they can live out their lives faithfully. They deserve a better answer -- the whole church deserves a better answer -- than simply telling them that they are a problem.

These issues have focused around questions of instructions and prohibitions for a long time. The Assembly's actions have given us the opportunity to step out of that quagmire. What if instead of looking for commands, we start by asking questions about the identity of the church, about whose we are, and why? What if, instead of starting with the prohibitions, we start by thinking about baptism, and what it means that God has united gay and straight in the one body of Christ. Such unity is not a problem, it is a gift and a joy, and we are called to give thanks for it. I hope that there's room, in our conversations and assemblies this spring, to do that.