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## Luther and the Confessions

**Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessions  
on Sexuality and the Bible:  
Then and Now**

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Like most medieval and sixteenth-century theologians whose writings have come down to us Martin Luther opposed same-sex relations, which in his day were referred to as “the unspeakable sin,” “sodomy” and “Italian marriages.” These terms appear mainly in passages where he attacks the immorality (in the observation of Luther and others) that was encouraged by the prohibition of clerical marriage. On the basis of 1 Timothy 3:2 and 1 Corinthians 14:34 Luther also opposed the ordination of women, arguing that scripture restricted the office of ministry to “competent males” (see LW 41,154-155). In both cases Luther’s opinion was formed by customary and prejudicial attitudes (“Italian” marriages”) and his interpretation of scripture, and in both cases the ELCA has chosen to rule against Luther’s views. Both men and women, regardless of sexual orientation, are now eligible to become and remain rostered leaders in the ELCA as long their sexual activity is limited to faithful relationships intended to be lifelong. In his day Luther would not have approved, but Lutheran churches are not bound to Luther’s sixteenth-century opinions apart from the “core of our Christian doctrine” as he defined it: “That without any merit, as a gift of God’s pure grace in Christ, we attain righteousness, life and salvation, and that there is no other way or path, no other means or effort, that can help us attain it” (LW 14,36).

At the same time, Luther did write three of the documents incorporated into the *Book of Concord*: the Large and Small Catechisms and the Smalcald Articles. Moreover, the ELCA accepts the Lutheran Confessions as true witnesses to the gospel (said only of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession) and as valid interpretations of the faith (ELCA Constitution, 2.05 & 2.06). The Confessions discuss sexual desire mainly in the context of arguing that marriage is God’s intention for most human beings and is just as pure and honorable as a life of celibacy and virginity. (Note: celibacy, the state of being unmarried, and virginity, abstinence from sexual relations, are not the same thing, although celibacy is sometimes used as a synonym for chastity and abstinence). Luther’s explanation of the sixth commandment in the Large Catechism is primarily concerned with the honor and necessity of marriage, which Luther calls “a divine and blessed walk of life” and the means God has provided for avoiding unchastity (*Book of Concord*, pp. 414-415). In article 23 on the marriage of priests, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, written by Philip Melancthon, calls the love of one sex for the other a divine ordinance and a natural law that cannot be abrogated (for example, by a vow of celibacy imposed on clergy). Article 23 also defines purity not as abstinence but as the putting to death of lust. Therefore, a celibate person is not per se purer than a married person, although article 23 does acknowledge (like Paul) virginity for the few as a more excellent gift than marriage, which most people need to remain chaste. The main point is, however, that “we are justified neither on the basis of virginity nor on account of marriage but freely on account of Christ, when we believe that on account of him [Christ] we have a gracious God” (*Book of Concord*, pp. 252-253).

What is noteworthy about these texts? First, sixteenth-century Lutheran reformers were more concerned about the legitimacy and integrity of marriage than about homosexual acts, which they simply presumed were sinful. To reduce sexual immorality of every kind among the clergy, they overturned the medieval church's requirement of celibacy and allowed Lutheran ministers to marry. Second, both Catholic defenders of clerical celibacy and Lutheran reformers cited scripture in support of their arguments (e.g., according to article 23 of the Apology). Third, for Lutheran reformers, two arguments were decisive: 1) All sexual desire was infected by sin but God did not intend for it to be that way and provided the divine ordinance of marriage for men and women to keep their sexual desires in check and their sexual activity from being unchaste; 2) A vow of celibacy or virginity, even when strictly observed by total abstinence from same-sex and heterosexual relations, did not merit salvation anymore than did marriage. In both states, only faith in Christ made one pure and acceptable in God's sight and led to salvation.

All well and good for sixteenth-century Europe but what about now? In what way can these sixteenth-century positions be helpful to the ELCA in the aftermath of the 2009 assembly?

1. The most important application I find is the following: Neither salvation nor being Christian depends on one's sexual orientation or the church's expectations about the sexual activity of its rostered leaders—just as for Lutheran reformers it did not depend upon the church's rule about the celibacy or marriage of priests. This does not mean that sexual activity is a matter of indifference to the church or to the behavior of all its members. Love, respect, and fidelity are still expected and forgiveness is available to all who fail in one or another of these. Christians should also be concerned about the social and economic exploitation of sex involving physical abuse, pornography, and prostitution.

2. In regard to personal sexual behavior, the context is different today. Sixteenth-century reformers regarded homosexual relations as sinful while for various reasons many twenty-first century Lutherans (and others) do not. The reasons today include both customary attitudes and different ways of interpreting scripture just as they did in sixteenth-century disagreements over the relative merits of celibacy and marriage. Another difference: as far as I can tell, Luther and other reformers did not recognize a distinction between sexual orientation and sexual activity and they did not debate whether or not sexual orientation was innate, learned, or alterable. Unlike us, on these questions they did not have to consider modern research on sexual orientation and the voices of gays and lesbians in the Christian community.

3. Lutheran reformers argued that sexual relations, just like all other human activities, are tainted by sin. That is the meaning of original sin: the human condition is a fallen one in every respect. They implied, however, that homosexual acts were more sinful than heterosexual acts because heterosexual acts were natural (i.e., intended by God) while homosexual acts were not. That assumption has been earnestly called into question by modern research and by the experience of gays and lesbians.

3. One issue looming today is the origin and nature of marriage. Is it a "divine ordinance" and should it be restricted to the union between a man and a woman? This debate is perhaps closer to the disagreement over marriage and celibacy that was paramount in the Reformation. Sixteenth-century texts and arguments may be more relevant to that discussion.

4. The authority and interpretation of scripture are important issues in all these discussions, and this is where Luther and the Confessions can perhaps be more helpful. First, Luther. Unfortunately, he did not always practice what he preached. The “touchstone” of his biblical interpretation was the gospel, which he defined “at its briefest” as “a discourse about Christ, that he is the son of God and became human for us, that he died and was raised, that he has been established as lord over all things.” (LW 35,18). The gospel was “our guide and instructor in the scriptures,” which Luther used to rate the usefulness of books in both testaments. In his preface to the New Testament, he ranked the gospel of John and the epistles of Paul and Peter above the other books: they showed Christ and taught everything that was necessary to know about salvation. Accordingly, the table of contents for his 1522 German New Testament separated James and three others—Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation—from the first twenty-three books by a large space at the bottom of the page. It was a vivid illustration of Luther’s oft-quoted statement: “All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate Christ” (LW 35,396).

That criterion was applied by him also to the Old Testament. Luther inherited a venerable tradition, already found in the New Testament, of finding Christ in the Old Testament. It was the church’s way of treating both testaments as one sacred scripture, but it gave no specific directions about applying to Christians commands from the Old Testament (e.g., in Leviticus). Luther’s general procedure, stated in *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525) was clean and simple. “The Old Testament is properly understood when we retain from the prophets the beautiful texts about Christ, when we take note of and thoroughly grasp the fine examples, and when we use the laws as we please to our advantage” (LW 35,173). The decalogue was an exception. The ten commandments agreed with natural law and provided a “mirror of life” in which everyone could see wherein they were lacking.

For Luther the bottom line seemed to be: All parts of the Bible are not equal. Although he occasionally made what he thought was a literal interpretation (e.g., no ordination for women), some parts of the New Testament and of the Old Testament were to be interpreted with discretion and were not as directly applicable to Christians as those parts that clearly stated the gospel.

5. Like the reformers in their own writings, the Lutheran Confessions used both prooftexts and arguments that invoked the primacy of the gospel. Except for prefaces to the Epitome and the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, there are few formal statements of biblical authority in the *Book of Concord*. The Solid Declaration states: “First, we confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated” (*Book of Concord*, 527). The Epitome uses similar wording and later calls scripture the “only touchstone” (*Book of Concord*, 486). The confessions do not specify, however, how judgments are to be made according to scripture. Should every verse be applied as literally as possible to Christians or should passages be read with discretion and those expressing the gospel given priority as Luther preferred?

The ELCA constitution offers an indirect answer. It calls the canonical scriptures the “inspired” and “written word of God” and “the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and

life” (ELCA Constitution, 2.02 & 2.03). Prior to these paragraphs on scripture, however, the ELCA confesses its faith in the triune God, Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and the gospel. That faith is the foundation of the church, not the Bible. ELCA Lutherans, therefore, do not believe “in the Bible.” It is the “source and norm” of the church’s faith, not the object of the church’s faith. The objects of faith are the triune God, Jesus Christ, and the gospel, the good news of salvation through Christ alone. They take precedence over anything else the Bible teaches.

6. One more historical note: If we want to understand how ELCA members can disagree so passionately over how to interpret the Bible, we must recall the impact of fundamentalism on all American churches, including Lutherans. Like every religious movement fundamentalism has a history. It started in the nineteenth century outside Lutheranism, but it came to be accepted by many Christians as a divinely-intended way to interpret scripture. In fact, most Christians throughout the centuries have not considered every book of scripture to be equally authoritative or applicable in the literal sense to all believers. American fundamentalism has different views of what makes an interpretation literal, but none of these was dominant in sixteenth-century Lutheranism.

7. Finally, the most important principle of the Lutheran Reformation was not the authority of scripture but Christian freedom. Appealing to scripture as the authority over papal pronouncements and regulations of the Roman Church was a means of gaining and preserving Christian freedom. In the sixteenth century that meant specifically freedom from ways recommended or required by the church (like clerical celibacy, monastic vows, praying to saints, acquiring indulgences, etc.) to merit salvation. Salvation was given freely through the gospel, which promises justification by faith alone and empowers believers for love and service to others. Policies that did not infringe on Christian freedom could be set by the church, but people could hold different opinions, as indeed ELCA members do, on all kinds of religious, social, and political matters.

8. It seems consistent with Christian freedom and the priority of the gospel (and it seems just) for the church to make a decision on controversial matters like admission to rostered leadership without regard to sexual orientation but under the same terms for everyone. We are free to agree with the decision or not to agree, but the decision itself does not make the ELCA unfaithful to scripture or to the Lutheran Confession. Most importantly, the decision does not contradict the Triune God and the gospel on which the ELCA primarily bases its faith.

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