

## The Ordination of Women and Ecclesial Endorsement of Homosexuality: Are They Related?

Lutheran Theological Conference of South Africa

FELS Retreat Center

11-14 August 2009

The August 2009 issue of *The Lutheran* (the official organ of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) carried two news items side by side. First there is a column under the heading “Rite Sought for Gays” reporting on requests from Episcopal bishops in six American states where same-sex marriages are now legal requesting permission to adapt their church’s prayer book for use at these weddings. Next there is a report that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cameroon at its General Synod meeting this past June voted by a wide margin to ordain women.<sup>1</sup> Are the two matters related- the ordination of practicing homosexuals and the ordination of women?

Over a decade ago, in 1996, Wolfhart Pannenberg shocked mainline churches in Europe and North America when he declared that “If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”<sup>2</sup> In the years after Pannenberg’s pronouncement Lutheran churches in North America and Europe have steadily moved toward providing liturgical formularies for the blessing of same sex-unions and the ordination of men and women who identify themselves as gay or lesbian.

In North America, the ELCA will entertain proposals that would allow for both the ordination of homosexuals living in committed, monogamous relationships and churchly blessings of such unions at their national assembly meeting in Minneapolis later this month. The Church of Sweden already has a woman, Eva Brunne, who has identified herself as a lesbian elected as bishop of Stockholm on May 26 of this year. The Church of Sweden has a liturgical rite for the blessing of same sex couples although these unions are not yet equated with heterosexual marriage. Although according to a release of the Ecumenical News International dated July 23, 2009, the majority of bishops, the doctrinal commission and the church board are in favor of expanding the definition of marriage to include same sex couples. This proposal will probably go to the general synod in October.

Opponents see within these moves a clear and certain denial of biblical authority and an over-turning of foundational moral truth while champions of these changes see them as necessary steps for the sake of the church’s mission. What is recognized by all is that change threatens the unity of the church. Those promoting change often argue that

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Lutheran* (August 2009), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Revelation and Homosexual Experience” *Christianity Today* (November 11, 1996), 37.

changes in church order to allow for the inclusion of homosexual men and women in the church's ministry is on the same level of previous decisions to ordain women. For example, just days ago, Herbert Chilstrom, the retired presiding bishop of the ELCA circulated "An Open Letter Response to the CORE Open Letter," chiding several prominent theologians and church leaders for their inconsistency in affirming women's ordination but not the full inclusion of homosexuals in the ministry of the church. Significant voices raised in support of the historic Christian teaching on sexuality insist that making provision for homosexual clergy and acceptance of same-sex unions is quite distinct from the question of women's ordination. For example, the American Lutheran New Testament scholar, Craig Koester argues that to draw an analogy between endorsement of homosexual practice and women's ordination is flawed since the Scriptures are said to be inconsistent in their testimony to leadership by women but consistent in the rejection of homosexual behavior<sup>3</sup>. A similar case is made by R.T. France<sup>4</sup> and Robert Gagnon.<sup>5</sup> It is this issue that this paper will examine by looking at the parallels in theological method and argumentation used to defend both practices.

1. The advocacy for women's ordination and for the ordination of homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions is argued in the churches as a matter of social justice.

Church office and sexual fulfillment are seen as matters of entitlement. Just as barriers to women and homosexuals have been removed in other areas of civic life and the work place, the same demand is made on the church. This is especially true in church bodies where social justice is not seen as a work of God in the government of the left hand but where the promotion of social justice is seen as a part, perhaps even the major part of the church's mission to the world. Here it is argued that the church must enact social justice in its own midst by removing barriers to equality. In fact Krister Stendahl argues "It seems to me almost impossible to assent-be it reluctantly or gladly -to the political emancipation of women while arguing on biblical grounds against the ordination of women."<sup>6</sup>

This was in large part the argument of Gustaf Wingren over against Anders Nygren in the Church of Sweden. Nygren argued against the move to ordain women in Sweden in 1958. After the decision was made to allow for the ordination of women, Nygren

---

<sup>3</sup> Craig Koester, "The Bible and Sexual Boundaries" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Winter 1993), 388.

<sup>4</sup> R.T. France, "From Romans to the Real World: Biblical Principles and Cultural Change in Relation to Homosexuality and the Ministry of Women" in *Romans and the People of God*, eds. S.K. Soderlund and N.T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 234-253.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 441-443.

<sup>6</sup> *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics*, trans. Emilie T. Sander (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 39.

and others still protested. In 1974, Wingren resigned the pastoral office in protest of what he saw as a social justice issue in the resistance to female clergy.<sup>7</sup>

2. Churchly acceptance of woman's ordination, the ordination of homosexuals and blessing of same-sex unions has been fueled by powerful liberationist movements within the culture rather than biblical understanding.

Feminism had its roots in nineteenth century equalitarian impulses that promoted social change. Many of the first women who would be seen as matriarchs of what might be more specifically identified as "feminist theology" were shaped by nineteenth century American revivalism.<sup>8</sup> While feminist theologies are variegated<sup>9</sup>, they have in common a strong theme that women are oppressed by patriarchal structures and need to be emancipated from these restrictive, ideological paradigms and freed for access to all aspects of the church life including the pastoral office. While various gay liberationist movements are historically much more recent than feminism, they tend to have similar goals. For example "Lutherans Concerned," a North American group works for full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered persons in the life of the church, that is, ordination and the blessing of those who lived in committed same-sex relationships. Both movements of feminist and gay liberation insist of a revisionist understanding of biblical texts that were previously held to be prohibitive and see the Gospel primarily as a means of empowerment and change.

3. In case for both the ordination of women and the ordination of homosexuals, Galatians 3:28 is used in such a way as to sever redemption from creation.

In a short monograph that would become foundational in making a biblical case for the ordination of women, where it was first published in 1958 and then in the USA after it was translated into English by Emilie Sander in 1966 was Krister Stendahl's *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics*. Stendahl maintained that Paul achieved an "evangelical breakthrough" in Galatians as the distinction between male and female is rendered obsolete. Stendahl writes "But in Christ the dichotomy *is* overcome; through baptism a new unity is created, and that is not only a matter discerned by the eyes of faith but one that manifests itself in the social dimensions of the church."<sup>10</sup> The new reality of redemption transcends and

---

<sup>7</sup> See Carl Axel Aurelius, "Wingren, Gustaf (1910-2000)" in *Theologische Realenzyklopedie* – Band 36 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 110. Also see Mary Elizabeth Anderson, "Gustaf Wingren (1910-2000)" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Summer 2009), 198-217.

<sup>8</sup> See Melanie May, "Feminist Theology" in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*- Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 305.

<sup>9</sup> For a helpful survey, see Hans Schwarz, *Theology in a Global Context: The Last Two Hundred Years* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 487-500 and Roland Ziegler, "Liberation Theology in the Leading Ladies of Feminist Theology" in *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 137-152.

<sup>10</sup> Stendahl, 33.

replaces the old order of creation. Paul's defense of the old order in I Corinthians is seen as a necessary and eschatologically-limited corrective for a chaotic situation where the Gospel was not yet fully apprehended. It is penultimate and provisional concession.

Edward Schroeder<sup>11</sup> extends Stendahl's basic hermeneutic to the question of the church's response to homosexuality. For Schroeder, the questions of blessing same-sex unions and the ordination of homosexuals are answered in the affirmative on the basis of his application of a law/promise hermeneutic that he claims comes from Luther. According to Schroeder's construal of this hermeneutic, Luther's approach to the Scripture is to see Christ at the heart and center of the Bible. The Scripture itself consists of two words from God, a word of law and a word of promise. He puts it like this "Scripture's law serves as God's diagnostic agent- diagnosis of our malady, not prescription for our healing. God's Law is X-ray, not ethics. The healing for patients diagnosed by the Law is God's promise, the Christ-quotient of both OT and NT. The law's purpose (Paul said it first - after he received his 'new' hermeneutics beginning at Damascus) is to 'push sinners to Christ.'"<sup>12</sup> Once sinners are in Christ, they are no longer under the law but under grace. Thus he writes "Once Christ-connected they come into the force-field of his 'new commandment,' and it really is new, not refurbished 'old' commandment, not 'Moses rehabilitated.' Christ supersedes Moses -not only for salvation, but also for ethics. In Paul's language the touchstone for this new commandment is the 'mind of Christ' and being led by, walking by, his Holy Spirit. More than once Paul makes it 'perfectly clear' that this is a new 'law-free' way of life."<sup>13</sup> Schroeder then goes on to ask and answer the question of what we are to do with all the commands and imperatives in the Bible in light of this new way of life, free of the law. He concludes "First of all, this new hermeneutic relativizes them."<sup>14</sup> Here Schroeder sees himself in company with Luther, especially Luther's treatise of 1525, "How Christians Should Regard Moses"<sup>15</sup> to which we shall return a bit later. Arguing that the law applies only to the old creation while the promise constitutes life in the new creation, Schroeder asserts that human sexuality is clearly a component of the old creation, and hence is under the governance of the law.

Surely there is much in Luther and the Lutheran confessional writings that seems to give credence to Schroeder's argument. In 1522, Luther wrote in his ""The Estate of Marriage" that marriage was a bodily and outward thing: "Know therefore that marriage is an

---

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed treatment of Schroeder's position, see John T. Pless, "Using and Misusing Luther in Contemporary Debates on Homosexuality: A Look at Two Theologians" *Lutheran Forum* (Summer 2005), 50-57

<sup>12</sup> Edward Schroeder, "Thursday Theology 159" (January, 28, 2001), 4 at <http://www.crossings>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 35:155-174. Hereafter abbreviated as *LW*.

outward, bodily thing, like any other worldly undertaking."<sup>16</sup> Thus Luther recognizes the place of civil authority in regulating matters of sexuality and marriage<sup>17</sup>

Does Luther's assessment of marriage as an outward thing, an artifact of the old creation, make questions of sexual ethics a matter of relativity as Schroeder contends and therefore lead to a definition of marriage elastic enough to include same-sex unions? I think not. There are several difficulties with Schroeder's approach. The first has to do with his understanding of the place of creation in Luther's thinking.

In contrasting old creation with new creation, Schroeder is concerned to show that the law is operative in creation both to deliver justice (recompense, as he puts it) and to preserve the fallen world from plunging into total chaos. Of course, these are themes that are readily found in Luther. But then Schroeder makes an interpretative move that Luther does not make. While Luther surely sees that neither the laws of Moses nor civil laws that indeed vary from place to place and one historical epoch to another, work salvifically, he does not view the law as being merely set aside by the Gospel. To use the language of the *Formula of Concord*, "the distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light"<sup>18</sup> but it is not a light that blinds us to the normative character of Holy Scripture. To reduce the distinction to an ideology, abstracted from the actual content of the biblical texts blurs both God's judgment and His grace. Schroeder's law/promise hermeneutic ends up with a divorce between creation and redemption, a schism between faith and life that is foreign to Luther.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> LW 45:25.

<sup>17</sup> Luther sees marriage as grounded in creation. It is not a sacrament that bestows forgiveness but there is no higher social calling where faith is exercised than that of the family. Marriage is the arena for faith and love. In 1519, Luther still regarded marriage as a sacrament. The change is evident in "The Babylonian Captivity" of 1520. In divesting marriage of its sacramental status, Luther actually elevates marriage as he makes it equal or superior to celibacy. See Scott Hendrix, "Luther on Marriage" *Lutheran Quarterly* XIV (Autumn 2000), 355; James Nestingen, "Luther on Marriage, Vocation, and the Cross" *Word & World* XXIII (Winter 2003), 31-39; William Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960); and Carter Lindberg, "The Future of a Tradition: Luther and the Family" in *All Theology is Christology: Essays in Honor of David P. Scaer*, edited by Dean Wenthe et al (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2000), 133-151. For a picture of Luther's contribution to the place of marriage in western culture, see John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 42-73. Lindberg aptly summarizes Luther's impact on marriage: "Luther's application of evangelical theology to marriage and family desacramentalized marriage; desacralized the clergy and resacralized the life of the laity; opposed the maze of canonical impediments to marriage; strove to unravel the skein of canon law, imperial law, and German customs; and joyfully affirmed God's good creation, including sexual relations" (133). Also see the insightful treatments by Oswald Bayer in "The Protestant Understanding of Marriage," "Luther's View of Marriage," and "Law and Freedom in Marriage" in *Freedom in Response-Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, trans. Jeffrey Crayzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 156-205.

<sup>18</sup> Formula of Concord-Solid Declaration V:1, Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, translators, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 581. Hereafter abbreviated as Kolb and Wengert.

<sup>19</sup> Contra this divorce, see Bernd Wannewetsch, "Luther's Moral Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, edited by D. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 120-135; William Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Reinhard Huetter, "The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics" in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* edited by K. Bloomquist and John Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 31-54. Schroeder asserts

Luther understands creation as the arena for God's work. Schroeder introduces a relativism and subjectivism to creation that is not there in Luther when he makes the claim that homosexuals are simply "wired differently" <sup>20</sup> than heterosexuals. Luther, in fact, sees human identity as male and female as a creational reality. Or to use the words of William Lazareth, God's ordering of creation is heterosexual.<sup>21</sup> This can be seen in Luther's exposition of the sixth commandment in the *Large Catechism* where he writes "He has established it (marriage) before all others as the first of all institutions, and he created man and woman differently (as is evident) not for indecency but to be true to each other, to be fruitful, to beget children, and to nurture and bring them up to the glory of God." <sup>22</sup> This is also expressed in a letter Luther wrote to Wolfgang Reissenbusch in March, 1527. After counseling Reissenbusch that he is free to renounce his vow of celibacy without committing sin, Luther observes "Our bodies are in great part the flesh of women, for by them we were conceived, developed, borne, suckled, and nourished. And it is quite impossible to keep entirely apart from them. This is in accord with the Word of God. He has caused it to be so and wishes it so."<sup>23</sup>

Earlier, in his "The Estate of Marriage" (1522), after noting God's design and purpose in creating humanity as male and female, Luther speaks of this ordinance or institution as "inflexible,"<sup>24</sup> beyond alteration. What Luther sees as a given, biological reality, Schroeder now moves into the realm of the subjective with an appeal to the explanation of the First Article in the Small Catechism. Luther's doxological confession that "God has created me together with all that exists. God has given and still preserves my body and soul" eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses" is now used by Schroeder to make God the author of homosexuality. He writes "Luther doesn't mention sexuality in that gift-list, but today God puts it on the lists we have. If 'hetero-' is one of the creator's ordainings, then wouldn't 'homo-' also be on the gift-list for those so ordained? Isn't it 'most certainly true' for both that they 'thank, praise, serve and obey God' as the sexual persons they have been ordained to be?' Both homosexuals and heterosexuals have a common calling to care for creation, carrying out the double agenda in God's secular world - the law of preservation and the law of recompense. If the gifts are different, the pattern of care will be different. What examples are already available within the ELCA of Christians-gay and straight- doing just that-preservation and recompense -with the sexual gift that God has ordained? Despite the current conflict, is it true about sexuality too that 'what God ordains is always good?' "<sup>25</sup>

---

that "Huetter's conclusion really is 'the end' of the promise of Lutheran ethics" -"Thursday Theology 26" (November 12, 1998), 1.

<sup>20</sup> "Thursday Theology 34 (January 28, 1999), 2.

<sup>21</sup> William Lazareth, "ELCA Lutherans and Luther on Heterosexual Marriage" VIII (Spring 1995), 235-268. Lazareth writes "Clearly, same-sex 'unions' do not qualify as marriages to be blessed for Christians who have been baptized as saints into the body of Christ. The Lutheran church should not condone the sinful acts (conduct) of an intrinsic disorder (orientation) in God's heterosexual ordering of creation" (236).

<sup>22</sup> Large Catechism I:207, Kolb and Wengert, 414.

<sup>23</sup> Theodore Tappert, editor, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Press, 1995), 273.

<sup>24</sup> LW 45:18.

<sup>25</sup> "Thursday Theology 51" (May 27, 1999), 3.

Luther's rejection of required clerical celibacy is seen by Schroeder as a precedent for relaxing requirements for individuals who understand themselves to be homosexual. Schroeder writes: "For outsiders to 'require' celibacy of them as a prerequisite for the validity of their Christ-confession is parallel to the Roman church's 'requirement' of celibacy for the clergy. Concerning that requirement the Lutheran Reformers said: God created the sexual 'pressure' that surfaces at puberty. To 'require' celibacy of the clergy - or anybody- is blatantly contradicting God. For those whom God 'wired differently' as a student once described himself -regardless of how that different wiring came to pass - requiring celibacy for him sounds like the same thing to me. It is God, not the gay guy, who is being contradicted."<sup>26</sup>

Here Schroeder reveals a basic premise that is not shared by Luther, namely, that homosexuality is ordained by God. Luther does not speak of a generic sexual drive or instinct but of the desire of man for woman, and woman for man: "This is the Word of God, through whose power procreative seed is planted in man's body and a natural, ardent desire for woman is kindled and kept alive. This cannot be restrained either by vows or laws"<sup>27</sup> Luther seldom mentions homosexual behavior. But when he does, his evaluation is always negative. For example, Luther identifies the sin of Sodom with homosexuality. Commenting on Genesis 19:4-5, he writes "I for my part do not enjoy dealing with this passage, because so far the ears of the Germans are innocent of and uncontaminated by this monstrous depravity; for even though disgrace, like other sins, has crept in through an ungodly soldier and a lewd merchant, still the rest of the people are unaware of what is being done in secret. The Carthusian monks deserve to be hated because they were the first to bring this terrible pollution into Germany from the monasteries of Italy".<sup>28</sup> In the same section of the Genesis lectures, Luther refers to "the heinous conduct of the people of Sodom " as "extraordinary, inasmuch as they departed from the natural passion and longing of the male for the female, which is implanted into nature by God, and desired what is altogether contrary to nature. Whence comes this perversity? Undoubtedly from Satan, who after people have once turned away from the fear of God, so powerfully suppresses nature that he blots out the natural desire and stirs up a desire that is contrary to nature."<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> "Thursday Theology 159, 5. Similar arguments are advanced by Christian Batalden Scharen, *Married in the Sight of God* (Landham, Maryland: University of America Press, 2000), although he finally must admit that "an ethic for same-sex relationships goes nowhere with the 'letter' of Luther's views (128). Likewise, Martha Ellen Stortz, "Rethinking Christian Sexuality: Baptized into the Body of Christ" in *Faithful Conversations: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* edited by James M. Childs, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). 64-66.

<sup>27</sup> Tappert, 273. For similar statements in Luther see *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook*, edited by Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), 137-170.

<sup>28</sup> *LW* 3:251-252.

<sup>29</sup> *LW* 3:255; Also note Luther's comment on "On War Against the Turk" (1529): "Both the pope and the Turk are so blind and senseless that they commit the dumb sins shamelessly, as an honorable and praiseworthy thing. Since they think so lightly of marriage, it serves them right that there are dog-marriages (and would to God that they were dog-marriages), indeed, also 'Italian marriages' and 'Florentine brides' among them; and they think these things good. I hear one horrible thing after another about what an open and glorious Sodom Turkey is, and everybody who has looked around a little in Rome or Italy knows very well how God revenges and punishes the forbidden marriage, so that Sodom and Gomorrah, which God

Luther's rejection of homosexual activity is not merely a matter of aesthetic preference but rather a theological judgment rooted in the reality of the way the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness that will not acknowledge God to be the Creator and Lord that He is. For Luther, homosexuality is a form of idolatry, of false worship as we see in his lectures on Romans<sup>30</sup>. In attributing homosexuality to the creative will of God for certain human beings, Schroeder strangely enough overlooks the teaching of his mentor, Werner Elert who maintains that creation places humanity in an ordered world of nomological existence.<sup>31</sup>

4. Opponents of women's ordination and those who resist the acceptance of homosexuality as a moral equivalent to heterosexuality are labeled as fundamentalists and legalists.

Taking "the interpretation closest to hand" as that one "which allows the text to say what it says most simply" to use the language of Hermann Sasse<sup>32</sup> is equated with fundamentalism. The labeling then becomes a weapon of defense from listening to what is said in the text. A simple reading of the text that yields an undesired result, i.e. that women can't be pastors or that homosexual acts lie outside of the realm of God's design is dismissed.

Lutherans are rightly allergic to the charge of legalism. Arguments were made for the ordination of women on the basis of the freedom of the Gospel as we have noted in Krister Stendahl. In a very clever statement issued by revisionist clergy and laity in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and aimed polemically at supporters of the church catholic's traditional position on sexuality<sup>33</sup> under the title "We Believe in the Gospel," advocates of a revised sexual ethic accuse those holding to scriptural

---

overwhelmed in days of old with fire and brimstone (Gen. 19:24), must seem a mere jest and prelude compared with these abominations" *LW* 46:198.

<sup>30</sup> Luther, in exposition of Romans 1, Luther links homosexual behavior with idolatry: "For this reason, namely: idolatry, God gave, not only to the above-mentioned disgrace, them, some of them, up to dishonorable passions, to shameful feelings and desires, before God, although even they, like Sodom, called this sin....And the men likewise, with an overpowering drive of lust, gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion, which overpowered the judgment of their reason, for another, men with men, and thus they deal with each other in mutual disgrace, committing shameless acts and consequently, receiving the penalty, punishment, due for their error, fitting and just for so great a sin, the sin of idolatry, in their own persons, according to the teaching and arrangement of God" *LW* 25:12-13.

<sup>31</sup> See Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*. Trans. Carl J. Schneider (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957). Elert writes "Creation places man into the world, *nomos* binds him to the world. In the first place, nomological under law means only that we, like all other creatures, are subject to the orderly rule of God and that we do not live in a world of chaos and arbitrariness" (51).

<sup>32</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Did God Really Say...?" in *The Lonely Way*-Vol. II, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 318.

<sup>33</sup> For the defense of the traditional position by Canadian Lutherans, see "The Banff Commission Declaration on the Malaise That Affects the Church of our Days" in *The Banff Commission*, ed. K. Glen Johnson (New Delhi, New York: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 2008), 9-26.

teaching as those who have revised and abandoned the Gospel by “turning it into law.”<sup>34</sup>

5. In making the case for women’s ordination and for the ordination of homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions, biblical texts once taken as clear are argued unclear or dismissed as culturally conditioned and time bound.

Some assert that the contested texts on relative to women in the office (I Corinthians 14:33-38 and I Timothy 2:11-14) and on homosexuality (Leviticus 18:22, 24; 20:13; Romans 1:24-27; I Corinthians 6:9-10; I Timothy 1:9-10) clearly reflect the theological worldview of the biblical writers but that these teachings are culturally conditioned and hence open to reassessment. Typical are the arguments that the Bible represents a patriarchal and or heterosexualist structure that may be abandoned without doing violence to the essential message of the Holy Scriptures.<sup>35</sup> Others argue that the disputed texts are unclear and therefore incapable of providing a sure foundation for church practice<sup>36</sup>. In his 2006 book, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism*, Wayne Grudem has demonstrated how both approaches have been adopted by some neo-Evangelical theologians.<sup>37</sup>

6. Ordination of women and ordination of homosexuals is seen as a matter of necessity for the sake of the Gospel and mission.

The case is made that a church that excludes women from the pastoral office (which is often equated with “positions of leadership” and/or renders a negative moral judgment on homosexual practice will not be attractive to a world that does not discriminate on the basis of gender or sexual orientation. Further, it is asserted that all Christians need to be actively involved in missionary outreach. Teachings that would exclude some Christians on the basis of gender or sexual identity from full participation in the mission of the church are seen as detrimental to effective missionary outreach and stumbling blocks to the proclamation of the Gospel which is meant for all people.

---

<sup>34</sup> “We Believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ” accessed on July 26, 2009 from <http://www.webelieveinthegospel.org/2652.html>.

<sup>35</sup> This presupposition in regard to women’s ordination is critiqued by numerous essays in *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective* and in regard to homosexuality by Armin Wenz, *The Contemporary Debate on Homosexual Clergy*, trans. Holger Sonntag (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), 3-24; also Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, an early attempt by Ruth Bretscher Rensmeyer, *Neither Male or Female* (East Northport, New York: Commission on Women of the Atlantic District LCMS, 1997). Rensmeyer draws heavily on Stendahl.

<sup>37</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006).

7. Arguments for both the ordination of women and the ordination of homosexuals along with churchly blessing of same-sex unions are often made on the basis of what A. MacIntyre has identified as an “ethic of emotivism.”

The case is made for women’s ordination and an ethic affirming of homosexuality on the basis of emotional appeal. The pain of exclusion, for example, is used by advocates to urge the church to respond with sympathy rather than restriction. With an “ethic of emotivism” claims to biblical authority or creedal teaching trumped by an appeal to the emotional well-being of those who denied access either to the pastoral office or marriage.

8. Women’s ordination and the ordination of homosexuals are urged on the church for the sake of unity and inclusiveness yet both practices fracture genuine ecumenicity.

Martha Ellen Stortz contributed an article, "Rethinking Christian Sexuality: Baptized into the Body of Christ" to the volume, *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality*. Stortz proposes a discussion of sexuality that begins with baptism, thus avoiding the reality of humanity created as male and female. Her conclusions are predictable. Baptismal identity over-rides sexual identity.<sup>38</sup> Thus sexual differentiation, distinctions between male and female, straight or gay are overcome by unity in the Body of Christ. Christians may indeed entertain a variety of opinions regarding men and women in the life of the church, sexual preference and ethics but these differences are said not to be church divisive. Working with something akin to a paradigm of “reconciled diversity,”<sup>39</sup> these differences are to be lived with and even celebrated. In actuality, however, such an approach will finally exclude from unity those who hold a traditional position on these matters. When truth is sacrificed for unity, unity will finally demand the exclusion of those who insist on truth.

In reality both women’s ordination and an accommodation of a permissive ethic in regard to homosexuality have fractured churches. First of all, churches that have compromised on these issues have separated themselves from continuity with the catholic pass. In that sense such communions may be said to have deserted “vertical ecumenism.” They have become chronologically sectarian, introducing novelties unknown to apostolic Christianity. Such a church can no longer confess the words of the prophets and the apostles to be the words of the living God. Second, these communions put themselves in a position that makes “horizontal ecumenism,” conversation with Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism even more difficult. Simply put, communions which determine theology and practice by majority vote and embrace religious pluralism as a given lack credibility in ecumenical dialogue with Rome or the East.

---

<sup>38</sup> Stortz, 59-79.

<sup>39</sup> Here see Reinhard Slenczka, “*Magnus Consensus*: The Unity of the Church in the Truth and Society’s Pluralism” *Logia* (Holy Trinity 2004), 21-39. Slenczka observes that “*magnus consensus*” is reduced to “reconciled diversity as an external mark of the church at the expense of truth; the question of truth is circumvented by pointing to the diversity in scriptural interpretations” (25).

9. Ordination of women, ordination of homosexuals and ecclesiastical recognition of same-sex unions are at first proposed as a matter of compromise or as a local option but they will finally demand universal acceptance.

When ordination of women was introduced in Sweden a “conscience clause” was included. Incrementally the provisions of this protective measure were lessened and finally removed. Candidates for ordination must demonstrate their acceptance of the legitimacy of female clergy prior to ordination. The Recommendations of the Sexuality Taskforce in the ELCA propose something of a local option, individual synods and congregations may opt not to have homosexual clergy or to provide rituals for blessing same sex couples. However such a situation of compromise will hardly satisfy either activist for change or those who believe that the Scriptural ethic precludes the placing in office of those who practice homosexuality. To paraphrase Richard John Neuhaus where orthodoxy is made optional, orthodoxy will finally be proscribed.

10. It is argued that by refusing to ordain women and homosexuals to the pastoral office the church is deprived of the particular spiritual gifts they possess and that these individuals are unjustly denied the opportunity for spiritual self-expression.

This argument relies on an understanding of the ministry that sees the ministry as an avenue for the expression of personal *charismata* rather than an office established by Christ and filled according to His mandates. Spiritual giftedness is confused with personal expression. Creativity and freedom to express oneself without boundary or restrict are celebrated in the name of autonomy. Given the spiritual climate of the postmodern context this becomes attractive as “gifts of the Spirit” are set in contrast to a biblical/confessional understanding of office. Expressive individualism takes precedence over an understanding of an office instituted by Christ to serve His church with Word and Sacrament.

Reviewing arguments made for the ordination of women in Lutheran churches in the middle years of the twentieth century, it is hard not to conclude that variants of these arguments are currently being used to advocate the ordination of homosexuals and to provide for an ecclesiastical recognition of same sex unions through an elastic definition of marriage that ignores both “nature and institution.”<sup>40</sup> Creation is left behind in pursuit of purely spiritual categories and relational qualities. Thus one Lutheran ethicist, Paul Jersild, is worried that some Christians have adopted an “excessively physicalist

---

<sup>40</sup> Here see Oswald Bayer, “Nature and Institution: Luther’s Doctrine of the Three Estates” in *Freedom in Response-Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 90-118. Also note Alfvag, Knut. “Christians in Society: Luther’s Teaching on the Two Kingdoms and the Three Estates Today” *Logia* (Reformation 2005), 15-20.

approach to homosexuality."<sup>41</sup> Creation is seen as secondary if not irrelevant. But without creation, there is no incarnation. Without creation, the new creation is reduced to a spiritualistic construct of our own imagination.

After women's ordination was permitted in the Church of Sweden, Bishop Anders Nygren perhaps spoke prophetically when he said: "As this current issue decision not only means a determination of the specific issue concerning female pastors, but I am convinced that our church has now shifted onto a previously unknown track heading in the direction of Gnosticism and the *Schwaermerei*."<sup>42</sup> In a tentative and somewhat ambivalent way, Helmut Thielicke would take cautious but nevertheless perceptible steps down this path when he affirmed that the writers of Holy Scripture were opposed to women's ordination and homosexual practice but that these biblical prohibitions are not absolutely binding on us as the church acquires a new and deeper knowledge<sup>43</sup>.

In the current move to sanction same sex unions and provide access to the pastoral office, the Gnosticism and enthusiasm that were magnetic for a departure from the New Testament mandates regarding man and woman in the church have seductively drawn Lutheran churches further away her apostolic foundations. Those who celebrate these changes rightly see that they have created something new. Else Marie Pedersen from the University of Denmark argues that the ordination of women has humanized the church, yielding a new understanding of the church "so that ministry will be about the pastor's authenticity, rather than about who, on the surface is a normal male. Authenticity and honesty as well as a solid education ought to be more important than whatever sex or sexuality a pastor has, given that the gospel is proclaimed in Word and Sacrament."<sup>44</sup> This vision of the church with a ministry grounded in the "authenticity" of the pastor presents quite a different picture from the one given in the New Testament. Nygren's fears are confirmed and we are left to ponder the weight of Hermann Sasse's observation that "There are some questions raised by the devil to destroy the Church of Christ. To achieve this he may use as his mouth piece not only ambitious professors of theology, his favorite tools, but also simple pious souls. Why women cannot be ordained is one of these questions."<sup>45</sup>

The situation of world Lutheranism does not invite an arrogant and carnal security on the part of confessional churches that have not yet succumbed to the temptation to worldly

---

<sup>41</sup> Paul Jersild, *Spirit Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 139. Also see B. Wannewetsch's critique of the "docetic" turn taken by advocates of homosexual unions in his "Old Docetism-New Moralism?" Questioning a New Direction in the Homosexuality Debate" *Modern Theology* (July 2000), 353-364.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted from *Kyrkomets protokoll*, nr. 4, 158, p. 154 in Harrison/Pless, 9.

<sup>43</sup> See Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*- Volume 3, trans Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 221-22 and *The Ethics of Sex*, trans John Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 269-292. Also note Sasse's sharp rebuke in "Did God Really Say?...A Reply to Professor Dr. Helmut Thielicke's Article 'Thoughtless, Doctrinaire, Loveless'" in *The Lonely Way*- Volume 2, 317-322.

<sup>44</sup> Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen, "Women's Ordination in Denmark: The Humanization of the Ordained Ministry" *Dialog* (Spring 2009), 5-6.

<sup>45</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Ordination of Women" in Harrison/Pless, 263-264. One may read Reinhard Slenczka's "When the Church Ceases to be the Church" as something of an extension of Sasse's point but now in relationship to ecclesiastical acceptance of homosexuality. His essay is published in *The Banff Commission* (New Delhi, New York: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 2008), 37-50.

compromise. Rather it is given to us to heed the apostolic admonitions to “keep a close watch on yourself and your teaching” (I Timothy 4:16) and “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (I Corinthians 10:12).

Prof. John T. Pless  
Concordia Theological Seminary  
Fort Wayne, Indiana USA  
VII. 28. 2009