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## In Favour of Blessing Same-Sex Relationships

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### Introduction

Of course there were rumours, and I had my suspicions about the two individuals<sup>1</sup> sitting across from me. Today, what had been guessed was confirmed. Yes, they were gay and they wanted to have their relationship blessed. They reasoned that since they were in a long-term, committed relationship and were Christians, they wanted a ceremony that reflected these facts. Further, since they were active and committed members of the parish, they wanted to be blessed by me—their pastor—in their church’s sanctuary.

So the struggle began: Could a Lutheran pastor serving in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada bless a same-gender relationship in good conscience?

The voices against such action are plentiful. A superficial reading of selected passages of Scripture (Genesis 19:1-14; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Judges 19:1-30 (20:6); 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-20; 1 Timothy 1:8-10) suggests that homosexuality is wrong, a sin, and an abomination. This conclusion is reflected in contemporary thought ranging from the scholarly works of Pannenberg<sup>2</sup> to the Internet ramblings of Bohlin and Schmidt.<sup>3</sup> Our own church in convention states that “this church does not ordain openly practicing homosexuals, nor does it bless homosexual unions. In 1993, the Convention noted that this would remain the practice of this church.”<sup>4</sup> Regarding blessings, however, this statement is at best an inference. The 1993 resolution is limited to the ordination of homosexuals and makes no mention whatsoever about the blessing of the same-sex unions.<sup>5</sup>

Against these powerful voices, the question remains: Can an argument in favour of blessing a same-sex union be made from within the Lutheran context? I believe so.

### **The Immutability of the Law**

As members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada we believe and teach that the Law has two uses – to maintain outward discipline which creates a just, safe, and orderly society and to bring us to the knowledge of our sins which then prepares us to receive the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> These two uses of the Law, because they are absolutely necessary for our social and spiritual survival, make the Law immutable.

But are individual laws within the Law equally immutable? The biblical and historical answer has always been no. Laws within the Law are subject to change, to reinterpretation, and even on occasion, to dismissal. Some examples from within Scripture itself can be identified. The Third Commandment states in part, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for Yahweh your God” (Exodus 20:8-9). That the Sabbath is the seventh day or Saturday is not open to debate. Yet in Acts 20:7 we read, “On the first day of the week we met to break bread.” For almost all Christians, Sunday has replaced the Sabbath as the day of reverence and worship.

Another example reflecting changes within Scripture concerns circumcision. Leviticus 12:3 states, “On the eighth day the child’s foreskin must be circumcised,” and Luke 2:21 states, “When the eighth day came and the child was to be circumcised, they gave him the name Jesus ....” But, in Acts 15 James rules that circumcision is among those things that make it “more difficult for pagans who turn to God.” Laws regarding circumcision are abrogated.

Examples of change regarding dietary laws can also be cited: Leviticus 20:25 and Acts 10:9-16. Examples of biblical laws which society has changed can also be identified. Leviticus 20:27 allows for the execution of male and female witches by stoning, but shortly after the Salem Witch Trials of 1697 executions and related practices were condemned. Scripture allows for, and even endorses, slavery (Exodus 21; Deuteronomy 15; 1 Corinthians 7:20ff.; Ephesians 6:5ff.; 1 Timothy 6:1-2) while by 1865 this practice was outlawed in the United States. Divorce is another example. Jesus condemns it (Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:2-12) yet our church allows not only for divorce but remarriage of divorced people. Our ordination of women also represents a significant shift in interpretation of the rules set out for us by the writer of Timothy (1 Timothy 2:9-15).

Laws within the Law, according to biblical and social witness are not immutable. Why do laws change? The basis seems to be: 1) when they fail to promote justice, 2) when to enforce them obscures the Gospel, or 3) when enforcing laws allows or creates innocent suffering. In this light our question needs to be: By enforcing laws and stories that condemn homosexual people, is the church protecting society, promoting the Gospel, and preventing innocent suffering?

### **The Violence/Pagan Factor**

Perhaps the three most familiar texts used to condemn homosexuality are Genesis 19:1-14, the incident at Sodom; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13, from the Holiness Code; and Romans 1:26-27. Each of these texts has elements of violence or paganism attached to homosexuality.

Briefly consider the story of Lot's angelic visitors and "the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man." Apparently every male in the city wanted to get to know the visitors. Are we to believe every male in Sodom is a practicing homosexual? While their intention is labeled as wicked, is the wickedness homosexual intercourse, homosexual rape, or that "straight" men are engaging in violent homosexual behaviour? Another issue in the mix concerns the local deity. While Yahweh brings judgment, is Yahweh the deity worshipped or is some pagan deity worshipped here? Further, the sacred issue of hospitality<sup>7</sup> needs discussion, as does the precise meaning of the verb "to know."<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note the interpretations concerning the sin of Sodom given by the Old Testament prophets: Isaiah writes of a lack of justice (1:10; 3:9), Jeremiah, of moral and ethical laxity (23:14), and Ezekiel of a disregard of the needy (16:49).<sup>9</sup> The abomination is not distinctly identified as homosexuality. The term "Sodomite" (1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10) may in fact refer to those who specifically commit rape which is homosexual.

Next there are the prohibitions against homosexuality found in the Holiness Code of Leviticus (Leviticus 17-26). Most likely, the Holiness Code was intended to help the Levites and the laity separate themselves from pagan religions, especially with the sexual depravity associated with both Egyptian and Canaanite worship.<sup>10</sup>

The argument that this section of the Holiness Code is more

concerned with homosexual behaviour as an expression of pagan worship rather than as an expression of sexual identity is the fact that between an injunction against adultery (Lev. 18:20) and against homosexuality (Lev. 18:22) there lies the comment, “You shall not give any of your children to devote them by fire to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am Lord” (Lev. 18:21). It is plausible that Molech worship, which included child sacrifice, also involved homosexual practice.

Likewise the context in which St. Paul writes also ties paganism and homosexuality together (Romans 1:2:23ff). The argument Paul seems to be making is that paganism (unnatural worship) results in homosexuality (unnatural sexuality). The point remains that “paganism and homosexuality go hand in hand” for Paul.

What is not specifically addressed in the Bible, and perhaps not even conceived of, is the possibility that homosexuality could be separated from both violence and paganism. The couple before me were faithful Christians, active members of the congregation, and in a long-term loving relationship. Do the above texts address this “new” situation?

### **A Two-Tiered Christianity**

By the 1500's, Western Christendom had evolved into a two-tiered system. One tier was composed of the clergy; the other by the laity. Many things evidenced the line between the tiers, but three can be highlighted. Only the clergy had access to Scripture. Second, the clergy enjoyed both elements of Holy Communion, while the laity received the bread/Body only. Finally, the clergy were celibate, while the laity had the option of taking the less favorable path of marrying (1 Corinthians 7:38).

With the Reformation, this system was attacked. Luther's teachings on “the priesthood of all believers”<sup>11</sup> put Scripture into everyone's hands, both elements in Holy Communion were received by all, and the clergy could marry. While not all Christians were ordained, all were equally ministers.

Today in our church, this basic understanding is under attack with the return of a two-tiered system. The tiering is not based along the lines of fidelity to Christ, good works, male-female, clergy-laity, but around sexual orientation and practice. Consider how this division is

shown. Heterosexual Christians have access to all the rites of our church, while homosexual Christians are denied ordination and marriage or even a blessing of their union.<sup>12</sup> While single heterosexual Christians are expected to be celibate they do have the option of sexual intimacy within a future marriage. Homosexual Christians are expected to be celibate their entire lives. Historically, life-long celibacy was and remains a sign of separateness within Christendom, as witnessed by Roman Catholic clergy.

This new tiering system not only ignores some of our understanding of the priesthood of all believers, it ignores St. Paul's radical destruction of the boundaries created by society when he writes, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

An aside worth noting is that God condemned loneliness (Genesis 2:18) before condemning sin (Genesis 3:14ff).

The question therefore becomes: Are we, as a church, comfortable maintaining a clearly two-tiered system based on nothing other than sexual orientation and practice?

### W W J D ?

In conversation with another pastor the remark was made, "There are plenty of words condemning homosexuality, but none endorsing it." True, but there are other considerations.

Consider the silences. While arguments made from silence are usually weak, this is not always the case. Not one of the Ten Commandments prohibits homosexuality. Not one of the sixteen prophets recorded in the Old Testament condemns homosexuality. References made by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel to Sodom concern social justice and religious fidelity. None of our Gospel writers remember Our Lord condemning homosexuality. Neither the law, the prophets, nor Our Lord speak against the matter – the resulting silence is deafening.

However, we are not left with silence only. Consider this incident recorded by St. Luke (6:6ff.).<sup>13</sup> It is the Sabbath and Jesus is in a synagogue. While there, a man with a withered, or stunted, right hand approaches him. The man wants to be cured. In order to bring charges against him, the scribes and Pharisees watch to see if Jesus will heal

him. What charges? The Third Commandment demands that the Sabbath be kept holy; the separateness of this day is found in a refusal to do work. Exodus records Yahweh's warning to Moses saying, "Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death" (Exodus 31:15). While rabbinical tradition allows for healing in life-threatening situations (M. Yoma 8:6)<sup>14</sup> a withered hand is hardly life threatening. The charge (carrying the death penalty) against Jesus is breaking the Sabbath by healing. Jesus says (vs. 9), "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or destroy it?" He then restores the hand.

This healing story makes the point that the law is not meant to limit the Gospel. Perhaps more to the point is that we can't allow the law to prevent us from doing good, being kind, or expressing grace. This story needs to impact on our interpretation of the stories and laws concerning homosexuals and our subsequent treatment of these people.<sup>15</sup>

### **Basic Pastoral Care**

*It is essential to see such persons (homosexuals) as entitled to understanding and justice in church and community.*

So concludes a brief paragraph on homosexuality taken from "A Statement on Sex, Marriage, and the Family," a document still in effect in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.<sup>16</sup> This working for understanding and justice in our church and society needs to shape the pastoral care that these people receive. Pastoral care needs to make a statement that is both personal and social.

"I can accept a homosexual; it's their lifestyle I can't stand" is not an unusual comment. More often than not, when this statement is unpacked what is meant by "homosexual lifestyle" is the assumed transience and promiscuity. If we agree that transience and promiscuity are wrong and dangerous, the best pastoral care may be doing all that we can to promote fidelity. Good pastoral care to an individual is to counsel celibacy, but should an individual become a partner in a committed relationship then good pastoral care becomes doing that which will promote commitment and longevity of that relationship. This may include adding the spiritual dynamic of a blessing in Christ's Name.

*God hates fags.*<sup>17</sup>

*Lesbian and gay youth are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide than other youth, and they may account for 30 percent of all completed suicides among teens, although they probably account for only about 10 percent of teens.*<sup>18</sup>

*70% of all male teen suicides are directly related to becoming aware of homosexual tendencies.*<sup>19</sup>

*It's unnatural.*<sup>20</sup>

For 4% of our population who are homosexual<sup>21</sup> the world is a dangerous and hostile place. Good pastoral care needs to make the world a safer place.

The true haters see a picket proclaiming God's hatred "of fags" and feel supported in their violence. In order to counteract this horrendous conclusion, our church needs to remove all such perceptions. It is not good enough to duck behind the old adage, "God loves the sinner but hates the sin." Rather we need to recognize this refers to all of us, and to quit seeing homosexuality as a greater sin or sin at all. We need actively to remove any implied excuse for discrimination. One way to do this is to affirm homosexual relationships and mainstream them into the life of the church.

Recognizing that young gays and lesbians are at risk of suicide, pastoral care becomes speaking to them, their family, and friends, of God's love and understanding, offering counsel or making a referral, and acting in ways that promote visible inclusiveness.

To the assertion that it's unnatural, pastoral care needs to recognize that even if homosexuality can be considered unnatural, resulting from genetics, trauma, or both, it can be compared to other "unnatural" people – Down's Syndrome, Albinism, brain injury, and so on. The goal in caring for any of these individuals remains the same: creating a safe environment in which they can all be God's children.

## **Conclusion**

Back to the original question: Can a Christian, who is also a Lutheran pastor, bless a same-sex union in good conscience? My answer is framed by the following considerations:



1. the demonstrable fact that laws do change within the Law;
2. the biblical writers did not address a homosexuality that was free of violence and paganism (a new creation, the homosexual Christian);
3. an inclusive understanding of “the priesthood of all believers” against any tiering within our church;
4. the pre-eminence of Gospel over law; and
5. the call to provide basic pastoral care that supports individuals within our church and that stands against violence in our society.

### Epilogue

In June 1999 I celebrated a service of blessing for two homosexual members of my parish.

In November 1999, the Committee on Discipline recommended to Synod Council that I be disciplined noting that the “blessing of a same-sex relationship lies outside the expectations of pastors serving in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.”

As of today I remain pastor of that congregation and the couple continues to worship with us.

For the future, my hope is that at convention the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada will grant individual congregations the right to decide autonomously whether or not they will celebrate the blessings of same-sex unions.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> While based on actual members of the parish, the description of these two people is altered to protect their identity. They have read this article.
- <sup>2</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, “You Shall Not Lie With a Male: Standards for Churchly Decision-making on Homosexuality,” Lutheran Forum 30/1 (February 1996) 28-29.
- <sup>3</sup> Sue Bohlin, “Homosexual Myths,” <http://www.proce.org/docs/homomyth.html>; Thomas E. Schmidt, “Searching for Truth in Lifestyles: Homosexuality and Christian Morality,” <http://www.storewallrevisited.com/issues/tomschmidt.html>.

- <sup>4</sup> *Report of Committee for Reference and Counsel*, July 1999, ELCIC Convention.
- <sup>5</sup> *Minutes, Fourth Biennial Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada*, Vancouver, B.C. (June 30-July 4, 1993) 28.
- <sup>6</sup> "Article IV, Augsburg Confession" and "Article XIV, Apology of the Augsburg Confession," *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1959) 107ff., 222 ff.
- <sup>7</sup> *Six Studies on Homosexuality*, The Division of Social Service of the ELCC, 1985. Study Two, 14.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible I (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964) 142.
- <sup>10</sup> Some ancient pagan religion deified and worshiped sex using cultic prostitutes called "holy ones." Cf. "The Pentateuch," *Interpreter's Concise Bible Commentary*, 1, 213-214.
- <sup>11</sup> "Article VIII, The Augsburg Confession," *Book of Concord*, 32; E.M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959) no. 3641-3642.
- <sup>12</sup> *Report of the Committee for Reference and Council*, July 1999.
- <sup>13</sup> See also Mark 3:1-6.
- <sup>14</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, Anchor Bible 28, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981) 607.
- <sup>15</sup> Luke 8:40ff. This story of Our Lord healing a woman of "an issue of blood" similarly shows that laws can be superseded in order to heal and in this case restore to religious and societal community.
- <sup>16</sup> "A Statement on Sex, Marriage, and Family," *Horizons for Justice*, 400 Section, 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial Convention of the Lutheran Church of America, 1970, 403.
- <sup>17</sup> Placard outside the church from which Matthew Shepard, the young gay man beaten to death, was buried.
- <sup>18</sup> *Who is Killing Whom?*, Ann Thompson Cook, Issue Paper-Respect All Youth Project, Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, 1991.
- <sup>19</sup> In conversation with Jim Battle, PhD, Counselling Psychologist, Edmonton, 1999.
- <sup>20</sup> Any number of conversations.
- <sup>21</sup> *Six Studies on Homosexuality*, 5.