

Homosexuality And Injustice

Pastor Bart Eriksson, Wainwright, AB.

It has been claimed that in order to be a “more just” church the ELCIC should liberalize its stance towards homosexuality. On the one hand I appreciate the fact that the liberal pressure groups within the church have forced the ELCIC to take more seriously the pastoral needs of homosexuals. That in itself is a positive thing. However, if one looks seriously at the overall effect that the homosexual discussion is having in the ELCIC, I would argue that supporting the liberal stance on this issue would cause more injustice than it remedies. In the following essay I demonstrate that liberalizing our approaches to homosexuality would harm the cause of justice in our church in at least three areas: the ability of our church to give aid to those in need, the cause of women’s ordination, and the ability of our church to have a central basis for ethics.

1) Injustice and Church Decline.

The first way that the same-sex debate hurts our ability to support endeavors of justice is by causing church decline. When our church declines we are less able to reach out to those in need. And as a result they suffer.

There are a number of sociologists, historians and theologians who have noticed that as a denomination becomes more secularized, it also begins to decline in terms of its membership and attendance. Bernhard Lohse mentions this trend in his *A Short History of Christian Doctrine*, (Fortress: 1985) Lohse comments: “A faith which no longer knows how to confess, and which can no longer express this confession doctrinally will lose its vigor and become weak.” (p. 22).

Others describe these same trends. Philip Jenkins in his *The Next Christendom* (Oxford University Press: 2002) describes how religious groups that are the most traditional and the least secular in their thinking tend to grow quickly whereas those that are secularized die out (Jenkins 201-202). The sociologist Rodney Stark echoes the same ideas as well. (Finke and Stark, 1992 p. 17).

Even R. Bibby, who has recently become more positive about Canadian Christianity’s longevity, mentions that it is the conservative groups within mainline churches that are saving them from dying out (Bibby, *Restless Gods*, 2002 pp. 60. 67-68). If we alienate our conservative members, then we kill off our denomination’s future.

In fact, one major Canadian Protestant denomination actually has already gone extinct. The Labour Churches of the early 20th Century, that were set up after the Winnipeg General Strike, had an enviable approach to social justice issues. But they had very little concern for traditional Christian doctrines. But now these Labour Churches don’t exist any more. They died out long ago. Most people in fact have never heard of them.

Now, we could argue that church decline on its own would not be a major problem—except for one thing. Certain people depend on churches for help. For instance, it is mostly the mainline churches that run “out of the cold programs” in Toronto and other cities. Without these programs and the churches that provide them, people will die.

The same thing is true about third world relief. Lutheran World Relief is the second most efficient aid organization on the planet. And since we are more efficient and effective at

delivering aid than other denominations and aid groups, then it would be a real tragedy if Lutheranism in Canada even dwindled significantly. Since we are more efficient, likely the other churches would not quite be able to replace us. And by allowing our denomination to dwindle, we would be betraying our sacred duty to take care of those in greater need than ourselves.

We may not be a perfect denomination, no church is, but we still do many good things. For example, we raised close to a million dollars for tsunami relief this Epiphany. But if we embrace theologies that cause our church to decline, which it seems that Lutherans Concerned would like us to do, then the next time a crisis strikes or a famine hits another part of the world, we will be able to send them less aid. As a result, people who otherwise would have lived, if there had been a healthy Lutheran church, will die. By allowing our church to dwindle or die off we will be indirectly responsible for spreading death in the world.

This is a very serious justice issue. Are other's deaths something we want to have on our conscience? Church decline itself is an injustice and the liberal theologies that cause it are therefore also a source of injustice! Those who promote this kind of thinking, (though they often have the best of intentions!) are actually unknown to themselves promoting injustice and death, and not promoting truth and life.

In fact ultimately the liberal cause is a lost cause. We can see this if we take church decline to its logical conclusion. A church with closed doors can include nobody. A church with closed doors can support no hospitals or aid project and it can bless no marriages gay or straight! In these days it might be wise for us to listen to the words of Jeremiah 6:16 who advises us to: "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls."

Hopefully this summer and in the years to come the ELCIC will choose the ancient paths, and by doing so be able to more effectively reach out to those in need around the world.

2) Women's Ordination:

The second way the cause of justice is harmed by the same-sex issue concerns women's ordination. Because of the activities of the homosexual lobby, traditionally minded Lutheran congregations and lay people are in the process of leaving our church and heading for other denominations.

Unfortunately one of the chief results of this is that women's ordination and the role of women in Canadian Christianity suffers. The ELCIC is the only Lutheran church in Canada that ordains women, and each time ELCIC people or congregations leave to join the Missouri Synod or whoever else, there is one less congregation that supports women's ordination left in North America. We have had a slow trickle of congregations leaving the ELCIC up until now, but thanks to recent developments from the National Church Council (NCC), this will likely increase to a flood. I have heard of two new congregations considering leaving in the last two weeks alone.

Women's ordination is something I care deeply about. For me it does not seem to make sense, that since we fought so hard to establish a place for women's ordination 25 years ago, to be undercutting our very effort now. The homosexual lobby effectively is eroding the middle ground in Lutheranism and pushing people towards extremes.

People have compared the two issues—women’s ordination and same-sex blessings—in terms of their approach to scripture. One commonly hears it argued that if we can ordain women we should be able to use the same approach to scripture to ordain homosexuals as well. But actually the two issues are quite different in terms of their approach to scripture.

For instance, there is quite a lot of support for women’s ordination in scripture. Even in the Old Testament times, Deborah was a judge and a spiritual leader of God’s people. In the New Testament, the women at the tomb were commissioned by Jesus to tell the disciples of the resurrection. Priscilla and Aquilla shared the tasks of ministry, etc.

But there is nothing in scripture that speaks of homosexuality in a positive light—nothing whatsoever. The challenge of the gay rights lobby then is to somehow find ways to manoeuvre around the various Biblical prohibitions. And it does not take a lot of training to discern that their efforts to do so are at best rather weak. They can’t remove the prohibitions against homosexuality from scripture without doing violence to the Biblical text. Scripturally speaking, homosexuality is a very different issue than women’s ordination.

The majority of internationally renowned Biblical scholars think so too. The majority of New Testament scholars support women’s ordination but the majority do not support same-sex blessings.

I graduated last year from a ThM program in New Testament at the University of Toronto. My area of study was Paul. For my thesis I had to read around 70 books from the most internationally recognized scholars on Paul: E.P. Sanders, Alan Segal, Ray Brown, N.T. Wright and on and on. Most of the books I read were quite recent, written in the last 10 years. Now homosexuality was not something I was specifically researching, but knowing that it is a large issue in our church, I did keep my eye open for the topic. It did come up, but **I never once encountered a liberal position on homosexuality by any New Testament scholar in my studies in Toronto.** Whenever it came up (about 12 times in those 70 books) a strongly conservative stance was always expressed.

For example, the world’s most influential scholar on Paul currently is E. P. Sanders. He originated what is now called the “New Perspective on Paul.” In his book *Paul*, (Oxford University Press, 1991, 1992. Pp. 110-113), he very strongly defends the conservative position on homosexuality as he does in his other writings.

The most celebrated American New Testament scholar is probably Raymond E. Brown. He was an editor of the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* and was called by some America’s foremost New Testament scholar. Brown is respected by both liberals and conservatives alike since he is usually seen as holding the middle ground between liberals and conservatives. But even Brown comes out defending the traditional position on homosexuality (Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997 pp. 528-530). Brown’s article is one of the best on the subject because he summarizes the positions by both sides and then explains why the traditional side has more weight. Now Brown and Sanders are just two of the most prominent scholars. There are many others who support the traditional side: R.B.Hays, N.T. Wright, Coleman, M.L.Soards, D. F.Wright, Gagnon, and J.Dunn, just to name a few.

When I was in Toronto it surprised me to discover that the majority of New Testament scholars are conservative on the homosexual issue because earlier at Waterloo Seminary we were not led

to believe that this was the case. From what I have heard elsewhere, in the 80's there was some support among New Testament scholars for the liberal stance on homosexuality. But in the years since this has been fairly solidly refuted. Its tough to make Paul and others say something they don't say.

So again, people have linked the two issues—women's ordination and homosexual ordination—in terms of their approach to scripture. But in reality the two issues are quite different. The majority of New Testament scholars in the world agree that there is much support in the Bible for women's ordination, but none for homosexual ordination or for same-sex blessings.

Yet despite the majority of international New Testament scholars being opposed to same-sex blessings, the ELCIC insists on trying to push forward with it. But this happens at the expense of women's ordination. Unfortunately with the current liberal drift of the ELCIC, many traditional ELCIC Lutherans, who otherwise support women's ordination, are being driven off to join churches where women cannot be pastors. This is a sad choice for them to have to make. It would be far better if our seminaries and the NCC would not put us in a position where the cause of women's ordination was being sacrificed for their particular recent agenda.

3) **The Holocaust and our Church's History.**

A third way in which the drive towards same-sex blessings harms the cause of justice in the ELCIC is by eroding the basis for our ethics. To demonstrate how this can happen let us take a look at the Jewish Holocaust during WWII.

It has been said that those who ignore the lessons of history are destined to repeat them. And so the history of the Lutheran church in Germany during the 1930's is a very useful one to recall when considering our present situation. Looking back on Lutheranism during the Third Reich we usually like to remember Bonhoeffer and Barth. However we also have to remember that unfortunately the majority of Lutherans in the Third Reich sadly did not support Bonhoeffer's Confessing Synod group. The majority did nothing, and a certain small but powerful minority that controlled the church, actually supported Hitler. It is interesting then to take a closer look at what kind of theological approaches led people then to support the Nazis.

The Lutherans who most strongly supported Hitler were part of a group called the German Christian Movement. The German Christian Movement believed that neither the Scriptures nor the Confessions should be the chief basis for their theological decisions. Instead they thought that it was human experience, (the experience of being a Third Reich German really) that should be the basis on which Lutherans formed their theology.

And so, **based on their human experience, the German Christian Movement made all sorts of odd claims.** They stated that Jesus Christ was not really ethnically Jewish, but Aryan. They claimed too that St. Paul was too much of a Jewish rabbi to be usable in German churches. They believed their human experience as Germans told them that anyone who was partly Jewish could not serve as a Lutheran pastor, and that the German church should be supportive of the Nazis. (Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Pittsburgh: The Pickwick Press, 1976) 112-113).

The German Christian Movement also, like some of those who focus on human experience in our churches today, tried to create a rapprochement with neo-paganism. They wanted their Third Reich church to become sort of a half-way point between the surging interest in Third Reich neo-

paganism and Christianity.

In contrast to this, Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth's group stated that no, it was not human experience but the Scriptures and traditional doctrine alone which should be the basis for theological decisions. Unlike the German Christian Movement, Barth's and Bonhoeffer's group was not swayed by public opinion or by the government, and they did not base their theology on human experience (Karl Barth, "Das Evangelium in der Gegenwart," in *Theologische Existenz Heute*, 25 [1935], 17; quoted in Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principals of the Römerbrief Period* (Mohr Seibek: Tübingen, 2001; p. 30).

However, looking at our church today, one can see strong parallels with some aspects of the German Christian Movement. Like the German Christian Movement, those who are pushing for changes to ELCIC doctrine focus a great deal on human experience as opposed to the Scriptures. Human experience, it is claimed, should be the basis for the theological decision making. In the recent NCC proposal to adopt same-sex blessings, one does not see any references to scripture included to justify this stance. However, with our church's sorry history in giving support to Hitler during because of theologies based on human experience and popular opinion, the NCC proposal is a fairly frightening development.

I had a Jewish uncle who spent time in one of Hitler's death camps. And although he survived, most of his family did not. He was forever emotionally shattered because of his time there.

Now it is very good that the ELCIC has made recent moves to apologize to the Jewish community and to distance ourselves from some of Luther's anti-Semitic writings. But I can say with strong concern and even some anger that all of it looks pretty hollow when we with our next breath abandon focus on the Scriptures and Confessions and instead once again, like the German Christian Movement that supported Hitler, base our theology on human experience.

The Nazi holocaust is the justice issue of justice issues. And it is eternally to our shame as Lutherans, that because of a theology focused on human experience, a section (albeit a minority) of our church actually supported this horrible act of evil.

It would be nice if we could learn something from the deaths of 6 million Jews, 14 million others (including many regular Germans **and** Nazi-targeted homosexuals) during the war, and the suffering of Eastern Europeans after the war. If we really want to be children of Bonhoeffer in the present day, and not of the German Christian Movement, then we should do as Bonhoeffer did and let the Scriptures and orthodox doctrine be front and central in our church's decision making. The holocaust tells us that it is better to err on the side of the Scriptures than on the side of human experience.

Now to be fair, those who are pushing for same-sex blessings in the ELCIC in no way wish to endorse the kinds of things that happened in Germany during the Third Reich. In fact those advocating the liberal viewpoint on homosexuality are for the most part good people with kind hearts and the best of intentions. They believe that they are acting in the cause of justice.

For their intentions at least I can salute the liberals. However, when one looks more closely at the kind of theology being used to support same-sex blessings, it becomes much more frightening. As the Third Reich shows us, when we base our theology on human experience and not the Scriptures, then suddenly we have no basis for ethics. If human experience is my central authority, then anything is permissible. If I feel like doing something horrible, I can do it, since

my experience (whatever that happens to be) can justify it.

Once we endorse same-sex blessings, we give up having scripture as the basis for our ethics on this or any other issue. This approach then would lead to many other kinds of injustices. The wages of sin is death. The last time in Lutheranism we let the Scriptures take a back seat to human experience; we certainly had lots of death. Let's never let that happen again.

Rather than a church that is declining and less able to reach out, let's strive to build a church that can help those in need. Rather than a church with only a muted witness to women's ordination, let's work to build a strong example of what equality between the genders in ministry can do for a denomination. Let's fight for a church with a scriptural basis for ethics. Let's avoid the various injustices caused by a push for the endorsement of same-sex blessings.