

A Joint Statement

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Hawarden, SK and Hanley Lutheran Church, Hanley, SK

While the National Church Council of the ELCIC has called upon us to address the question of same-sex blessings, we are convinced that we must also address some larger questions that impinge upon this issue.

Among these larger questions are:

- 1) Biblical interpretation—any plain reading of the Bible shows a clear and repeated condemnation of same-sex sexual unions
- 2) the relationship of justification and sanctification—as Paul asks, ‘shall we sin the more so that grace may abound?’
- 3) the role of the Church in embracing sinners of all sorts

Biblical interpretation

We hold that a correctly evangelical approach to the Scriptures would be to see this collection of books as God’s unique revelation to humanity. The Old and New Testaments are understood as reflecting the gathered tradition of God’s people (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15 and 1 Cor. 11:23). Hence, textual criticism which seeks to uncover the original text to the best of our ability is a proper evangelical discipline. But, the kinds of criticism that employ a hermeneutic of doubt are to be rejected. These kinds of criticism only lead to uncertainty. We cannot intelligently and fruitfully discuss Biblical interpretation if we cannot agree on the content or the status of what is to be discussed.

We hold that the Biblical witness is that in the beginning God created the world and everything in it and he saw that it was very good (Genesis chapter 1).

Unfortunately, we humans—in our self-centredness—chose to rebel against God. This has led to the current state of creation as broken, as damaged, as not conforming to God’s plan any more. It is because of this brokenness that we experience the world as characterized by death, decay and danger. Another part of the brokenness of the world is how our understanding of human sexuality has become twisted.

God created humans as male and female and intended them to complete each other in the exclusive relationship we call marriage. Same-sex marriage, and homosexual behaviour in general, is a defect stemming from our rebelliousness against God. It is not natural, not productive, and not a gift from God. (cf. Romans 1:26&27) We affirm that heterosexual promiscuity and adultery are similarly a misuse of the gift of sexuality.

Fortunately, in Christ there is the hope of redemption. In speaking to the woman caught in adultery (John 8) Jesus says that he does not condemn her and goes on to enjoin her to ‘go and sin no more’.

In fact, Jesus tells us that he did not come into the world to condemn the world, ‘but in order that the world may be saved through him.’ (John 3)

Homosexual behaviour and same-sex marriage or blessing are not the chief of sins. Lying, cheating and stealing come to mind as equally wrong, as are many other things. Homosexuality is unique, though, in that those who practice it want us all to affirm it as good and right.

‘Although they know God’s righteous decrees that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.’ (Romans 1:32)

The Relationship Of Justification And Sanctification

We hold that a truly evangelical church would seek to call people to experience both justification and sanctification in Christ. A truly evangelical understanding would not seek to totally separate these concepts. Like to the woman caught in adultery (John 8), Jesus declares to us when we are repentant that he does not condemn us and so we are justified in him. But he also says, ‘Go and sin no more’, and so begin the journey towards sanctification. Hence the ethical command is not understood as a work by which we might be saved, but instead it is understood as a joyful response to the gift we have received. In baptism we die to self and are raised to newness of life in Christ. This newness of life includes obedience to the clear will of God. While none of us will perfectly demonstrate this obedience this side of heaven, this question still is asked, ‘...shall I take the members of Christ and join them to a prostitute? Never!’ (1 Cor. 6:15), and again, ‘Flee from sexual immorality...’ (verse 18) As Luther said, ‘Now we are only partway pure and holy. The Holy Spirit must continue to work in us through the Word, daily granting forgiveness until we attain to that life where there will be no more (need for) forgiveness.’ (Large Catechism, third article of the Creed, Book of Concord 418:58)

The Role Of The Church

As followers of Jesus Christ, we want to call on all sinners to turn from darkness and come into the light of a relationship with Jesus. The church is not an ivory tower of perfect people but rather a hospital for sinners. We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3), but Jesus embraces and forgives those of us who will turn to him.

The ministry of our churches, then, must be a ministry of helping sinners of all stripes find justifying reconciliation with God through his grace, then sanctifying repentance that comes through the gift of faith. To borrow some language from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), all ‘active’ sinners are welcome to worship with us ‘recovering’ sinners with the understanding that we are all at different stages on the same journey whose door is justification by grace through faith and whose goal is union with God at the end of the road called sanctification.

Again to borrow from AA, the only qualification for membership in AA is for a person to admit that he is an alcoholic. Without this confession there cannot be even the beginnings of recovery. In the same way, we cannot deal with our sin by applying sophistry so as to declare that ‘it is not really sinful’. We can only deal with our sin by recognizing our own inherent brokenness and need for reconciliation with God. Through faith in Jesus that sin is forgiven and the Holy Spirit begins to work in us.

Conclusion—we are concerned that our ELCIC has strayed from the evangelical path. That we would even consider legitimizing homosexual practices is evidence that we have lost our connection with Scripture. Is Scripture no longer ‘God-breathed’? Is it no longer ‘...useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’? (2 Timothy 3:16) Have we become so wise that we are, in fact, fools?

Our Church is at a crossroads and needs to recognize that its continued existence is at stake. Rejecting any form of same-sex union, while declaring our openness to all sinners, is a first step that must be taken if this church is to continue to minister to the huge mission field which is

twenty-first century Canada. This definitive step needs to be taken to prevent the kind of schism that we are seeing within the Anglican communion.

Finally, let us not lose sight of the fact that God loves everyone and that it is not his will that any should perish but that all should come into a saving relationship with him through Christ. Let's deal quickly with this controversy and then move on to our real mission of spreading God's love to a dying world.

May the Lord bless you as you prayerfully consider these words. Amen!

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