

Living Faithfully In The New Birth Given To Us Through The Resurrection Of Jesus Christ From The Dead

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The issue of the blessing of same-sex relationships has been put forward for the last twenty-five or thirty years in our church. Whether it was actually on the agenda, or pushed privately in the background is beside the point. It has been ever present, and many have become sick and tired of having to deal with the issue over and over again. It is such a divisive and relationship-breaking issue that many have simply closed their eyes and hoped that somehow it would go away. “*Not this again*”, has been the reaction of many a heart and soul. The last thing wanted by people who hold a traditional biblical view on the teaching of marriage and sexuality is to become involved in this heartrending and dangerous debate.

When our National Bishop called for conversations on this topic, I wrote an article for the quarterly publication *The Lutheran Forum* entitled, “*The Issues or Questions we should be discussing.*” Bishop Schultz had suggested other important items for discussion, so I added just a few more. I also suggested that as we discuss these other issues, we should remove the same-sex debate from the agenda for the next ten years.

I suggested that we discuss with the Roman Catholic Communion how we can better express our unity in Christ now that we have agreed on a statement of Justification By Faith. I suggested that we should (as a small national church) discuss whether or not we would be willing to live in submission to the authority of the whole church on matters that affect the whole body of Christ, thereby opening up ourselves to the genuine guidance of the Holy Spirit and genuine renewal. I suggested that we discuss how we faithfully bear witness to Christ in a society increasingly intolerant to the distinctive witness to Jesus Christ. I suggested we explore how we might become more faithful to our confessional claim of placing the Sacrament at the center of every Lord’s day service. And finally, that we discuss whether or not there is any real variance between our confession of “*Sola Scripture*”, and our actual teaching and practice. Others sent this article on to the *Canada Lutheran* but it was not printed. We apparently have such a fixation with sex that all other genuinely important issues have been shelved.

Another reason why traditional presentations on marriage and the family and sexuality have been lacking is the genuine fear that somehow any valid opinion based on scripture or our Confessions which runs counter to the cultural disposition of so many in our age might lead to trouble, and even a charge of promoting hate. Calgary Bishop Fred Henry, one of the most articulate Roman Catholic spokesmen for the traditional teaching on marriage, the family and sexuality, has had a complaint laid against him in the courts. He has also received death threats. It can be a dangerous business to stand up against the cultural norms espoused by the lobbyists and power brokers of our day.

There is one more reason why people are so reluctant to publicly express their views. If one holds to the traditional teachings of the church and publicly expresses those views, one will automatically be nailed as a homophobe, even within the church.

I am one of those Lutherans who believes that the teaching and the principles that have guided the Lutheran church for five centuries are as valid today as ever they have been, and that unless

we hold firmly to those truths and those principles we have nothing to offer our people, the ecumenical community, or the people of our world but a meal of molding and stale bread.

Karl Braaten outlined for us the seven principles of Lutheran theology in his book of the same title. I will examine the current debate in the light of those principles: the Canonical, the confessional, the Ecumenical, the Christological, the Sacramental, the Law-Gospel, and the Two Kingdoms principles.

Along with Merton Strommen (*The Church and Homosexuality* p.105) I believe that we should continue to “*clearly and forcefully reject the condemnation of homosexuals.... being both a welcoming church, inviting homosexuals to be a part of the fellowship of believers-both homosexuals who are dissatisfied with their orientation and those who are satisfied with it.*”. He also believes that on the basis of the research that we should reject the gay agenda that maintains that homosexuals are born that way, that they can never change, and that a gay lifestyle should be affirmed and encouraged as normal and desirable. He also calls for a wide dissemination of the best research regarding the causes of homosexuality, and information about the best reorientation therapies. He contends that ex-gays should be allowed to tell their stories and that the risks of promiscuous homosexual life style be talked about openly.

The Canonical Principle:

Some feel that maturity comes when we discover that everything we have ever thought is wrong. That is what St. Paul discovered when he was blinded on the way to Damascus. Luther remarked that he too was a blind horse led by the reins of Christ into the light of the Gospel. He raced through the Scriptures and discovered that they were indeed the cradle in which Christ lay. He found the gracious God in Christ whom he had hitherto refused to trust and obey. Because of his own experience with the Scripture and the Holy Trinity, seen through the person of Christ, Luther insisted that the Bible become available to every person in contemporary translation and the entire church, as hierarchy, congregation, pastor, and individual believer become subject to the Scripture as the sole norm in matters of faith and life, with the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins given freely through the person and work of Christ to be received by faith as the chief hermeneutical principle.

The Lutherans made the Scripture the sole arbiter in matters of faith and life. In a recent article, “*A Second Thought About Inspiration*” (*Pro Ecclesia* – Fall 2004, p. 397) Robert Jensen makes the following comment, “*It was a great maxim of all pre-modern interpretation: that very Word who is incarnate as Jesus was not first heard when he ‘became flesh and dwelt among us.’ God speaks through the life of Israel and in her Scriptures; and when he speaks this utterance is not another than that same Word who is named Jesus. That is, when God speaks to Abraham or one of the Judges or by a prophet, he does it—in the language of the earliest Trinitarianism –in persona Verbi.*” He speaks in the person of the Word. In all of Scripture we hear Christ speak and we listen to none other.

The Word was there at the beginning and all things were made through the Word. We are told with great clarity that we were made in the image of God, male and female, and that through the union of male and female we become one flesh, and are co-creators with God. As the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit live faithfully in submission and in union one with another, so are the co-creators of this world to live faithfully in submission and union with one another, male and female, husband and wife.

What a gift and treasure we have been given. God made us in his own image, and co-creators with him, so that in union with God and in faithfulness to his will we might produce for God the children of God. The gift of male and female, of marriage and the family, are at the very heart and center of the created order. It is both for God and for us that this world came into being. The first order of creation is the family, for in and through it come the family of God.

The centrality of marriage and the family in the created order is evident on every page of Scripture. Idolatry is likened in human terms to unfaithfulness to the marriage vow. And the Church is called His bride. With Christ as the bridegroom, we the church are being united with him as one body in his death and resurrection. When Jesus lived among us, he lived in submission to the Father's will in creation. He honored marriage by performing his first miracle at a wedding, providing wine for the celebration. As the one set aside to be the suffering servant, he himself lived in celibacy so that he could bring to salvation all of the children that we co-creators with God were bringing into this world. He affirmed marriage as integral to the order of creation, and by his life showed the beauty and authenticity of chastity as its only alternative.

It should surprise no one that when sin came into the world it manifested itself in the union of male and female and the family, the very center of the created order. Where sin reigns the family disintegrates and the children who we are called to bring to glory are the most damaged. In our world, sex has become a commodity, and the family simply one option. Fetuses pulled from the womb at whim, adultery, incest, sexual abuse, homosexual practice, and numerous other sexual practices have become the norm for many.

Like Paul and Luther, we who have been blinded by our culture must be led once again by the reins of Christ. Led not only into salvation by faith, but also into a restoration in our midst of the beauty and sanctity of marriage, the call to bring children to glory, and to live faithfully in the new birth granted us through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

In Scripture we have the revelation of the word of God, to which we are bound as the sole authority in matters of faith and life. There is another revelation that comes to us in nature. "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork." God's handiwork is to be seen everywhere, and never more brilliantly as in the creation of man and woman. The older I grow, the more I marvel at the way God has put us together. When one considers the human body everything that we see and know from experience tells us that sexual union is natural only between male and female.

There is a growing body of research identified by the Family Research Council (*Getting It Straight*), Merton Strommen, and others that indicates the following: 1) The size of the homosexual community is less than three percent; 2) It is seldom a free choice. The cause of homosexuality is not genetic, but exceedingly complex including many developmental factors. 3) It is a community at significantly greater health risk; 4) Reparative therapy and reorientation is possible, although not in all cases. 5) A large number, getting close to fifty percent, were molested in one way or another as children.

We all need to grow and live faithfully in the new life granted us in the resurrection of Christ, hearing Christ speak to us in Scripture, awake and alert. Paying heed to God's revelation in nature as we understand it better through research. We must be filled with compassion for all of God's creatures, welcoming all while daring to speak the truth in love, trusting in God's power to renew and make whole.

The Confessional Principle:

We require subscription to the whole six hundred and fifty pages in the *Book of Concord* which contain our confessions, not in so far as, but *because* they are in agreement with Scripture, though always subordinate to it. We have a wonderful legacy of statements, formulated in crisis, which will always be relevant because of their breadth and because they focus so clearly on the central issues of Christ and the Gospel. As a witness to the Gospel and the catholic consensus of the faith and as an interpretation of Scripture they give us freedom to confess the faith in the midst of the new crises that every age will bring, including the crisis that now confronts us.

The Lutheran Confessions argue that justification by faith is the central issue, and a true summary of the Gospel. They speak of the terrified conscience which experiences of the wrath of God, and of the subsequent consolation of the Gospel. Finally, they are concerned with ensuring that Jesus Christ is not robbed of his glory as the only mediator between God and humans. In this the bloodiest of all centuries and the most nakedly idolatrous age, the wrath of God and the terrified conscience are with us still, but in new guise. This century calls for as radical a doctrine and proclamation of the justification of the ungodly by faith alone as ever before.

We are confronting the question as to whether or not we shall bless committed same-sex relationships, and developing a rite for the same. Let us listen to what Luther has to say in the *Large Catechism* in his explanation of the second commandment: “You shall not take the name of God in vain”. He says, “*Let us learn and take to heart how much is at stake in this commandment and diligently guard against and avoid every misuse of the holy name as the greatest sin that can be committed outwardly. Lying and deceiving are themselves great sins, but they become much more serious when we try and justify and confirm them by invoking God’s name and thus make it into a cloak to hide our shame. Thus one lie becomes two, indeed a whole pack of lies.*” (*Book of Concord* – p. 393)

And as for marriage, the *Augsburg Confession* states clearly, “*Not only God’s command urges, compels, and insists upon this, but also God’s creation and order direct all to the state of marriage who are not blessed with the gift of virginity by a special work of God, according to God’s own Word.... ‘It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helper as his partner.’*” (*Book of Concord* – p. 84) It is most interesting to note that both the Scriptures and the Confessions recognize the necessity of marriage not only as the center of the created order, but also as a protection to help us guard against the power of carnal and deceitful sexual urges that afflict all of human kind.

They knew well of the sexual thoughts and desires of our day for they were present in their day, as in every era. But they were not willing to salve the terrified conscience with rites of blessing. There is only one power to forgive and to heal and that is in Christ alone. They were not willing to rob Christ of his glory as the only mediator, and nor should we.

The Ecumenical Principle:

Lutheran ecumenical principles are rooted in the experience of confessing the Gospel under the ban of the pope and the threat of the Emperor. “We are catholic Christians”, they said, “and our teaching is what the church has taught everywhere. We only wish to reform the abuses that have developed, abuses in teaching and practice condemned by God’s Word”. They defined the church as, “the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments administered rightly,” and they said that for true unity of the church it was enough to agree

concerning these things. This definition was not a maxim but the minimum necessary for the existence of the church itself. The confessions also state unequivocally that the Lutherans will do whatever is in their power to strive for and achieve true unity within the church.

The blessing of same-sex relationships and the ordination of those in the same relationships has become the most divisive issue of our day within and between denominations. Its full impact on the whole church is yet to be fully realized. In the Anglican Communion, the Episcopal Church in the USA and the New Westminster Diocese in Canada are under censure. The Lutheran community may also be rent asunder. In the *Bukoba Statement: a Statement on Globalization and Sexuality* produced by the Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania we find this statement, “*We admonish all human communities that to endorse, legalize or encourage homosexuality in any form is to reject natural ethical codes that humanize society. It is thus to violate God’s creation.*”

The vast majority of the ecumenical community is unalterably opposed to endorsing anything other than the marriage of one man and one woman. If we care not for the unity of our own national church and the whole church, and suppose that we are being led by the Spirit to bless same-sex marriages apart from the consent of the church catholic worldwide, then we stand in danger of becoming a schismatic body. In the judgment of the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, “*A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.*”

The Christocentric Principle:

“Full many shall come from the East and the West
To sit at the feast of salvation
With Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the blest
Obeying the Lord’s invitation
Have mercy upon us O Jesus.
Then heaven will ring with an anthem more grand
than ever on earth was recorded
When all of the saved shall receive from his hand
the crown of the victors awarded
Have mercy upon us O Jesus.”

Magnus Bostrup Landstad,
Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church in America #333, 1958

Salvation has been created and won in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. But the words sound so quaint, so ancient, so out of touch with the drama of modern life. Humankind has replaced God at the center of the universe, and there is simply no room in the human story of the modern world view for ideas such as sin, hell, salvation, and Jesus with the victor’s crown.

Many forms of pluralism are in ascendancy. Jesus is just a spoke in the wheel with Buddha and others leading to the transcendent; or even the transcendence that resides within the human species. Many within Christendom deny that God can be known adequately through Jesus only. Others call for an end to the exclusive claim that Jesus Christ is different. Many believe that the age of pluralism and dialogue with world religions demands that Christianity abandon the idea that Jesus is the only way.

But the Christocentric principle will not allow us to blink. We must leave the end and the judgment to God. We must proclaim Jesus only and rest on God’s mercy and let the mystery of God’s self-disclosure await the consummation. We are bound to Word and Sacrament because of God’s promise and command. God however, is not bound to our limitations in addressing the world.

Our difficult task is to demythologize the world view of the last two centuries. Human despair, human greed, and rapaciousness, human lust and human bondage are all around us. We have the name of Jesus and in that name the power to console, comfort, absolve, heal and free from every bondage. We have the power, in that name, to believe and be granted eternal life.

When the United Church of Canada made the decision to both bless and ordain those in committed same-sex relationships they did so against the objection of ninety percent of their congregations. They became the fastest declining denomination in the Western world. This has as much to do with Christology as with the approval of homosexual activity. When we deal with marriage and the family we are dealing with one of the fundamental orders of creation. The Word that was made flesh was there at the beginning and that order and all other orders came through Him. The Word became flesh through that order. When one ceases to honor that order one stands in the precarious position of dishonoring the Word through whom the order came into being. It is not surprising therefore to find at the highest levels in the United Church a reluctance to affirm the Christology of the church catholic. Their preference seems now to look toward the pluralisms of the day. This is also true of at least one of the esteemed Bishops of the Episcopal Church in the US, Bishop John Shelby Spong.

The Barmen Declaration written in 1934, states the issue with great clarity. It says, “*Jesus Christ as testified to us in the Holy Scripture, is the One Word of God to which we have to listen; to which in life and in death we have to trust and obey.*”

The Sacramental Principle:

My granddaughter, who was five years old at the time, was ecstatic with her birthday and Christmas celebrations being only two days apart. She vacillated between childhood handsprings and homespun adult life philosophizing. On the way to the Christmas Eve service she asked her parents, “Is this Lord going to come down here tonight, or is He going to stay in heaven where he belongs?”

Luther won the battle, but Zwingli won the war, and the western intellectual tradition has since separated symbol from reality. But The Lutheran sacramental principle insists that the finite *does* comprehend the infinite and that the symbols of bread and wine *do* convey reality. This is not an intrusion of the sacred into the real world, or a miraculous intervention. This is the real world and the real creator. We receive what the words convey. God is here feeding us and sustaining us in our battle against evil both within and without. The power and life of the cross and the resurrection are our meat and drink.

Marriage is a sacrament among the vast majority of Christians in this world, and the Lord God, the Word, is as present to bless those who enter into that estate as God is present in Baptism and in the Lord’s Supper. While we in our Lutheran tradition have not declared it to be a sacrament, we recognize the sacramental nature of that union. Marriage was instituted by God, the Word. It was blessed by God and the visible sign is that the two become one flesh. Luther, in the large Catechism, went so far as to declare that “*God has given this walk, fatherhood and motherhood, a special position of honor, higher than that of any other walk of life under it..... he distinguishes father and mother above all other persons on earth, and places them next to himself.*” (*Book of Concord* – p. 400)

In the Augsburg Confession we are told that penance and holy orders can be considered sacraments, with holy orders being the ordination into the pastoral ministry or the priesthood. Is

it not an utter delight to hear Martin Luther describe father and mother as the priests and bishops in their homes, set aside from the beginning, to bring their sons and daughters to glory? It is a holy order like no other order.

There is nothing sacramental in any form of homosexual activity. No holy orders, no honour commanded, no blessing promised. Only prohibition.

The Law-Gospel principle:

Karl Braaten in his discussion on the Law/Gospel principle quotes a German theologian who said, *“If by any chance a peddler of indulgences were to appear among us, he would not do a good business; for nobody has a disquieted or alarmed conscience.”* (p. 112) Braaten continues by making the comment that everyone is looking for a good deal, and we are helping them.

For Luther and our confessions the Law/Gospel distinction is the most important distinction in interpreting the Scriptures and in the preaching of the Gospel. I asked Dr. Jim Nestingen for a brief statement on this distinction and here is what he said. *“The Gospel is both the end of the law and its establishment. It declares the benefits of Christ Jesus unconditionally as an out and out gift, thereby silencing the law’s accusations. But just so, while stripping the law of its ultimate claims, the Gospel puts the law in its place. While the law can’t judge the quick and the dead, it can order human community, providing some protection, pointing to peace and justice”*.

He continues, *“So in the rubbing chaos of human sexuality, where love and desire compete, the Gospel sets out the last word. It says, amidst all the dominance and submission, exploitations and self-assertions, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ But with the last word spoken, there is still a penultimate word: ‘You shall,’ ‘you shall not.’”*

We are here to call people to repentance and faith. We are here to ask them, nay, challenge them, to live faithfully in the new birth, given through the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. We are here to expose the terrified conscience, and to bring the true consolation of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins. We are here to proclaim that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, justifying the ungodly.

In the current crises, while we are called to welcome and have compassion on all sinners, (of which, of course, we are always ourselves the chief) we are not to confuse the clear distinction between Law and Gospel. When we do that there is no bread for anyone. When we fail to maintain this clear distinction, (“Your sins are forgiven,” “You shall not,”) we are Lutheran in name only and we have nothing to offer anyone.

The Two-Kingdoms principle:

The two kingdoms are not two separate realms, but two modes of God’s activity. One in the realm of the laws, principles, and life of society, of the planet and the cosmos. The other operative in the calling of a people. One is operative in the promotion of all that is good in society, the other in seeking the lost, to restore human beings into that intimacy that transcends all intimacies, fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The two kingdoms are also the spheres for human activity and human vocation.

Luther compared the two kingdoms to God’s right hand and God’s left hand. On the one hand God is at work in this world through the structures and principles of societal and cultural life, and indeed in the life of the planet and the cosmos. It is here that we hear the groans of creation itself suffering under the weight of human oppression and sin, as well as the cry of the poor and the

oppressed. On the other hand God is at work through the Spirit in the church, offering the bread of reconciliation, forgiveness and eternal life to those who will believe in the Son.

We are in a period of major transition of which we cannot see the end. When the government feels the need to re-engineer an institution that is more fundamental to human life than the state itself, we know that our intellectual and moral underpinnings are indeed crumbling.

The United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights, and the Charter of Rights for the Family recognize the fundamental and inalienable rights of the family as "*the natural and fundamental group unit of society.*" (Art.16) As Bishop Henry stated, "*There is no need to change this fundamental social structure in order to protect individual rights and to assure all citizens of social benefits. The state certainly has the power to authorize social benefits for any of its citizens without redefining marriage.*"

The Lutheran church has an extraordinary theological and intellectual heritage because of its commitment to Scripture and its commitment to confess the faith in the midst of crisis and danger, clinging to the evangelical principle and the heritage of the church catholic. But in the midst of the current debate in society we are silent. All that our ecumenical partners and the world will hear from us are the muffled roars of a house divided against itself.

Samuel S. Schmucker was a gifted pastor and theologian who was responsible for the establishment of the first seminary in North America. Led by the spirit of his age he wished to develop a Lutheranism much more compatible with the Protestantism of his day. There were five errors that he noted in the confessions, one being the regenerative power of baptism, and another, the real presence in the Lord's supper. There was a split in the church, but what emerged was a strong and energetic confessional Lutheranism that was a vibrant force in North American life for over a century.

Now we are being directed again, this time by the powerful lobbyists of our day to adopt a Lutheranism much more compatible with our culture. The supposed error that we are to correct is in our teaching on marriage, sexuality and the family. Such a 'correction' would move us away from Scripture, from the Confessions and from the Lordship of the Word. There is not one principle of Lutheran theology that would remain standing if the church chose to move in this direction. What would remain is a schismatic body only calling itself Lutheran.

Jesus once told us that a house divided against itself will not stand. Perhaps the Lord God is using this moment in time to lead us all to repentance and faith, to make no provision for the flesh, to be conformed only to Christ, and to live faithfully in the new birth given us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Can you imagine Lutherans, who talk so readily about returning in daily repentance to baptism, actually donning sackcloth and ashes and pleading for mercy before the Lord?

A church that stands on biblical and confessional authority cannot maintain its identity and mission with two opposing and irreconcilable views on an issue of such importance. This issue will not go away as some had hoped. It must be dealt with. We have no alternative but to renounce one of those opposing views, or to separate, as did Lot and Abraham, and each go their way with their flocks.