

Some Reflections on the Resolution Regarding the Blessing of Same Sex Unions

The resolution that the National Church Council (NCC) will bring to the ELCIC convention in July has now been released. I wish to express my appreciation for the hard work of the NCC who tried their best to come up with a proposal that they hoped would bridge what seems to be a widening gap in this church around the issue of the blessing of same sex unions.

A couple of observations. The resolution does not affect the definition of marriage in the ELCIC. That portion of *Sex, Marriage, and Family, a Social Statement of the Lutheran Church in America, 1970*, is not changed. It suspends only the application of the section relating to homosexuality. It is also limited to the blessing of committed gay and lesbian relationships. It makes no attempt to deal with the issues around the relationships of bisexual or transgendered persons. Groups like PFLAG(TB) and Lutherans Concerned have pointed out in the past several years that the whole spectrum of sexual orientations must be taken into consideration by church and society. So this resolution would “move the bar” a bit, making a certain group of people feel welcomed and affirmed by this church, but would continue to make others feel excluded whose orientation does not fit into this proposed new environment.

The resolution, if passed, implies that the official position of the ELCIC will be that homoerotic attraction and behaviour are integral parts of God’s good and gracious design for human relationships, and, therefore, will allow the blessing, when requested, of persons who choose to enter committed, life-long homosexual relationships, through the use of an official rite that will be designed for that purpose. Individual pastors and congregations of the ELCIC will have the right to refuse to provide this rite of blessing.

Delegates to the 2005 ELCIC convention will decide whether the rationale presented for this significant change in position of the ELCIC has Biblical and Confessional support.

Therein lies a dilemma. The resolution sets aside the social statement on homosexuality without offering a replacement. Normally our theology informs our action. The delegates are being asked to approve an action without the theological framework that supports it. It is implied along the lines mentioned above, but not explicitly stated. The Program Committee for Worship will be asked to develop a rite for the blessing of same sex relationships without any statement of our theology of such relationships, unless the expectation is that the committee will develop the theological framework on behalf of the ELCIC in the course of developing the rite. The status of the essays that were submitted for the process of developing this resolution is also unclear.

Some comments. It appears to me that this resolution is a reaction to pressure from society and from some within the church to move this church quickly to respond to the movement in Canada toward same sex marriage, rather than a reasoned reflection about how our faith informs our response to societal issues. We appear to be willing to go “this far” in response to this pressure, but no farther. The essays that were part of the NCC’s discernment process focus on the “local option”, since no widespread consensus appeared to be possible. Since there is no specific Scriptural basis for the blessing of same sex unions, some essays suggest moving sexual behaviour and rites of blessings into the category of adiaphora in the church, since they are more

pastoral than doctrinal in nature and there is room for such diversity in the ELCIC. Some suggest that the few references to sexual matters in the Bible indicate that the whole subject is not the highest priority in Scripture, so it should not be the most critical issue for us, and does not warrant the intense debate that is currently raging around it. Is this rationale adequate, and will it clearly guide us in future discussions of other challenges to approve behaviours that are Scripturally proscribed?

I would like to shift this conversation/debate to a broader context than the specific issue of the blessing of same sex unions. We live in a sex-saturated society. If the television, film, and magazine industries are an accurate reflection of society's morals, the expectation is that everyone from junior high onward (maybe earlier than that) is sexually active. Some even characterize sexual activity as a basic human right. At the same time, there are many among us who are not called to marriage as we currently define it. Given the current statistics available, I would assume that most of these people are heterosexual. There are all kinds of reasons why they are not called to marriage: physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. Having an unchangeable sexual orientation that is other than heterosexual would be a pretty strong reason why a person is not called to marriage. In a society like ours, what do we, as a church, do for all these people? How do we welcome them, minister with and among them, and incorporate their gifts into the life and witness of our congregations? How do we enable and encourage them to live as sexual beings through wholesome, healthy, and chaste relationships? This is so counter-cultural a thought that it is usually laughed at, sometimes even in the church. We prefer to talk about "responsible sex", or "safe sex", and then wring our hands over the steadily rising rates of undesired pregnancies, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases, to say nothing of lives that are emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually scarred by sexual activity outside of marriage. Marriage itself is under siege, with growing percentages of marital breakdowns. No matter what our society condones in the matter of sexual behaviour, the Bible is pretty consistent: sexual activity is to be carried out within the bonds of marriage. It is true that the models of marriage vary dramatically in Scripture, including polygamy and concubinage, but it is always heterosexual in nature, and by the time of the early church, monogamous.

Another perspective on the relatively few references to sexual behaviour in Scripture is that it is so important as to be almost self-evident, requiring little repetition. It does not appear to be an adiaphoron when concern for marriage makes it into the Ten Commandments at least three times, great attention is paid to David's adultery with Bathsheba, Jesus sharpens the understanding of the laws around divorce and adultery, Jesus chooses the wedding in Cana as the location of his first miracle, Paul refers to marriage as a metaphor of Christ's relationship with his church, and the early church, in making allowances for the admission of Gentiles to the Christian church without first becoming Jews, specifies sexual purity as one of the non-negotiables. (Acts 21:25)

Article VI of the Augsburg Confession, *Concerning the New Obedience*, reminds us that we are not saved by good works, but for good works. Sanctification follows justification. The Apostle Paul spends the first eleven chapters of Romans demonstrating that there is nothing we can do to earn salvation. It is a free gift, offered through Jesus Christ. It is God's great *BECAUSE*. In chapter twelve he comes to the *THEREFORE: I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by*

the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom.12:1 NRSV) Exhortation to a Christian life-style is common to all Paul's letters. He recognizes the challenges facing Christians immersed in a non-Christian culture.

We are not called to find the lowest common moral denominator that will make as many as possible feel comfortable among us with the orientations they naturally have. Lutherans understand that all our orientations are corrupted by original sin. That is why we need an external guide for our behaviour. We are not called to judge one another, but to introduce each other to Christ, and allow Christ to do his healing work in us. Jesus welcomed and ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, but we cannot infer thereby that Jesus condoned fraud or prostitution. Jesus is in the business of changing people's lives. He did not say to Zacchaeus, *shape up your life and I will come to eat with you*. He said, *come down, I'm coming to your house today*. Zacchaeus' life was changed in that encounter with Jesus. He gave half his money to the poor and refunded four times the quantity he defrauded from anyone. Jesus did not say to the woman caught in adultery, *neither do I condemn you, go and do whatever your nature dictates, but go and sin no more*. Jesus' forgiveness empowers people to live lives that are consonant with God's self-giving love demonstrated in Jesus, thus fulfilling the law. (Cf. Rom. 12:8-10)

Jesus never "lowers the bar" on expectations for his disciples. He says in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, *17 Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (NRSV)*

Jesus makes new creations out of his disciples. Through the power of forgiveness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, followers of Jesus live in such a way as to fulfill the law. We are not called to tolerate one another. That is what we do with mosquitoes when we cannot kill them all. We are called to give our lives for one another as Jesus gave his life for us. Our baptism reminds us that we died with Christ and were buried with him, and that we exist as new creations through the power of his resurrection. We can hold each other accountable for our actions only because we understand that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, empowering us to live our lives according to the Gospel. Whenever we are tempted to think that we can live up to God's standards on our own, we are reminded of Jesus' words later in the Sermon on the Mount, *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect. (Matt. 5:48)*

Sex is a wonderful gift from a loving God. It is good, it is powerful, but it is not safe. That's why it comes with a book of instructions. The Bible is consistent from beginning to end in insisting that sexual intercourse is limited to marriage. We ignore this instruction at our peril, in spite of the pressures of society to do otherwise. Sexual sin is no worse than any other sin, and

to isolate sexual sin of a particular type as the greatest of sins is just plain wrong. On the other hand, to say that sexual sin is minor or unimportant is dangerous.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians sums up nicely our responsibilities to one another as we debate this and every other issue.

5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. 12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; 13 esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. 15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. 25 Beloved, pray for us.

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