

Against the Influence of Para-church Organizations  
In the Discussion of Same-sex Blessings

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The debate regarding same-sex blessings has brought to greater light the existence and influence of what I call “para-church organizations.” These are associations of like-minded Lutheran Christians who come together in response to a particular issue in the church, like same-sex blessings. *Solid Ground* is one such organization within the context of the ELCIC. *Solid Ground* represents those opposed to same-sex blessings and calls the ELCIC to re-ground itself in scripture and the Lutheran confessions. *Lutherans Concerned* is another association working both in the context of the ELCIC and the ELCA. It calls the church to accept gay and lesbians according to its understanding of the Lutheran faith.

Along with the two presented above, there are other organizations with a Lutheran view that would likely offer a position on same-sex blessings, even though their *raison d'être* is not exclusive to the issue of homosexuality. Organizations in this category include the *Word Alone Network* (USA) and the *Society of the Holy Trinity* (USA/Canada). I provided the web-links to these organizations below. I imagine there are other organizations and new ones forming as we speak.

The common characteristic of these organizations is that they see defects in the church *as is*, and promote a vision of how the church could be better. In some cases, they develop statements that are likened to a confession of faith. You will see this characteristic if you read their mission and purpose statements provided in the web-links below. Their criticisms and visions often centre on three aspects of church life: 1. Worship (e.g., not liturgical enough or too liturgical); 2. Ecumenism (e.g., in the USA against the historic episcopate and communion with Anglicans vs. for communion with Anglicans and beyond); and 3. Social and politic ethics (e.g., pro-gay vs. anti-gay). For the sake of space I am simplifying these aspects. But you can see that the organizations reflect the diversity of piety and practice about various matters in North American Lutheranism. Ironically, on some aspects they would agree and others they would be divided. Lutheranism is indeed a muddled affair!

But who are these organizations and why should any believer be compelled to listen to them? They do not represent the church proper. No act of synod has established their authority or voice in any matter. The ELCIC has a structure and procedure for deliberation on matters of theology and practice. This happens within the national, synodical, and congregational context. Members of the ELCIC decide things as members of the ELCIC. In this context, the faithful gather under the guidance of scripture, the confessions, and the Holy Spirit. This *is* the church. Para-church organizations are not the church. They may represent people in the church with like-minded views, but that is all. They are mouth-houses of opinion, but not mouth-houses for the gospel. Their vision of the church is just that, a vision, but it is not the reality.

The faithful of the ELCIC should not be confused by the existence of para-church organizations in the matter of same-sex blessings. This matter can be dealt within the church *as is* because our procedure allows for freedom of thought and democratic

process. Within this context, the like-minded of course can gather to strategize and voice their positions. In this we do not deny a diversity of interpretative approaches. But they need not create formal associations or societies who presume to have some measure of authority because they have some sort of formal organization, vows, a mission statement, or slick web sites. If we are to be divided on the issue of same-sex blessings, let us be divided within the limits of our structure. Let us not create novel quasi-church communities with their own confessions and creeds (and perhaps arrogant assumptions to know the real truth about the gospel). These para-church communities, acting outside the structure of the church proper, are like the gnostic communities of the early church, purporting to possess a higher and pure truth. Thus they reflect little humility before the word of grace that only Christ alone gives. It is only through the church proper that this word of grace is uttered and where the Holy Spirit will guide the faithful. Outside of this context we must be wary.

In the guise of para-church organizations, these dangerous factions are not helpful and only pave the way for disunity. In fact, the ELCIC needs to theologically reflect on para-church organizations and whether or not it is a good thing that laity and pastors belong to them. In baptism we are immersed in one faith and one body. There is no other confession or mission statement other than that accepted by and passed down by the historic church. This is the confession meant to deal with all matters of faith by laity and clergy alike. It is this that the pro- and anti-gay faithful must reckon with, as messy as that reckoning may be.

It is a difficult discipline to come under one church and one confession, to come under Christ's authority alone. This discipline is something we never perfect in this life and in which Christ forgives with unending and unmerited mercy. To go beyond the church *as is*, however, is to come under another discipline, or to assume a discipline better than the church already has. Is not Christ heard in the church *as is*? Para-church organizations, because they cannot accept the discipline of the church *as is*, seek to multiply the church's confession and tailor it to their vision. In this subversive activity, they end up confusing the faithful and obscuring the gospel. Therefore they should be considered as anathema in the deliberation on same-sex blessings.

Here now are links to suspect para-church organizations of which the faithful should be wary about in the matter of same-sex blessings and other issues of church life:

*Lutherans Concerned/North America (Reconciled In Christ):* <http://www.lcna.org/>

*Solid Ground:* [www.solid-ground.ca/](http://www.solid-ground.ca/)

*Society of the Holy Trinity:* <http://www.societyholyltrinity.org/>

*Word Alone Network:* <http://www.wordalone.org/>

Respectfully submitted for consideration,

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