

As I begin, I want to make clear a couple of the major points I will be making.

First, the issue we are primarily concerned with is not homosexuality; the issue is the authority of the Bible, Scripture, for the faith, life and proclamation of the church.

Second, we want to consider briefly the influence of philosophies that are foreign to Scripture and our heritage

(there is nothing necessarily wrong with that; this has happened in every age.

However, rather than slowly and deliberately working out the meaning and implications of these philosophical influences for the church, there was a rush to judgment on the subjects at hand in what can only assume was a desire to appear relevant to some secular agenda.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our LORD and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let me begin with a question that may seem a bit sensational: Do those words (Grace be unto you...)

have any meaning anymore?

I do not ask that question to be overly dramatic, or in a vain attempt to be clever,

- but because with the deconstruction of language, the tearing down of meaning, that has been taking place in our culture and in our church for several generations,
- and with the deconstruction of meaning that is implied by the ELCA assembly actions in Aug.,
 - e.g., to say, on the one hand, that the Bible is the source and norm for the faith, life, and proclamation of the church...
 - but on the other hand, to pass resolutions that are clearly contrary to the plain meaning of the biblical text... that is not only crazy making... but one may legitimately ask if anything in the Bible, or words in general, can be said to have any meaning anymore.

That is a question (posed and demanded by the philosophies of post-modernism & deconstructionism and) worthy of exploration on another day.

But the point or question is: might the church have so sought to respond to various philosophies and cultural challenges that in the process it has accommodated itself too much to foreign and even hostile ideologies.

We are gathered together at a time in which we are

witnessing unprecedented changes taking place in our society and, more specifically, our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. As you know, as of the close of its assembly in Minneapolis on Friday August 21st, the ELCA voted to allow homosexual persons living in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships to be ordained into pastoral ministry in our denomination (i.e., active homosexual persons in a monogamous same-sex relationship may become pastors, deacons, etc. in the ELCA). Although at this time no congregation will be forced to call a homosexual pastor, such normalization of the behavior is now the policy of the ELCA.

However, because some people find that to be an obvious contradiction of the clear teaching of the Bible, they find the policy change to be not only unacceptable,

but also verging on apostasy, or “heresy”.

James Nestigen, certainly no theological lightweight, says the following: “*The ELCA has redefined the Word of God. Instead of understanding it in terms of what God does with words, the theologians of the church—with the bishops in tow—have uncritically shifted out of the original Lutheran argument into a scheme in which God’s word depends on its meaning (i.e., it is not what God says but what it means to the reader; – GRJ). To no one’s surprise, in this setup, the power transfers from the word itself to the interpreters of the word— those who decide what it really means. The biblical text is ambiguous by definition, they say, and consequently only the informed—generally, those who are superior, either intellectually or politically – can finally determine what it says.*”¹

What Prof. Nestigen describes is in effect a sort of neo-Gnostic elitism in which only those who are gifted with an esoteric insight, enabled by enlightened and innovative interpretive schemes, can see what the rest of us do not.

However, we must ask, *do we really want to leave the Bible in the hands of the so-called experts?* Is that not the exact opposite of what Luther wanted? Did he not translate the Bible to put it into the hands of the laity? Did not Luther say he would rather trust a poor peasant armed with the Bible as opposed to bishops & professors without it? My, how the Lutheran church has changed!

Nonetheless, it was the ELCA national assembly that voted contrary to Scripture to ordain homosexual persons living in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships. In addition,

it voted to authorize the blessing of homosexual couples in same-sex relationships (i.e., it would in effect allow clergy to preside at homosexual “unions/weddings”).

Now, there are those who argue that that resolution does no such thing. I will let you be the judge. The actual language of the resolution states:

“Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.”

So, technically they are correct – the resolution does not in fact speak explicitly about blessing same-sex unions.

However, let me ask: does not the language of that resolution imply that such “blessings,” are permissible? Is that not the way it has been interpreted? And, does anyone think for a moment that the resolution will not be interpreted and used by activist pastors and congregations to permit and promote such blessings? A plain reading of the resolution, along with a little candor, will demand that we admit it implies and will be used to authorize such “blessings”.

So, again, the real point is that those who find this policy change to be in direct contradiction with the clear teaching of Scripture will also find it unacceptable.

By the way, I just received a report dated Monday Nov. 16 from the ELCA News Service that said that the ELCA is now taking steps to reinstate gay clergy who had been removed from the clergy roster because they had been living with a partner and not in the previously required celibate state. The article quoted the Rev. Stanley N. Olson, executive director, ELCA Vocation and Education division, who said,

“We intend to carry out the directives of the assembly... to welcome people who are in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships into rostered (professional) ministry.”

In other words, with this step they are simply carrying out the implications of the assembly actions – it is the next logical step in the application of ELCA thinking and policy.

For a long time now there have been voices calling for these policy changes among gay activists who have wanted their viewpoint firmly established in the church. Some have argued that this is a justice issue comparable to the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. They say that faith in Christ demands that

the church take up the cause of oppressed homosexual persons because they have been discriminated against – even persecuted – by institutionalized “homophobia” present in both church and culture. And, they have a point. Who among us has not been repulsed by vile and hateful epithets aimed at homosexuals? All Christians who are grounded in the gospel of God’s unmerited grace through Jesus Christ ought to be disgusted by signs that say, “God Hates Fags” and the like.

But the point is that activists for homosexual rights say it is no longer enough to be repulsed by such signs and sayings; it is no longer enough that such attitudes be challenged and rejected in the church and society, but that homosexuality itself must be normalized and celebrated by both mainstream America and the church.

One voice, an advocate for full inclusion and normalization in the church, an ELCA Bishop from southern California, says that the church should now provide “liturgical blessings for lesbian or gay unions and permit congregations to choose openly gay ordained and lay ministers who are either single and celibate or coupled in a permanent, committed, monogamous, and blessed covenant.”²

Another voice, Eugene Robinson, an Episcopal priest who was formerly married and had children but is now an openly homosexual bishop in the Episcopal Church (so much for his commitment to his vows – marriage & ordination), has reportedly argued that it is no longer enough that homosexuals be accepted in church and society, they must be celebrated.

Anecdotally, a psychologist describes the push to mainstream homosexuality in his profession,

“(G)ay-affirmative psychologists act as relentless advocates for their own worldview...”

They tell clients that same-sex feelings are ‘sacred.’ They push them to revolutionize society’s and the church’s attitudes. Any client’s conviction that heterosexuality is the norm will be defined by the therapist as a psychological illness – homophobia.”³

On the other hand, there are other voices who cannot reconcile these policy changes with the biblical injunctions against homosexual behavior. They say that the Bible is very clear in its rejection of homosexual behavior. They believe it to be contrary to the order God has woven into the fabric of creation, especially with regard to the sexes. For example, Genesis 1:27 says,

“God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. ²⁸God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply...’”

This passage is a clear affirmation of God’s intention in creation – *“male and female He created them.”* What’s more, it is difficult to imagine what else might have been intended when God blesses the human family and says, *“be fruitful and multiply.”* Is it possible for a same sex couple *“to be fruitful and multiply”* in the clear meaning of this text?

Or consider Romans 1:26f. Notice how the Apostle Paul refers to the break in the natural order of things when he speaks of...

“women (who) exchanged natural relations for unnatural, ²⁷and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”

And by the way, what do you suppose are the *“shameless acts”* that men commit with other men to which Paul refers?

If I may use blunt terminology, a client who had a hard time accepting his homosexual tendencies said to his therapist, *“How could I have been designed by my creator for anal sex?”⁴*

(I apologize; I don’t mean to be vulgar, but that is a question I have never heard addressed in any forthright way. It is one we must stop dancing around like the proverbial elephant in the room or trying to hide it under the carpet. That is one of the behaviors that the ELCA is in effect normalizing; we must deal with it & its implications.)

This same client who asked how he could have been designed by his creator for such an act went on to say, *“(The act) is damaging to the body; it is demeaning to a man’s dignity; it is unhealthy.*

I couldn’t have been created for a same sex-relationship whose very design makes biological parenthood impossible.” Then he added derisively, *“So I was designed this way?”*

Then I must have been created by an absurd god.”

Or consider 1Timothy 1:9ff where Paul writes...

⁹“The law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, ¹⁰for fornicators (pornos), for sodomites (arsen-o-koites – Lev.20:13), for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound

doctrine.”

Or, 1Cor. 6:9f

⁹“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals (malakos), nor sodomites (arsen-o-koites), ¹⁰nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.”

On the basis of those scriptures, those who question the ELCA assembly actions ask themselves: *“How can we who have pledged ourselves – whether through ordination vows or the ELCA constitution or both – to the authority of the Bible as the norm for the faith, life, and proclamation of the church, now endorse as permissible what the Bible has expressly forbidden?”*

And notice what Paul in 1Cor.6:9f says, that those who do such things *“will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* Now, we could dismiss that statement, or question its authority, claiming, as some have done, that Paul was merely a repressed homosexual and a misogynist...

(that’s one way to discredit someone, even the Apostle Paul; make outlandish accusations against them on the basis of no real evidence – just wild speculation – and then they have to spend the majority of their time defending Paul or themselves rather than dealing with the issues).

However, if we allow the Apostle Paul to be dismissed in such a cavalier fashion, then we would no longer be subscribing to the ELCA faith statement that the Bible is the norm for the faith, life, and proclamation of the church, which, unfortunately, too many in the ELCA have already done. However, if we in this way dismiss what Paul says we must also ask why we have this faith statement in our constitutions in the first place? It makes hypocrites of us all.

Nonetheless, those who do take the Bible seriously along with Paul’s warning that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God, tell us that by simple logic any attempt by the church to normalize any of the behaviors prohibited by Paul, including homosexual practice, would imply that we would be dooming those who engage unrepentantly in such lifestyles to be excluded from the Kingdom of God? If we take the Bible seriously, is that not the logical conclusion of Paul’s warning? Is that a loving thing to do? And if you take seriously the love of Christ as presented in the Bible, is that a morally defensible position? Has the ELCA addressed any of these issues or concerns? Or have they simply

dismissed Paul's warning as archaic and thus opted for some form of universalism?

Those who advocate for the more traditional interpretation of the Bible agree that homosexuals, like all of us sinners, need the Gospel and should be welcomed in our congregations. Similarly, opponents of the ELCA measures embrace the fact that Christ calls us to care for and minister to all people. But they (these opponents of the ELCA resolutions) also point out that when Jesus welcomed sinners, He never once endorsed their behavior. They note that Jesus did indeed welcome all people but He also rejected sin and called all people to repentance. Notice how Jesus summarizes His message in Mark's Gospel chapter 1:

1:14^c "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, **'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.'**"

Notice that, even though sin is often downplayed in our modern psychologized culture, Jesus regards repentance as one of the two essential aspects of the believer's response to the Gospel proclamation.

And so, those who question the recent ELCA assembly actions insist that, *while the church is to welcome sinners, that does not mean we can simply turn around and endorse behaviors that the Bible explicitly forbids*. It should be noted, by the way, that before the ELCA came into existence in the late 1980s, never had such measures normalizing homosexual behavior ever been considered in the history of the Lutheran Church. Indeed, up until the last part of the 20th Century in the most liberal wings of Protestantism, they have never been considered in all of the history of Christianity.

Thus, it ought not surprise anyone that this issue has sparked intense debate not only across the church, but also throughout American society. In addition, there is no question that, in that debate, scientists and scholars from a variety of disciplines are deeply divided over the issue of homosexuality and its causes – geneticists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and sociologists, to name only a few. To assume that there is general consensus among scientists regarding the origins of homosexuality

(as does Dave Brauer-Rieke, Bishop of the ELCA's Oregon synod who wrote: "One significant piece of our Lutheran conversation around homosexuality has been the growing medical, legal and anthropological consensus around sexual orientation."), such an assumption is at best erroneous and uninformed. Similarly, regardless of your own personal theological perspective regarding this debate, the fact is that biblical scholars and theologians are divided

over the issue (consider Robert Gagnon's debates and book with Dan O. Via). Thus, at the very least, in both church and society, the debate over homosexuality rages over the extent to which it should be normalized, if it should be normalized at all. Yet, throwing all caution to the wind and oblivious to the damage it might cause, our church charged ahead.

I have long affirmed the policies that had been in place in the ELCA basically from its inception in 1988 until the assembly last August. Those policies can be summarized in the following:

"The 1993 Statement of the ELCA Conference of Bishops states that *'there is basis neither in Scripture nor tradition for the establishment of an official ceremony by this church for the blessing of a homosexual relationship.'* However, this statement by ELCA bishops acknowledged that local pastors within their respective contexts are to *'provide pastoral care for all to whom they minister.'*"⁵

In other words, in 1993 the ELCA Bishops declared there was no Scriptural basis for establishing a ceremony for blessings a homosexual relationship.

(One wonders: what has changed since then? has the Bible changed? or, what new verses or books have been added to the Bible that would cause or compel the Bishops and the ELCA to reverse that 1993 statement?)

Notice by the way, that in 1993 the Bishops went on to call for pastors & congregations to extend the care and the love of Christ to all people for whom Jesus Christ suffered and died.

However, it is clear that this care, along with the love of Christ, is not to be construed as at same time condoning sinful behavior.

So, how then do we defend this attempt to justify what God has declared unjustifiable – this behavior that breaks so radically from the order God has woven into the fabric of creation?

Is it not the human attempt to justify what God has forbidden one of the oldest seductions?

In the Genesis 3 story of the fall, Adam and Eve were seduced into doubting God's Word and His motives, *"Did God really say...?"* By the way, notice what happened after Adam and Eve had been seduced by the lie. They blame everyone but themselves for what happened. Adam says, *"The woman whom You, God, gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate."* So, it's your fault, God; You gave me the woman. And then Eve says, *"The serpent deceived me, and I ate."* And if you read between the lines you might perceive that another accusation is implied,

"And, um, God, who made the serpent? You did!"

Ultimately, it seems, Adam and Eve blame God for their own folly and their own sin.

That's the way it always has been with self-justification, that great sin that every Lutheran ought without difficulty to recognize, but which has been all but lost in this debate. So, isn't it odd that self-justification and the attempt to blame God (God made me this way!), are both so flagrantly ignored in a church that claims the heritage of Luther and, more importantly, claims to be committed to Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone?

Self-justification – “God made me this way.” Remember the client I mentioned earlier who said to his therapist that male homosexual behavior...

“is damaging to the body; it is demeaning to a man's dignity; it is unhealthy.

“So if I was designed this way, then I must have been created by an absurd god.”

That is not an unreasonable conclusion, one that the ELCA assembly action failed to deal with as it rushed to this policy change on the basis of very little evidence.

Most of us, I suspect, have always tried to welcome all people in the name of Jesus. Of course there are those persons whose personal brokenness has made their integration into society and the church much too dangerous. We must leave their judgement up to God. Nevertheless, apart from those extreme cases, we have tried to bear the tension of inviting all people to faith in Christ and into our fellowship, because we believe that is what Jesus would have us do. But, at the same time, we are to encourage everyone to grow in the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f), in righteousness (1 Timothy 6:11), and in the knowledge and grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18), because we believe that that, too, is what Jesus would have us do.

For example, consider how Jesus in John 8 dealt with the woman who had been caught in the act of adultery and the crowds who brought her to Him. She had been brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees who wanted to stone her to death for her sin (stoning was the punishment that was prescribed by Levitical law). Jesus responds by saying to the crowds,

“Okay, so you want to stone her to death for her sin....

Let those of you who are without sin cast the first stone.”

Those in the crowd who had been swelling with such self-righteous indignation at the sin of the woman that they wanted to stone her to death!

yet at Jesus' words, they dropped their stones and dispersed. Jesus then turned to the woman and said,

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

She answered, *“No one, Lord.”*

Jesus replied, *“Neither do I condemn you; go now, and sin no more.”*

It is rightly pointed out that Jesus showed great compassion towards the woman in spite of her sin and brokenness. However, what is often skipped over is the fact that not only did Jesus not condemn her, but neither did He condone or approve of her behavior. Instead He told her to go and sin no more. In other words, Jesus' approach to the woman was both to accept her and to call her to repentance.

This brings us back to the theme of justification. Prof Hans Schwarz of Regensburg, Germany has written, *“What then about the justification of the sinner? Again, justification of the sinner sounds good. But sinners are not justified to continue sinning. Sinners are justified to amend their ways.”*⁶

This, of course, echoes what we noted earlier about Mark 1:14 which summarizes Jesus' preaching: *“Jesus came preaching the gospel of God,¹⁵ and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.’”*

For the woman caught in adultery, the Kingdom of God with all of its grace, love, compassion, and forgiveness was present in the person and words of Jesus Christ. However, we dare not miss the fact that Jesus also called her to repentance.

This call for repentance is not meant to imply that she could or we can stop all sinning entirely – none of us can – but it does mean that she should turn from her adulterous behavior. If hers was a sexual addiction or obsession, then, by admitting her powerlessness over it, she could lean on the strength of others as so many do when they finally confess, rather than try to justify, that their lives are out of control.

Whatever the case, the point is that Jesus' act of forgiveness cannot be construed as condoning sin or as giving her permission for her to continue in behaviors that God has declared sinful. She was called to repent... or as was said in the old SBH

“time for the amendment of life and the grace and comfort of His Holy Spirit.”

The story of how Jesus dealt with the woman teaches us what ought to be the role of the church and of Christians in this kind of situation, namely, that we are to welcome all people and share with them the love of Christ, but we are not to condone what God in Scripture has clearly and consistently rejected.

Yet, that is exactly what the ELCA has done. Rather than calling people to confession and repentance... rather than calling people to the historic and confessional norms that define us... rather than affirming the biblical norm for our faith and life together, the ELCA has broken not only with these norms but also with standards that go back to Jesus and the Apostles themselves.

Break - Stretch

I can think of no more serious indictment of the ELCA than what James Nestigen wrote in his essay, "Joining the Unchurched," by which he means that because the ELCA has broken with standards laid out in the Augsburg Confession, it has ceased to be the church in any meaningful sense. Therefore, those who remain in it are now among those who are in effect "unchurched". Nestigen writes:

"In making this move, asserting authority over Scripture by subjecting it to a vote, the ELCA has forfeited obedience for a scheme of management. Traditionally, the church has been spoken of as a steward of the Word. Here's the difference: stewards tend what belongs to another; managers take control, displacing the original speaker for the ends they have in mind. Like the medieval papacy that Luther and the reformers set off against, the ELCA in its assembly declared itself master of the Word rather than servant. Instead of proclaiming God's Word, it formally proclaims itself as arbiter of the word. An organization which no longer hears its Lord's voice cannot be considered a church, according to the Augsburg Confession's definition. It may still claim religious credentials, but it has decisively broken its continuity in the faith. It gathers together not to proclaim God's Word but to vote on it."

So, what is one to do?

- ◆ What is one to do when one has earnestly tried to be an "ambassador for Christ" reaching to others with His Gospel of grace...
- ◆ when one is trying to be obedient to his/her ordination vows to preach and teach in accordance with the scriptures and the confessions of the Lutheran church...
- ◆ when one has tried to abide by the ELCA's constitutional faith statement (as well as the model constitution for congregations) which includes this provision: "This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of

God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life" (2.03)...

- ◆ when one believes that the church has departed from the Bible, from the clear teaching of Scripture, and from the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions?
- ◆ and when one believes his/her church, instead of fighting the human impulse towards self-justification has instead become the very mouthpiece of self-justification?

How does one dare stand before God and say, "Well, I know I promised I would be faithful to preach and teach in accordance with the Scriptures and the confessions of the Lutheran Church but, well, that just no longer seemed relevant to me so I changed my mind... After all, everyone, including the bishops, was doing it;

it just seemed so right at the time"?

Will God say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," I know you meant well"?

or will He say, "You wicked and slothful servant... ' and cast that worthless servant into the outer darkness" (Matt.25:26 & 30)?

How does one stay in a church structure which former ELCA bishop, Paull Spring, now Chair of Lutheran CORE, describes, "as having fallen into heresy?" My accountability (and yours) ultimately is to God, and to Him I/we must do my/our best to be faithful. In short, will God commend us for abiding heresy when we pledged not to?

I will admit that part of the problem arises from the fact that the ELCA has no normative or common understanding of how the Bible is to be interpreted. Yes, we say the Bible is "the norm for the proclamation, faith, and life of this church," but, that is as far as it goes. It is no exaggeration to say that within the ELCA today, we have clergy and theologians who range everywhere from "Jesus Seminar" devotees who even question the resurrection of Jesus as well as His divinity, to those who hold to a literal interpretation of the six days of creation (and all shades in between).

Are all of these approaches – from literalistic fundamentalism to the rejection of core doctrines – equally valid? If they are all equally valid, and if the ELCA can argue that the Bible's clear, consistent, and explicit rejection of homosexual behavior is no longer binding, then how is the Bible actually normative for us in any meaningful sense? To say that the Bible is the norm but that different people

read it differently, that each interpretation may be equally valid and that each person may be bound by his or her own conscience - is what it means to have no norm; it is in effect non-sense; it is absurd; it is to embrace anarchy & chaos, which is a contrast to the biblical witness Isa. 45:

¹⁸“For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He is God!), who formed the earth and made it (He established it; He did not create it a chaos, He formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the LORD, and there is no other. ¹⁹I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in chaos.’ I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right.”

However, because there are so-called experts whose conscience-bound, individualistic and revisionist interpretations are, in effect, rewriting the Bible in their own image and tacitly giving the individual reader permission to do the same – a Bible passage can mean almost anything any individual reader wants it to mean. One would think the ELCA has forgotten that Luther and traditional interpretation have provided some very important and helpful principles for biblical interpretation.

Amidst all of this folly, one is reminded of Luther’s former colleague Andreas Carlstadt who in spite of having three earned doctorates went through the streets of Wittenberg asking casual passersby to interpret a biblical passage to him. Carlstadt cast aside learning for wherever he felt the Holy Spirit was at the moment leading him to. Little wonder Luther said of him and his ilk that they had swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers & all.⁷

Yes, Luther translated the Bible to make it accessible to the laity but that was not meant to imply that biblical interpretation could be a casual and careless affair.

Now it seems the Bible is no longer normative for the ELCA in any meaningful sense. Whereas our colleges and seminaries were in the past bastions for training in sound thinking and for the defense of faith, they now often take the lead in deconstructing faith and the Bible. As a result, we must ask if there are any interpretive methods that are out of bounds for this church or its church-related institutions, methods that ought not to be considered legitimate? Sadly, the answer appears to be, no. Instead, we have all sorts of philosophies and ideologies that are imposed as a template on the Bible and the church as something to which we are expected to conform -

pluralism, feminist and liberation theologies. One ELCA congregation in San Francisco advertises that it is based on “*Feminist, Womanist, Mujerista (moo-hair-ee-sta)*”⁸ theologies.

In a strange twist that hardly anyone could see coming twenty to thirty years ago, orthodoxy is now sometimes considered a threat because by its very definition (right teaching) it implies some things are right (or more right) and other things are wrong. A new orthodoxy has seemed to emerge. In this nonsensical orthodoxy, if it were asserted that someone or some teaching is wrong, that would be considered arrogant and intolerant. Who are you, they might ask, to judge another person or to say that another person’s belief system is wrong?

Thus, when traditional Lutherans draw a line in the sand and say we cannot go past it, we cannot go there, because to trespass that boundary is wrong teaching and contrary to our core convictions, we are accused of being “intolerant”. And the one thing progressive/revisionist thinking is intolerant of is what they perceive as intolerance. And they will cry foul.

It is like the bully who keeps pushing and invading everyone’s space but then when others finally start standing up to him and pushing back, he cries foul and claims he has been misunderstood & mistreated.

The problem is that what is being pushed is more of a secular or cultural agenda than a churchly one, the end result of which is that some very important faith considerations have been & are being trampled on in the manic pursuit of policies that at least appear to be more driven by cultural considerations than faith considerations. Is that because the church is trying to play catch-up with culture and society? If so, what need is there for the church? Society always does a much better job of keeping up with social relevance than does the church.

Ken Myers, founder, host, and editor of the audio journal, “Mars Hill Audio,” wrote an introductory essay to his interview with Bible scholar, Robert Gagnon, in which Myers writes that, “*part of the mission of the Holy Spirit through the Church is, as Jesus says in John 16[:8ff], to tell the world that it is wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.*

“*On the other side,*” Myers continues, “*are those who reject the historic Christian teaching and who seem to believe that the world, as represented by its most self-consciously progressive institutions and*

thinkers, is ahead of the Church in ushering in the Kingdom of God, indeed that the world is right in telling the Church that *it is wrong* about sin and righteousness and judgment. They say that God is doing a new thing, but they seem unable to imagine that God might say “No” to any new thing (they might want to do) in the world in the name of progress.”⁹

Unfortunately, this desire to play catch-up with societal and cultural trends is nothing new. I am in no way well-read on the history of interpretation but if we had the time we could explore how theologians in every age have tried to make faith and the Bible more palatable to people and the spirit of their times. We must leave that exploration for another day.

So, what about the ELCA’s commitment to ecumenism?

I have probably spent too much time on the earlier material so I must now race ahead. The ELCA and its predecessor bodies have long shown a strong commitment to ecumenism. Now, however, some of those more significant relationships are in jeopardy. Pope Benedict, orthodox patriarchs, and many of the world’s Protestant leaders are familiar enough with Scripture and church tradition to know when they are being taken seriously and when someone is playing footloose and fancy free with them. As one church historian put it, “They can hardly welcome a church that has defied standards they consider inviolate.”¹⁰

In other words, a process of ecumenism that has been going on for generations (Vatican II), is in danger of collapsing because of the ELCA’s reckless act.

What’s more, many of the ELCA’s relationships with Lutherans throughout the world have been shaken. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has already expressed its dis-ease with the ELCA. Nicholas Tai, Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Hong Kong wrote to Bishop Hanson prior to the ELCA assembly, saying that passing the proposed resolutions by the ELCA “*would be a source of profound embarrassment for the Lutheran Church in Asia.*” Bishop Tai went on to say that such actions by the ELCA “*would affect our companion relationships, as homosexual practice is regarded as sin in the vast ecumenical community in Asia,*” and that if the ELCA accepts homosexual behavior, “*it will be a big stumbling block for the vast majority of 1.3*

billion Chinese, who need the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Another letter from a group of Hispanic pastors within the ELCA begins:

“It is with deep regret that we have seen that the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly will be considering a proposed Social Statement on Human Sexuality which would significantly change the historical teaching and practice of the Church on sexuality.” They go on to say, “*Since many Pastors and members of Hispanic Congregations are extremely concerned with the vote taking place in Minneapolis in August, we are writing to let you know of our opposition to both the proposed Social Statement and to making any changes to the current rostering standards of the ELCA.*”

The letter went on to express the deep commitment these Hispanic pastors have to their ordination vows, to the Scriptures and to the Lutheran Confessions. They conclude by saying, “*When the Assembly votes on these matters, your vote will not simply decide on possible changes to ELCA policies but will also be a vote on whether or not Holy Scripture will be the final authority for our faith and life in the ELCA.*”

When I was back for the Lutheran CORE meeting outside of Indianapolis in Fishers, Indiana, we heard from a representative of an African (Somalian-?) Immigrant church here in this country that is affiliated with the ELCA. He passionately spoke of their commitment to the Bible and thus their opposition to the recent ELCA actions.

Or, moving beyond ecumenism and various church affiliations, we might note the opposition of some of the most prominent theologians in the world. One of the world’s foremost theologians, the German Lutheran scholar Wolfhart Pannenberg, has written, “*If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.*”¹¹

Another prominent Lutheran theologian, Carl Braaten, wrote an open letter to former ELCA presiding Bishop, Herb Chilstrom who himself had written in support of the ELCA proposals. Prof. Braaten argues that the proposals were based not on Scripture and sound reason, but on subjective

experience and then reasoning from those subjective experiences. Braaten writes:

*“Yes, reason and experience are in command. (But w)hose reason and experience? Not the Church’s, as defined by millennia of teaching by the fathers, martyrs, saints, doctors, evangelists, and missionaries, down through the centuries and across all cultures, but yours and those with whom you agree during the last 20 years of **American culture-conforming Christianity**. I do not believe you can quote a single major Lutheran theologian who agrees with your views prior to the birth of the ELCA twenty years ago.”*¹²

So, where are we? Let’s review:

- ◆ We have an action by the ELCA that is at best theologically controversial, even reckless.
- ◆ It jeopardizes some of key relationships with fellow Christians, including Lutherans, throughout the world, not to mention ecumenical endeavors that have been in process for over 40 years.
- ◆ We have a church that is seemingly caving into cultural pressure rather than being driven by Scripture and doctrine.
- ◆ We have a nonsensical situation in which we say that the Bible is the norm for the faith, life, and proclamation of the church but we pass policies that are in violation of the clear and consistent witness of Scripture on this issue.
 - Not only that, but we let each person be “conscience-bound” with regard to how s/he interprets a passage which in effect means that biblical passage means nothing at all.
- ◆ We have a situation where the authority of key doctrines, whether intentionally or not, has been severely called into question: “Sola Scriptura,” confession and repentance, the doctrine of justification.
 - Where is reliance on & faithfulness to scripture?
 - Where is the biblical call to repentance?
 - Have we embraced the practice of self-justification?
- ◆ We have a monumental failure of the office of bishop (not all bishops) who are, by definition, to watch over the orthodoxy of the church, and...
 - where orthodoxy is understood to be determined by adherence to Scripture and the confessional writings.
- ◆ We have a tragic situation of chaos and madness due to the disintegration of language – all with the blessing of denominational leaders.

There are many more things that could be said.

However, in short, the fact of the matter is that the real issue is not about homosexuality – that is simply the precipitating factor. The real issue is the role and authority of the Bible in the faith and life of this church, the ELCA.

This is what concerns me most – faithful witness to our LORD and Savior Jesus Christ. And so, I am in a crisis of conscience, or what theologians call “*in statu confessionis*”, that is, in a state of confession to the extent that I must stand in opposition to a teaching or practice of the church. The action of the recent ELCA churchwide assembly has in effect demanded that I take this stand. I found I could no longer continue in this body because it has abandoned the foundations on which it was to be built.

Jesus said in Matthew 7,

“Those who hear these words of mine and do them will be like the wise who build their house upon the rock ²⁵and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like the foolish who built their house upon the sand; ²⁷and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”

It seems to me the ELCA has become a house built on sand.

I am deeply saddened by this. Indeed, I have grieved over what has happened. I grew up loving my church and my heritage. I have lost sleep over it and what it has required of me to endeavor to remain faithful. Nonetheless, all my fears were born out. As such it was the case that it was not I who left the ELCA but the ELCA that has left me and, more importantly, left the Lutheran tradition and historic Christianity.

Galatians 1: ⁶*“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel -- ⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.”*

I cannot and will not recant my ordination vows in order to preach another Gospel. That is why I concluded I had to leave the ELCA.

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- ¹ James Nestigen in an article titled, "Joining the Unchurched".
- ² Bsp Paul Egertson quoted by Merton P. Strommen in: The Church and Homosexuality, (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2001), p.65.
- ³ Joseph Nicolosi, "Why I Am Not a Neutral Therapist," The Jasper Commission, (Dehli, New York, 2009), p. 9-10.
- ⁴ Ibid, p. 11.
- ⁵ Found at: <http://www.lutheranforum.org/sexuality/the-dissenters-speak/>
- ⁶ Comments on the "Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality" by Dr. Hans Schwarz (ELCA Pastor and Professor at the University of Regensburg, Germany) at http://www.wordalone.org/docs/wa-hans_schwarz-2008.shtml.
- ⁷ Nestigen, op. cit., p.7.
- ⁸ "An exploration of the emergence of *mujerista* theology -- which brings together elements of feminist theology, Latin American liberation theology and cultural theology" (<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=874>).
- ⁹ Ken Myers, the introductory essay to: "Texts, Sex, & Sanctity: Robert Gagnon on Homosexuality & the Bible;" A Mars Hill Audio "Conversation", #20.
- ¹⁰ Nestigen, op. cit., p.7.
- ¹¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg's essay can be found at: <http://www.holytrinitynewrochelle.org/yourti92881.html>
- ¹² Carl Braaten in: "An Open Letter to Bishop Herbert W. Chilstrom", available at: <http://www.lutheranforum.org/sexuality/open-letter-from-carl-braaten-to-herbert-chilstrom/>