

## **How Could This Be? Some thoughts from our recent churchwide assembly**

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At the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly I stood in line to speak during the debate on the controversial ministry recommendations related to sexuality. Those in favor of the proposed changes in policy had frequently cited portions of scripture in pleading their case, but the other side had unyieldingly held that the Bible's word on this topic, along with nearly two millennia of Christian teaching, was absolutely clear and unmistakable. Advocates for change had been described as standing against the Word on the basis of selfish desire or self-centered experience, and I had wanted to provide some counterword that would explain how it could be that some among us understood, or believed, themselves actually to be faithful to the scriptures rather than in defiance of them when they argued for the possibility of same-gender relationships within the pale of Christian ethics. As one of those who so believed, I wanted to try to make that position understood and respected even if unshared and rejected.



**Pr. John Stendahl at 2009  
Churchwide Assembly**

As I stood and waited my turn at the microphone, however, it became clearer and clearer to me that my allotted two minutes would not suffice for all the words I had to speak, both scribbled on the pieces of paper I held in my hands and weighing on my heart. Moreover, not only wasn't there enough time but it seemed to me that this was not the time: emotions were too high, the decision too close, and the time for thoughtful and patient conversation over complexities of interpretation had passed. One more argument would have seemed just that – more argument. When at last my turn came to speak I abandoned my notes and instead spoke simply of the feelings and thoughts that I have just described, closing with the hope that once the dust settled from this fight the conversations that should have happened earlier might again become possible and we would be able to talk across the divide.

To that end, and in response to several requests from people curious about what I had originally intended to say, I have typed up this now significantly expanded (and even endnoted) version of my scribblings. They are now less a speech than a short lecture, but still I write in the hope that these words will further the cause of understanding. And, oh, how often we human beings simply yearn to be understood!

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In this assembly, in this church, and in many of our partner churches, there are many who find it a conclusive argument, or simply an insurmountable obstacle to change, that there is no endorsement of same-gender intimacy to be found anywhere in scripture. We who argue the other side of this issue neither deny that fact nor find it surprising. Neither do we pretend that there are not several biblical passages that have classically been understood to condemn such relations as abominable and sinful and are considered to do so by the majority of Christian churches around the world. And yet we too love the Bible – the whole Bible and not just parts of it – and attend to its authority. How can this be? How can we indeed even claim, as we do, that the Bible itself drives and draws us to the stand that we are taking here?

To answer, I bid you begin by thinking about a central and recurrent pattern that we find in the Scriptures: again and again some new, unforeseen reality arises to challenge God's people – Israel, the Church, and humankind as a whole – to new faithfulness. What had seemed settled and sure gave way and God gave new meaning to ancient promises. Such was a pattern and paradigm for biblical Israel, and so it was also for the New Testament Church pushed by its Lord to the inclusion of gentiles and to the breaching of long-sanctified dividing walls.

And so it also has been, again and again, for the Church in our nearly 2,000 years of living in attempted faithfulness to the Word: challenges have come along to confront our assumptions, backed up with Biblical texts, about the naturalness of slavery, the divine right of kings, the centrality of the earth relative to the sun, the proper and submissive role of women, and many other issues. The examples abound, in both great and trivial matters. "New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth"<sup>1</sup> was how it was put in one of the hymns some of us grew up with. But not only did old assumptions about what was right give way: what had once seemed too scandalous to countenance in dress or behavior or thought sometimes turned out to seem quite compatible with the will of God. This is *not* to say that every new notion is acceptable, for some indeed are evil and destructive, but it *is* to remember both that we have been confronted by difficult and divisive challenges to ancient assumptions before, and that, when we have, we have sometimes discovered in Scripture's inspired words inspiring and fresh meaning.

Within my own lifetime, the Church has again been confronted with what has seemed a *novum*, an unanticipated new thing, confronting us with the challenge of rereading and rethinking for the sake of faithfulness. People, brothers and sisters in Christ, began to stand up and say, often at considerable risk and with painful consequence, words to this effect: *I am as in Romans 1, a person who has desire for those of my own sex. Yet I do not see myself in those words of Paul. I have not "exchanged the natural for the unnatural;" this is my nature. I do not worship creatures and idols, but love and seek to serve my creator and living God. And, like you, I yearn for companionship and love, not just kicks and promiscuous pleasure. I am like you.*

For me and for so many others, this was a *novum* entirely unexpected. I had never imagined it or thought of it when I was a child and a youth, though of course in time I recognized how the underlying realities had been there all along, pressed down and hidden in so many closeted or shamed lives in the world around me. But now, confronted with these words and this discovery, I recognized anew what the Bible itself had taught me about the potential of such challenge and about my obligation to attend to the surprising stranger. Shaped by Scripture's story and by Christian tradition's encouragement, I went back to look again at what I had assumed I already understood. I studied Paul's words in Romans 1, asking the Lutheran catechetical *Was ist das?* – What does this mean? What is at stake here? What is this really about? – and I learned how differently Paul's Greek word *physike* means from what we hear when we translate it as "natural," and I examined more fully the theory and rhetoric of the Pharisaic Jewish views of gentiles that Paul is using to further his underlying argument in this section, and I wondered about the distinction between the arguments that form the rhetoric for a vital point and that point itself. (That long hair is shameful on a man<sup>2</sup> and that all Cretans are liars, beasts, and lazy gluttons<sup>3</sup> are among examples of such apostolic argument, i.e. of a rhetoric whose factuality we might question even as we owe allegiance to the underlying point it serves.) Moreover, now knowing homosexual men and women whose lives seemed neither adequately described nor convincingly explained by those oft-cited verses in Romans 1, did I not at the very least have to consider the possibility that Paul's words were making a point that (a) did not necessarily apply to every single person of homosexual orientation or in a homosexual relationship, and (b) should not be taken as a definitive and comprehensive description of the genesis and dynamics of *all* homosexual love?

By thinking about these things, I was neither devaluing the Scriptures nor reading them with a "cafeteria-style" selectivity. I was reading faithfully, seeking what it was that I was now meant to understand from Paul's words, from his classic Pharisaic linkage of gentile idolatry with sexual excess and incontinence, even his resort to a rhetoric of physical disgust.<sup>4</sup> Understanding this passage not as prescriptive for our present understanding of the lives of all gay and lesbian persons—a function for which it seems ill-suited – but instead as Paul's passionate argumentation for the principle of a universal responsibility and relationship to the living God, a principle and a passion to which we too are bound, seems to me a much more faithful attention to the meaning – the "*Was ist das?*" – of the text.

It was of course not only to Romans 1 but also to several other passages of Scripture that I was driven back by the *novum* of a sexuality I had not understood. I had to go back and reread the story of those divine strangers who came to Abraham at Mamre and then to Lot in Sodom,<sup>5</sup> Sodom the cruel and unjust city.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly it seemed so striking that God had tested the city by coming to it in the form of alien and vulnerable outsiders. These angels, as they come to be described, these queer beings,<sup>7</sup> needed hospitality but instead the mob gathered before the gate of Lot's house to abuse and rape them. This was clearly not the story of people falling in love with members of their own sex. Rather, here was a story much akin to what I had come to learn about, the violence and contempt so often directed against the vulnerable and alien. It was the gay-basher, not his victim, who committed the biblical sin of Sodom. So it seemed to me, and so it seems still as I consider the many other instances of abuse directed at the vulnerably different in human communities.

Likewise did I now look more closely at the few other Old Testament passages that had seemed to back up our centuries-old teaching on homosexuality,<sup>8</sup> only to find again that what these verses concerned or entailed was not necessarily what we had assumed. Issues of power, gender, procreation, identity, community, ritual, idolatry all seemed either present or suggested, important issues that needed thought and care, for ancient Israel and for us, but the unequivocal condemnation of all same-sex intimacy once seen in those few verses no longer seemed anywhere near evident. Similarly, the condemnations of pederasty and homosexual exploitation found in the New Testament now appeared as straightforward moral teaching with which also most gay people would agree and not as necessary condemnations of homosexuality itself. Faithful to my reading of Holy Scripture, therefore, I could not feel compelled, nor compel others, to the condemnation of any and all same-gender sexual relations as inherently sinful.<sup>9</sup> (Of course many disagree with me on that, and I respect their bound consciences even as I pray they will respect mine.)

There is incidentally a further so-called scriptural argument that has been put forward by some for the condemnation of homosexual relations, namely the paradigm of male-and-female creation described in Genesis 1 and 2 and cited by Jesus when questioned about the legal permissibility of divorce in Mark 10 and Matthew 19, but even though I love and apply that paradigm in various ways I find it both unconvincing and perversely unrealistic to claim that it is the single and absolute basis for all sexual identity and morality. Indeed in Matthew 19:10-12 Jesus himself acknowledges, without condemnation, that some exist outside the norm he had cited from Genesis 2:24. The exegesis of these passages in Matthew and Mark raise several important and relevant issues tempting to discuss, but the immediate point is that extrapolation from them to a condemnation of sexual minorities seems neither logical nor wise.

Please understand that none of the above denies the reality of sexual sins. It is a slander and an insult to suggest that a rethinking of the intrinsic sinfulness of same-gender relations means an abandonment of either a consciousness of sin or of a moral concern for human behavior. *Both* sides in this argument are driven by a deep sense of moral urgency (indeed occasionally in each case by an unhelpfully imperious moralism). This point is missed by those who describe the reform position as an obliteration of the Law in favor of some loosey-goosey reading of the Gospel.<sup>10</sup> Abuse, rape, prostitution, exploitation, infidelity, betrayal, promiscuity are all among the many violations of the sacred that demand our response and resistance. A part of the desire for a revision of our teaching and policy is in fact the urgency of confronting such sin in the context of same-gender relationships, calling for responsibility, care, and fidelity rather than ruling all such relationships by definition beyond the pale of morality. The *a priori* condemnation of gay and lesbian relations in our traditional position has often had the sad effect of encouraging the very irresponsibility that was then used to justify it in lurid descriptions of a hedonistic subculture.<sup>11</sup> The ELCA social statement on sexuality we approved last month needs to be read in its seriousness about the disfiguring power of sin and not caricatured as a denial of its dangerous and tragic reality.

That verb “caricature” brings me back to where I started, with the sense of both insult and sadness at being misunderstood and maligned. I had wanted to explain and defend myself. I wanted, in the manner of human beings, to be understood, not just for my own pathetic sake but also for the sake of what I understood as true and right. For Christ’s sake, I might say, both in the theological sense and in the impatient colloquially exclamatory sense. And with the recognition of that motivation come at least two tempering thoughts: first a recognition that, in spite of my mind knowing better, my secret heart harbors the vanity that if only people “on the other side” understood me they also would agree with me, an arrogance that can blind me to the ways in which they also have felt caricatured and dismissed in these debates; and then a remembering that seeking to “justify ourselves,” even theologically, does not lead to either our salvation or our ultimate unity but rather away from it. The way to which I am called is to the foot of the cross.

Still, ethically and responsibly, we *do* have to contend for what we believe is faithful. We who have advocated for greater room and responsibility in this church for its sexual minorities do hope for understanding, but we know we cannot demand to be agreed with, nor even to be completely understood. Our arguments may be rejected and our interpretation challenged. We may indeed be wrong where we think we are right, and as Lutherans we are called to a fairly high doctrine of fallibility. Nonetheless, still we plead with you who dispute with us on this issue: if you hear us and still do disagree, let not our disagreement define us. And even if we cannot fully understand each other, please let us respect each other. And even if you cannot now find a way fully to respect us, I pray you not to close the open hand of fellowship and go away. If you believe you have to, I shall defend your bound conscience also in that regard. But I beseech you to be slow, prayerful, and careful about it in that case, and talk not only with those with whom you agree. This issue matters, but please let it not keep us from perceiving the Body that we share, the Gospel that we proclaim, or the vital work we are called to do together.

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<sup>1</sup> James Russell Lowell, “Once to Every Man and Nation,” Hymn #547 in the *Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal* of 1958. (It is not terribly surprising that this stirring hymn did not pass muster for inclusion in the *LBW*.)

<sup>2</sup> I Cor. 11:13-16. There is an intriguing possibility that Paul’s argument here is grounded in a Greek theory of reproductive physiology that had the seed of life generated in the male brain and then drawn down out and up into the female womb where it would develop. Hairs were believed to exert an attractive force on the seed and were thus thought part of the reproductive system. I do not know for sure if Paul subscribed to that theory but I appreciate the humbling reminder that we do not automatically understand the world of our fathers and mothers in the faith. The past, as has been said, is another country. That cautionary truth, however, does not cancel the inspiration and truth-bearing of Scripture for us; it just forces us to be less cocksure in our own assumptions.

<sup>3</sup> Titus 1:12-16.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 1:27’s concluding words give Paul’s argument a flourish of revulsion at what they suggest.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 18 and 19.

<sup>6</sup> Compare Ezekiel 16:49.

<sup>7</sup> I use the adjective in its once common sense, and don’t mean to suggest anything about sexuality, but I do mean to point out the social “otherness” of these visitors. (The Epistle of Jude uses the interesting term “strange flesh” (*sarkx hetera*) when describing the Sodom story.)

<sup>8</sup> I am not a fan of the modern word “homosexuality” and use it mainly as a stylistic convenience here. The term, and arguably the concept, is barely 100 years old and almost certainly oversimplifies and distorts what it purports to describe.

<sup>9</sup> That I had also become painfully aware of personal harm and tragedies to which the Church’s condemnation and ostracism had often contributed was obviously a factor in my thinking hard about this, but that reality is not a necessary part of the logical argument I am offering at the moment.

<sup>10</sup> That mistaken confessional critique is unfortunately abetted, and seems momentarily valid, when advocates for change fall into arguing their position not from an attention to God’s passion for how we should treat one another (*i.e.*, the Law) but only from the Gospel of God’s forgiveness or, worse yet, from the tolerant but careless characterization of “homosexuality” as only one of the many sins by which we fall short. That approach does indeed misunderstand both our Lutheran confessions and the issue itself. But that is not the approach I am arguing here.

<sup>11</sup> Confronting this possibility may force us also to think about the culpability of our churches for the spread of AIDS in the 1980’s, the guilt upon us for what happened in the shadows of our absolute clarities. But, again, that’s a topic for a later time in the conversation that I hope will continue.