

## Keeping Faith

From its earliest days, in reliance on the clear teaching of Scripture, the Christian Church has taught that human sexuality is a precious gift to be enjoyed exclusively within the marriage bond. It is the “means of reproduction, but, independently of this defined purpose, it brings with it its own joy, in married life, in the love of two human beings for one another.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the Church has taught that sexual relations outside of marriage, including same-sex sexual relationships, are by nature sinful and to be resisted.

In recent years, some in the ELCA have advocated a new theological understanding of human sexuality under which same-sex sexual relationships would be treated like marriage. These advocates have had success in some congregations and synods. However, the ELCA as a whole has refused thus far to embrace their new perspective. Those favoring the new perspective almost certainly will ask the 2009 Churchwide Assembly to adopt a series of resolutions committing the ELCA to new teachings and practices, such as the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination of persons in committed same-sex sexual relationships. Between now and then, they will seek to build momentum for their campaign in congregations and in synod assemblies throughout the ELCA.

After careful and prayerful consideration, the members of Lutheran CORE have concluded that those seeking changes in the Church’s understanding of human sexuality have not met, and almost certainly cannot meet, their burden of showing that those changes are consistent with the foundational tenets of the Christian faith. In this essay, intended for all who are wrestling with the sexuality issues before the ELCA, Lutheran CORE explains its position. As readers consider the arguments offered here, they should focus particularly on three key points.

**First**, the question facing the ELCA is whether it should bless or condone a type of conduct – same-sex sexual relations – that the Church across time and space has taught to be sinful. The question is *not* whether the ELCA should discriminate against, condemn, or exclude gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender persons on the basis of sexual orientation or gender. *Nor* is the question whether the ELCA should single out for special condemnation those involved in sexual relationships outside of marriage. Lutheran CORE believes that the Church must welcome all people, relating to each person, including anyone involved in a same-sex sexual relationship, with the pastoral care and sensitivity appropriate to the particular circumstance.

**Second**, the question before the ELCA is not “just about sex.” Instead, it is about the very foundation of the Christian faith. The Christian Church bases all that it believes, teaches, and confesses on Scripture. A church body simply cannot be Christian, at least not in any orthodox sense, if it claims that it need not be bound by the teachings of Scripture. And yet, proponents of a new sexual ethic argue that the ELCA should make precisely this claim. They advocate an

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith, Rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone: 1995), 157.

entirely new “gospel” – indeed, an entirely new religion – whose adherents are not “necessarily bound” by Scripture, or by anything else.<sup>2</sup>

*Third*, many within the ELCA have grown weary of the seemingly unending debates over sex. Some such persons may be tempted to support the blessing of same-sex sexual relationships or the ordination of persons in such relationships, not out of theological conviction, but in hope of putting the issue behind them and getting their church life back to “normal.” The experiences of other church bodies show that this likely would be a vain hope. Those church bodies that have adopted the new sexual ethic have splintered and shrunk in size.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, because these church bodies have concluded that adherence to Scriptural teaching is not required, they have grown less and less committed to the foundational precepts of the Christian faith, all of which flow from Scripture.<sup>4</sup> There is little reason to expect that the ELCA experience would be different. Thus, anyone who supports the new sexual ethic in the hope of returning the ELCA to “normal” instead risks sending it into steep decline and pushing it toward further rejection of fundamental Christian doctrine.

In the pages that follow, Lutheran CORE explains its position in more detail.

## **I. The Church Discerns Its Teachings From Scripture.**

In its constitution, the ELCA expressly “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.”<sup>5</sup> Simply put, the ELCA has committed to make Scripture the

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert W. Chilstrom and Lowell O. Erdahl, *Sexual Fulfillment for Single and Married, Straight and Gay, Young and Old* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 116.

<sup>3</sup> For example, between 2003 and 2005, The Episcopal Church lost “nearly 115,000” members “with homosexuality issues fueling the departures.” John Dart, “Episcopal Membership Loss ‘Precipitous,’” *The Christian Century*, November 14, 2006, [www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=2566](http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=2566). Since then, the rate of loss has accelerated. In 2007, The Episcopal Church lost over 80,000 members. [www.nccusa.org/news/080215yearbook1.html](http://www.nccusa.org/news/080215yearbook1.html). Moreover, at least three dioceses (similar to ELCA synods) have taken steps to leave The Episcopal Church, as have some individual parishes. In some cases, different groups are fighting in court at great expense over church property ownership.

The United Church of Christ, “much like the Episcopal Church of America, is struggling to keep its family intact as it grapples with questions about its own identity.” Elizabeth Hamilton, “Topics for Synod Show UCC Tensions,” *Hartford Courant*, June 17, 2007, [www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/DowntownDevelopment/htfd\\_courant\\_061707.asp](http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/DowntownDevelopment/htfd_courant_061707.asp). Since 2005, when the United Church of Christ overwhelmingly approved homosexual marriage, at least 243 congregations have left the denomination. [www.faithfulandwelcoming.org/content/show.asp?mne=withdrawn%2Dchurches](http://www.faithfulandwelcoming.org/content/show.asp?mne=withdrawn%2Dchurches).

<sup>4</sup> The teachings of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong illustrate this. For example, Bishop Spong criticizes those he calls “fundamentalists” for holding as a core belief that “the crucified Jesus, who was laid in the grave as a deceased man on Good Friday, was by the mighty act of God, restored to life on Easter.” [www.johnshelbyspong.com/bishopspogon\\_theResurrection.aspx](http://www.johnshelbyspong.com/bishopspogon_theResurrection.aspx). Bishop Spong’s response: “It ain’t necessarily so.” *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Constitution, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Art. 2.03.

foundation for all that it believes, teaches, and confesses. Thus, the ELCA may adopt a new teaching or practice if, but only if, the teaching or practice is in accord with Scripture, or at least is not condemned by it.

This understanding of the role of Scripture is fundamental to the Christian faith. It dates to the Christian Church's early days and was foundational to the Lutheran Reformation. As early Lutheran leaders put it, Christians "believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone."<sup>6</sup> Christians look to Scripture, among other reasons, because "believers require the teaching of the law: so that they do not fall back on their own holiness and piety and under the appearance of God's Spirit establish their own service to God on the basis of their own choice, without God's Word or command."<sup>7</sup> In this context, "the word 'law' has one single meaning, namely, the unchanging will of God, according to which human beings are to conduct themselves in this life."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, those urging the ELCA or any other church body to adopt a new teaching must establish a Scriptural basis for concluding that the teaching comports with "the unchanging will of God."<sup>9</sup> In discerning whether such a basis exists, Christians look to the plain language of Scripture. In addition, they consider what sometimes is called "tradition," which includes the recorded teachings of Christians across time and space. Unlike Scripture, tradition is not binding. However, where virtually all Christians over time have reached one conclusion regarding the meaning of Scripture on some point, those urging a contrary conclusion bear an extremely high burden in showing that they are right and that all who have gone before were wrong.

## **II. As Even Advocates Of A New Sexual Ethic Admit, Scripture Does Not Approve Same-Sex Sexual Relationships.**

Advocates for a new sexual ethic generally make little or no effort to meet their burden of establishing a Scriptural foundation for their position. Some seek to justify this by contending that "the realities of homosexual orientation and same-sex relationships of faithfulness and trust between consenting adults are never addressed anywhere in the Bible."<sup>10</sup> However, most concede that the Bible does address these issues, and that it "quite clearly takes a negative view

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<sup>6</sup> *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, et al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), Formula of Concord, Epitome, Prologue, 486.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art. VI, 590.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 589.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Chilstrom and Erdahl, 116.

of same-sex sexual relations . . . .”<sup>11</sup> And all agree that “there are no passages in the Bible that specifically affirm homosexual relationships.”<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the plain language of Scripture hardly could be more clear. For example, the Old Testament exhorts men, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman.”<sup>13</sup> And in the New Testament, St. Paul describes a sin-filled culture like this: “Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own person the due penalty for their error.”<sup>14</sup>

Scripture does portray sexuality as a gift of God. However, Scripture’s explanation of that gift demonstrates that it is to be enjoyed solely within the covenant of marriage.<sup>15</sup> In that context, and in that context alone, a sexual relationship is both a means through which humans participate with God in creation and a means through which a married couple share companionship, pleasure, and intimacy.

From its beginnings, the Christian Church’s understanding of sexuality has reflected the clarity of Scripture on the issue. Until the last few years, virtually no church body or prominent Christian teacher dissented. Even today, church bodies representing all but a small percentage of Christians hold to Scriptural teaching. Serious efforts to change this teaching exist now almost nowhere outside so-called “mainline protestant” church bodies in westernized countries. And even within these church bodies, strong support remains for Scriptural teaching. For example, only 22% of ELCA members responding in 2004 to an ELCA study on sexuality favored blessing same-sex unions and ordaining persons in committed same-sex relationships, while 57% opposed both practices.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, those urging the ELCA to condone same-sex sexual relationships stand against (i) the plain language of Scripture; (ii) the nearly unanimous teachings of Christian thinkers from the last

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Wink, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” in Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 37.

<sup>12</sup> Chilstrom and Erdahl, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Lev. 18:22.

<sup>14</sup> Rom. 1:26-27. *See also* Lev. 20:13, I Cor. 6:9, I Tim. 1:10.

<sup>15</sup> *See, e.g.*, Gen. 1-3. In Matt. 19:1-9, Jesus speaks approvingly of God’s vision for marriage and human sexuality as set out in Genesis.

<sup>16</sup> *Report and Recommendations from the Task Force for Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Studies on Sexuality* (2005) 32. This should come as no surprise. At least until recently, the ELCA and its predecessor church bodies always have taught that sexual relations are appropriate only between a man and woman joined in marriage. *See, e.g.*, the 1996 ELCA Church Council Message, *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions*, [www.elca.org/socialstatements/sexuality](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/sexuality); the 1982 ALC Social Statement, *Teachings and Practice on Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources/ALC1982.pdf](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources/ALC1982.pdf); the 1980 ALC Social Statement, *Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*, [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources/ALC1980.pdf](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources/ALC1980.pdf); and the 1970 LCA Social Statement, *Sex, Marriage, and Family*, [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources/LCA1970.pdf](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources/LCA1970.pdf).

2,000 years; and (iii) the judgment of church bodies representing all but a very few Christians who have ever lived. And they admit this. That should end the matter. But it does not. Advocates for a new ethic continue to ask the ELCA to change accepted Christian teaching on sexuality.

### **III. Because Scripture Prohibits Same-Sex Sexual Relationships, Advocates For The Blessing Of Such Relationships Contend That It Is Not Binding.**

Advocates for the new sexual ethic argue that no matter what Scripture says regarding same-sex sexual activity, the ELCA need not and ought not comply with it. They contend that rejection of Scripture would be nothing new, pointing to changes by some church bodies in Christian teaching and practice on matters such as slavery, marriage after divorce, and the ordination of women. This contention fails for at least two reasons. For one thing, past rejections of Scripture would not justify additional rejections. But more importantly, Scripture provided the basis for each of the changes identified. The disagreements surrounding these changes related to the meaning of Scripture, and not to whether Scripture was binding. Thus, this argument is at best irrelevant.

Moving beyond any consideration of past practices, advocates for a new sexual ethic contend that the Church should condone and bless same-sex sexual relationships simply because such relationships are “natural;” that is, they invariably exist. They contend that because sexual orientation is not a choice, and because a certain number of persons always have had a homosexual orientation, it would be “unnatural,” unjust, and discriminatory not to celebrate same-sex sexual relationships. According to this view, that which we desire is good and worthy of the Church’s approval precisely because we desire it. For the Church to withhold its approval of same-sex sexual relationships therefore would be unjust toward those who desire such relationships.

This understanding, of course, is decidedly not Christian. Christians believe that humans are created in God’s image, and that they therefore do desire much that is good. However, Christians also believe that all humans are sinners, each of us desiring much that is sinful. Thus, the fact that some persons desire same-sex sexual relationships – the fact that such relationships exist in “nature” – tells us literally nothing about whether these relationships are potentially good or inherently sinful. To make that kind of determination, Christians always have looked to Scripture. However, perhaps because Scripture does not give the answer they want, advocates for a new sexual ethic argue that it is not binding and they offer nothing else in its place.

The implications are profound. Under the approach advocated by the supporters of the new teaching on sexuality, the Church would be left with no principled basis for discerning that the desire to help the poor or work for peace is good, or that the desire to steal from others or sexually abuse children is sinful. Indeed, we would have no basis for concluding that any person acting on any desire is committing an inherently sinful act.

Advocates for the blessing of same-sex sexual relationships no doubt would dispute this. Some even argue that Scripture is a valid basis for determining some things.<sup>17</sup> But they do not provide any principled basis for discerning when Scripture should apply and when it should be ignored. All therefore apparently are free to reject Scripture whenever it does not affirm their own desires.

#### **IV. The Advocates Of The New Sexual Ethic Urge The ELCA To Replace The Christian Gospel With A New And Very Different Religion.**

This therefore is about much more than sex. It is about a “gospel” uncoupled from the law, which Lutherans believe provides “a sure guide, according to which they can orient and conduct their entire life.”<sup>18</sup> It is about a philosophy under which each person’s innate desires are considered “natural” and therefore somehow justified and free of sin. It is about a belief that each person finds redemption within himself or herself, and not in the saving grace claimed for us by Christ on the cross. It is about an entirely new religion, which borrows many of the trappings of Christianity, but jettisons the content of Christianity.

Because adherence to Scripture is optional for adherents to this new religion, there remains no basis for any of the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. The Creeds and Confessions, our understanding of the nature of Christ and of the Holy Trinity, the foundation for the sacraments, and all other tenets of our faith become optional, if not prohibited.

It should come as no surprise that the church bodies that have chosen to condone same-sex sexual relationships also have permitted this new religion to creep in. And at the same time, these church bodies have splintered, with many members, congregations, and even whole groups of congregations leaving in search of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no reason to expect a different outcome if the ELCA adopts the new sexual ethic.

#### **V. What To Do**

Lutheran CORE urges all who share its commitment to the teachings of Scripture to take the following steps.

*First*, when the question arises, state clearly and honestly that sex outside of marriage is sinful and not to be blessed by the Church. However, do so as you would to members of your own families. Specifically, do not single out our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters for special condemnation, but instead affirm that Christ and His Church love and welcome them and all others as fellow sinners in need of forgiveness and redemption.

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<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Chilstrom and Erdahl, 113-17.

<sup>18</sup> *The Book of Concord*, Formula of Concord, Epitome Art. VI, 502.

**Second**, participate in the decision processes. Attend congregational meetings relating to sexuality. Attend synod assemblies or the Churchwide Assembly. Submit comments regarding the draft social statement on human sexuality that a task force is charged with preparing for consideration by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.<sup>19</sup> Elect voting members to synod assemblies and the Churchwide Assembly who share your views.

**Third**, learn the issues well enough to explain to others confidently and persuasively why the ELCA should uphold the Church's traditional teaching on human sexuality and should oppose proposals to bless or condone sexual relationships outside of marriage. Be bold enough to explain your views publicly within your congregations, at assemblies, and elsewhere.

**Fourth**, be persistent. Discussions of sexuality within the ELCA seem almost endless. Some might be tempted to support the blessing of same-sex sexual relationships simply to get the issue off the agenda. They may hope that the ELCA will be little changed as a result. However, the experiences of other church bodies should give such persons pause. Church bodies that have chosen to bless same-sex sexual relationships have splintered and fallen away from adherence to the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. There is little reason to believe that the ELCA's experience would be different.

**Fifth**, do not despair. Our work within the ELCA is extremely important, but it is not the last Word. We remain certain that salvation is ours by grace through faith in the redemptive sacrifice of God in Christ Jesus. That certainty is absolute and does not depend on the fate of the ELCA.

**And sixth**, pray constantly for wisdom, for strength, for our church body, and for all persons locked in the ELCA's debate over human sexuality; in particular, pray for those with whom we disagree.

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<sup>19</sup> The task force published a draft of the social statement on March 13, 2008. [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/draft/draftstatement.pdf](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/draft/draftstatement.pdf). Individuals and congregations may submit comments in response to the draft until November 1, 2008. The task force will take those comments into account in preparing a revised draft, which it will submit to the ELCA Church Council in early 2009 for its referral to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.