

The Bible, the Church, and Faithful Discernment

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In the reactions to the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, there have been frequent charges that by adopting the statement on human sexuality and the proposals regarding the blessing of unions and the ordaining / rostering of partnered gay and lesbian people, the ELCA has abandoned the authority of the Bible. My hope is that the following examination of a few biblical texts will be helpful to those who are hearing the accusations and wondering what they and their congregation ought to do and say at this point.

The Scriptures are “the authoritative source and norm for *the church’s+ proclamation, faith, and life” (ELCA Constitution). If we are to honor that affirmation, we need to avoid, as much as possible, confusing the authority of the Bible with the authority of poor translations, incorrect assumptions, partial knowledge, or contested interpretations. The Bible clearly and unambiguously declares God’s condemnation of sin and God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ. But that does not mean that the meaning of every individual text, or how it should shape the church’s life, is simple or obvious. The texts involved in this discussion must not be ignored or pushed to the side. However, the difficulty of interpreting them likewise cannot be ignored if we are going to take the authority of the texts seriously. We must face the texts we have, and not simpler texts that we wish for or imagine. The following will address a few texts that have been the focus of much of our discussion, and which I believe are most often viewed as the “clear word of Scripture” which the Assembly’s actions supposedly violate. They are certainly not the only texts that ought to shape our decisions. They may not even be the most important ones. But they are the ones which, for better or worse, have formed the center of our debate.

Two passages from Leviticus (Lev 18:22, 20:13) reject male same-gender intercourse. One issue which must be addressed, however, is whether or not such regulations continue to apply to the church (fortunately, no one in our discussion seems to be advocating that we are bound to continue the punishment assigned in Lev 20:13 for this behavior). The church, from the beginning of its life, has needed to make such decisions. Leviticus also includes commands not to eat shellfish (Lev 11:10, 12). Of course, the church can point to the teaching of Christ in the setting aside of dietary regulations (Mk 7:18-19), but that did not make it simple for the early church. Peter’s reaction to the vision given to him in Acts 10 was still to assume that some foods were improper. It took time, and an encounter between Cornelius’ household and the Holy Spirit, to convince Peter that such regulations could be, and must be, set aside. The regulations in Leviticus also include commands not to wear clothing made from two different materials (Lev 19:19), something that Lutherans seem universally to ignore. One could respond that clothing material is “obviously” unimportant, but sexual behavior is not (though that of

course begs the question of why we find this “obvious”). Leviticus also, just a few verses before prohibiting male homosexual intercourse, lays down rules about what times during the menstrual cycle a husband may have intercourse with his wife (Lev 18:19). This is certainly an issue of sexual behavior, and yet few of us, I suspect, view the Leviticus prohibition as normative in this case. The church will make wrong decisions from time to time, but the discussion about whether or not such biblical regulations apply to the church’s life is not, in itself, an unfaithful action or a denial of the Bible’s authority. In fact, such biblical discernment has been a central part of the church’s life at least since the church in Acts welcomed uncircumcised Gentiles.

Perhaps another example of the church’s work of discerning how a biblical commandment addresses our lives will help. Despite the clear word in the 10 Commandments against killing, the church has usually said that there are some situations in which killing is not murder, and therefore not forbidden for Christians (killing in war, or in defense of a neighbor’s life, for example). Thus, the decision that some forms of a prohibited behavior may not come under the biblical condemnation is not necessarily a denial of Scripture’s authority. In a similar way, we may ask whether there are contexts in which homosexual intercourse might not come under these verses’ condemnation. That, it seems to me, is what the ELCA has discussed for many years, and which the Assembly found to be possible when it opened the way to bless homosexual unions. Just as killing in war or defense of the neighbor is not murder, so too homosexual intercourse, within the context of a public, exclusive, and lifelong relationship, held to standards of faithfulness and mutuality, does not fall under condemnation from Leviticus. Such a move is not an abandonment of Scripture, but a serious reading of this text within the whole Bible’s witness to God’s will for human life and relationships.

There are two texts from the Pauline letters (1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10) which seem to mention homosexual people in lists of those whose behaviors are contrary to God’s will. However, there are serious difficulties with how to translate and understand the terms involved in these verses. The word translated as “sodomites” by the NRSV in both verses is a word that does not appear in any document earlier than 1 Corinthians. Such a situation, with no historical “track record” of how this word is used, makes it difficult to determine precisely what Paul means. In this case, two words have been combined: the word for “male” and the word for “bed” or “intercourse.” We could translate it awkwardly as “men-bedders”. This word would reasonably seem to refer to some kind of male same-gender intercourse, but Paul does not explain what he has in mind here, and the wide variety in translations demonstrates the uncertainty. Luther translated it as “defilers of boys”. The King James Version tried “abusers of themselves with mankind”. Several recent translations have introduced the language of homosexuality here, and used “homosexual offenders” (New International Version) or

“practicing homosexuals” (New English Translation), but we need to realize that (1) there is no ancient Greek word for “homosexual” or “homosexuality”, and all such translations are a recent innovation; and (2) these more recent translations hide an important interpretive decision, namely they assume that Paul’s unusual term is meant to indicate those we would today call homosexuals. That may or may not be right, but it is certainly dishonest to say that anyone who would disagree about that interpretive decision is therefore denying the authority of the Bible. After all, Luther’s translation reflects what is often criticized today as a “liberal” attempt to avoid the “clear meaning of the text.” Taking the Bible seriously at this point means recognizing the difficulty of this word, and not confusing the authority of the text with one particular (and questionable) understanding of a rare and difficult word.

The other relevant term in 1 Cor 6:9 is even more difficult to translate, as is again seen in the various attempts of the translators: “effeminate” (King James Version), “weaklings” (Luther, Tyndale), “those who make women of themselves” (Darby Bible), “the self-indulgent” (New Jerusalem Bible), “male prostitutes” (NRSV). Here, the Greek term is actually a common one, meaning “soft”. The problem for us (and obviously for translators over the last several centuries) is that “soft” was a description which covered a wide range of behaviors. Basically, one was considered “soft” if one allowed desires to gain control. This language of “soft” was used to describe men who ate too much, slept too much, and those who engaged in too much sex, whether with boys, or men, or multiple women, or even with one’s own wife. There are clearly some cultural assumptions here from the first century that differ from our own, and that we need to consider as we read this text. In the most general understanding, this verse addresses situations where one’s desires gain control of life (one is “soft” in first-century terms), and it declares the good news that the Kingdom of God means the end of being ruled and controlled by such desires. However, to limit this word to meaning “passive homosexual partners” (New English Translation) or “those guilty of homosexual perversion” (New English Bible) or “male prostitutes” (NRSV) does not in fact honor the authority of this text over our lives, but instead limits its meaning to situations that would let heterosexuals off the hook. We live in a culture that tries to define and evaluate everyone based on how well we fulfill our desires – for food, for wealth, for comfort, and for sex. This text speaks against all such life lived in the service of fulfilling our own desires.

These two words used together would indicate, then, those who surrender themselves to desires (“the soft”) and those who take advantage of that specifically in some form of male homosexual sex. The question then becomes whether or not these words describe the kind of committed, lifelong, responsible, and exclusive same-sex partners which the ELCA Assembly’s actions addressed. I think it does not. The assembly’s actions in fact seek ways to encourage and support homosexual persons to live out their lives and relationships in stable and faithful

ways (and to hold all of us accountable to those standards), rather than in ways that are characterized by the unregulated desire and exploitation criticized in these Pauline verses.

The remaining NT passage is the most theologically developed, Romans 1:26-27. It is important to notice the logic, assumptions, and the point that Paul is making here. First, Paul argues that the behavior he is describing in vv. 26-27 is the result of Gentiles worshiping idols (vv. 20-25). Notice, Paul is not saying that same-gender sex IS idolatry in some abstract sense of placing one's self above God and God's law, but is saying that Gentile activity of worshiping statues has led to this homosexual behavior. A common Jewish critique of Gentile society in the first century is that their idolatry has led to all sorts of behavioral problems, from theft to perjury to sexual impurity to murder, and Paul shares and reflects that view here (note Rom 1:28-32). Paul's language about being "consumed with passion" (v. 27) is a very common first-century explanation for same-gender intercourse. It was seen by both Jewish and Gentile writers as an example of desire gone out of control. It was widely assumed that the same desire that leads one into marriage with a woman, if left uncontrolled, would eventually grow into adultery, pedophilia, and then intercourse with another adult male. Finally, we should notice that the POINT of Paul's argument is not to tell the church that homosexual behavior must be abandoned, but rather to point out that Gentile society in general had turned from God to idols, and as a result suffered from uncontrolled passion. Same-gender intercourse is used by Paul, as it was by other Jewish writers, as a prime example of this.

The primary question that arises from noticing these aspects of Romans 1 is not whether this text is normative for the church, but rather HOW it exercises that normative authority. It is not at all clear that this text actually describes the people and the relationships that the ELCA Assembly's actions address. The gay couples in our congregations do not, presumably, engage in the worship of statues, nor do they seem to be more consumed by passion than other people. There are times when biblical texts mention something within the story or the argument that is assumed in their ancient culture, without that element being something taught by God's Word. For example, the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 assume an ancient Near Eastern view of the universe and how it is constructed, with water above the earth held up there by a dome in which the stars are placed. We can (and I think do) rightly affirm Genesis' insistence that God has created all things, without being tied to the ancient view of cosmology written in the text. Joshua 10:12-14 describes the sun standing still. This text was, wrongly as it turns out, used by the church to deny and condemn Galileo's claim that the earth went around the sun. The point of the Joshua text was not to teach that the sun went around the earth, but to declare God's faithfulness to Israel in their struggle. We can affirm the text and its authority without adopting the assumptions of ancient astronomy.

In Romans 1, Paul similarly uses assumptions from first century culture, medicine, and science, particularly an assumption that same-gender intercourse is the result of runaway passions. We should hear in this text the claim that life lived apart from God leads to disordered relationships. We should hear in this text that sexual addictions, which our culture seems so good at promoting and which consume so many lives, are in fact contrary to God's will. We should hear in this text a clear word against any society obsessed with how sexually active people are and which abandons fidelity in relationships for the sake of sexual self-gratification. However, the text does not require us to affirm the 1st century cultural assumption that all same-gender intercourse is the result of runaway passion or to conclude that those same-gender couples in our congregations must be secret idolaters, any more than Joshua requires us to affirm that the sun goes around the earth. This stance is not an abandoning of the authority of Scripture over the church, but in fact results from taking the text and its authority seriously enough to read carefully and to notice the point that Paul was actually making.

As we think about how Scripture functions authoritatively to shape and guide the life of the church, there is one more text that we ought to consider. In Acts 10-11, and again in chapter 15, the early church had to face an issue that the rules in the Old Testament seemed to have settled quite clearly: to belong to God's people, Gentile men would have to be circumcised. As Peter and the other leaders in Jerusalem found out, however, God seemed to be doing something else. God had called Peter to go to the Gentile Cornelius, and God had poured out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household without requiring circumcision. The church leadership met in assembly at Jerusalem to discuss this and to set policy for the church. As part of that discernment, they listened to what God had been doing among the Gentiles through Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. In the end, they decided that the old regulation was no longer binding on the church. Circumcision was not required. What the church in Acts did in seeking God's will involved listening to the experience of brothers and sisters in other parts of the church, and they took seriously the possibility that the Spirit was working and speaking there (see Acts 15:28).

The actions of the 2009 ELCA Assembly are the result of an extended period of study and discussion. For the last 20 years and more, we in the ELCA have carried on this conversation of discernment around Scripture, prayer, and listening to each other's stories of how we see God at work. We have not arrived at overwhelming agreement about what to say and do with regard to homosexuality, though these discussions have brought some changes, as seen in the Assembly's actions. We have also, for many years, consistently heard some of our brothers and sisters say that they believe God is calling partnered gay and lesbian candidates into ordained ministry. We have consistently heard them say that, in their context, they need, value, and

benefit from the ministry of these people. The actions of the Churchwide Assembly are undoubtedly imperfect, as all human efforts are. However, I believe that those actions faithfully reflect and respond to the years of discernment that we have done together, attempting to honor both the disagreement that remains and the calling by God that many have discerned. We should move through these changes with humility and trembling. Our discernment may be faulty. Our plans may be flawed. But in listening to one another over long years of discussion, and in seeking the Spirit's movement in those stories, the ELCA has not made an unfaithful move, but rather has been shaped by the pattern within Scripture itself. This is what the church in Acts did. This is what the church is always called to do.

It is not my goal here to argue that my way of reading these texts is certainly the one right way. It has been my goal, however, to show how someone can read these texts with a high regard for their authority over the life of the church, and still speak in favor of the proposals adopted by the ELCA regarding homosexuality. As one who supported (and supports) these proposals, I do not believe that doing so constitutes the abandoning of the Bible's authority. Honesty and the commandment not to bear false witness against others requires that we not confuse our disagreements about the meaning of these texts with faithlessness, heresy, or the denial of Scripture's authority. It is true that the Bible never says a single positive thing about same-gender intercourse. The few mentions of same-gender intercourse in the Bible are universally negative. But serious questions remain about how these texts address the issues we are facing and the people involved. There are legitimate questions about how well the concerns addressed in these biblical texts correspond to the committed, exclusive, faithful, lifelong relationships that are the focus of the ELCA's action. There are genuine difficulties in understanding some of these verses, and we ought to wonder whether, and why, we are trying to place too much weight on a few uncertain verses. Proper interpretation always involves listening to each text within the context of the whole witness of Scripture. There we hear with absolute clarity God's desire and call for mercy, compassion, faithfulness, and love of our neighbors. We hear that God's saving, sufficient grace has been poured out through Jesus Christ crucified and raised. We hear the promise that the Spirit will lead the church into God's truth. I believe that the ELCA Assembly's actions have been shaped by, and are in agreement with, this authoritative biblical word.

