



SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

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Since the release of the two ELCA task force documents up for vote this summer, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” and “Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies,” I along with some others have been posting extensive commentary on both of them on our website (www.lutheranforum.org; see back inside cover). To summarize, I find that the proposals, despite their apparent effort to be biblical and Lutheran, fall far short of this ideal.

Some aspects of these documents are outright recipes for internal ecclesiastical catastrophe, especially the effective congregationalism proposed by the “Report and Recommendation,” wherein homosexually active persons may be ordained but need not be accepted by any church or individual whose conscience is offended. This in turn would make for an ecumenical catastrophe; not only on account of the extreme departure from the consensus of the church across time and space, but in destroying altar and pulpit fellowship *within* the ELCA—all for the sake of respecting consciences! It is hard to fathom what exactly the church is supposed to be, according to this recommendation. And beyond the ecclesiological problem is the general retreat, particularly in the social statement, from the inevitable conclusions of biblical Lutheran teaching on sex, marriage, and the family.

What then are we to do? We who are committed, by our confirmation and the love of our hearts, or further by our ordination vows, to the church and its teaching as understood by the Lutheran confessions? If we desire our church to live according to the word of God, then we must do so ourselves. So our task is to follow the charge of Ephesians 4:15 and speak the truth in love.

Speak...

Despite the frustrations and disappointments we experience daily in the church, and despite all the burdens the rest of life regularly imposes on us, it is incumbent upon us to speak. We are Christ’s witnesses: to us he entrusted his gospel. Therefore, let us speak as his ambassadors.

Before the assembly: take the risk of making your convictions public. Find those who are inclined to support the Report and Recommendation and help them see how ecclesiological disintegration would ensue, not validation of homosexuals in ministry. Find those who are silent on the issue, cowed by the force of anger flying in every direction, and witness faithfully, calmly, and reasonably. Find those who agree with you and support each other, not in self-indulgent outrage, but in prayer and Bible study.

Before the assembly: take part in the Fifty Days of Prayer leading up to the assembly as an opportunity not only to pray for our church to exercise “right judgment,” as the prayers themselves request, but to engage in genuine dialogue on these issue—dialogue that has been conspicuously absent despite all claims to the contrary. The details can be found at www.elca.org/50days.

Before the assembly: start a letter-writing campaign. Start a blog. Start a podcast. Teach your friends, acquaintances, parishioners; and while you’re at it, reach out to the spiritually starving world with the good news. Keep this up after the assembly, too!

Before the assembly: examine the other proposals from renewal groups in and around the ELCA, like Lutheran CORE and Word Alone. Examine the statement on “Pastoral Guidance Concerning Same-Sex Unions” adopted by the Society of the Holy Trinity, available on their website.

At the assembly: fast for some or all of your time there.

Dress in sackcloth and ashes—really. Show your respect for the word of God by doing what is prescribed for repentance (Jonah 3:7–9). Make your witness visible to other voting members, the media, and the world.

At the assembly: campaign for all the steps outlined in the Report and Recommendation be approved by a 2/3, not 50%, vote. What is in question is a matter of church teaching, not just a response to social conditions, as its promoters are claiming. In any event, the success of a bare minimum would be a pyrrhic victory.

At the assembly: if indeed both documents fail—grant it God!—push for the recommendation of the first dissenting position, i.e. a ten-year moratorium on the subject. Give this poor church a rest.

After the assembly: network with others within and outside of the ELCA. Form associations. Learn how Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists are coping with this issue publicly. Learn how Catholics, Orthodox, evangelicals, and Pentecostals are dealing with it privately. Foster ecumenism that builds up instead of breaking down.

After the assembly: Americans know that we speak loudest with our dollars. So, despite the economic downturn, increase your benevolences—and reroute them. Certainly reject the absurd “Blue Ribbon” campaign that’s trying to jolly synods into passing along 55% of their congregational gifts as “unrestricted” funds to Higgins Road. And stop sending your funds to the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. There’s no reason for a middleman that uses the statistics chiefly to bolster its own prestige. Send them directly to Lutheran World Relief, which is one of the most highly rated charity organizations in the world.

After the assembly: seek out the best and brightest youth, set them on fire for the Lord, immerse them in the Scriptures, and—only then—send them to seminary. Take a careful look at each seminary’s curriculum and faculty before shipping your candidate off there. If you find that you could

not possibly send one of your flock to one of these seminaries, take the time to write a letter and say why. In this age of economic crisis, you will get a better hearing than before—because no one can afford to lose potential students.

After the assembly: this may be the most important one of all. Recognize the dire situation as a renewed call to evangelism. Forget the broken structure for awhile and obey an indisputable command of Jesus: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Fill your church up with new believers hungry to obey the words of Scripture. This alone could turn the tide.

Why go to all this trouble? For a very simple reason. Most of the 4.8 million members of the ELCA will stick with “this church” no matter which way the vote goes this summer. The intuition of the *consensus fidelium*, that it is wrong to break apart from other baptized Christians, will not be wrong. They are the main reason to stay and fight. Would you leave Christ’s sheep without a shepherd? Would you leave them without any voices to teach them the truth of canon, creed, and confession? For many of us the problem with sticking with the ELCA is sheer embarrassment at being associated with it. For the sake of these of Christ’s people, we need to swallow our embarrassment and stay in the fight. If we don’t keep speaking the truth to them, who will?

...the Truth...

If we are to stay with the ELCA—as I think we should, though the precise ecclesiological reasons for this will have to wait for another occasion—it can only be with a renewed commitment to fight for the truth of the Word of God in Scripture and sacraments as the one true source and norm of our common life, in all its aspects, not only where sexuality is concerned.

But the fear of the Lord is the

beginning of wisdom, and repentance is the way to truth. Our Lord charges us to remove the log in our own eyes before we work on the speck in our neighbors’. We ought not claim to speak as Christ’s ambassadors unless we are willing to ask hard questions of ourselves.

Why is it, exactly, so easy for so many among us, both clergy and laity, to accept false teaching? Worse yet, not even to recognize false teaching when it appears? Why are our laity so biblically illiterate? Why have Lutherans lost their reputation for being great preachers? Why have we not even come close to matching the incredible creativity—not to say money—that evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Catholics have poured into the edification of the faithful?

Even if the vote goes well in August, this temporary victory in one political skirmish will not be anywhere near enough. There is a much larger battle to be fought, to recapture minds and hearts for the truth taught in the Scriptures. This is not to dismiss the importance of political action and speech as outlined in the previous section—but to set it in context. What follows, devoting ourselves to the truth of the gospel, matters still more.

Before the assembly: clergy, get out your book of occasional services and reread your ordination vows. Humbly assess yourself. Thank God for your successes in living up to this high calling. Repent where you have failed. In your heart renew all of these vows. Clergy and laity both, reread your confirmation service. Recall what you publicly professed to believe. Renew this profession of faith in your daily life.

Before the assembly: take time to read theology, and not about the topic at hand. This controversy is only the smallest part of a much bigger picture. There is vastly more for Christians to say than that homosexuality is not a blessed creation of God. The politically necessary focus on it at the moment is a dangerous distortion of the good news.

Before the assembly: be on your guard against joyless truthfulness. There is a terrible temptation to use Christian teaching on marriage as a big heavy club, inscribed with the word DUTY, and bash people over the head with it. The Christian calling to marriage is supposed to be one of free, joyful, self-giving love, mirroring Christ's love for the world. Duty comes in only when all else is lost, to give joy a chance to recover in this fallen world.

Before the assembly: by the same token, regard with skepticism those who dismiss the power and the goodness of sexual desire, as if it were just plain gross or beneath us dignified humans to be caught up by such animalistic impulses. Desire is not to be trifled with, and pleasure is not to be dismissed. The devil lurks on the opposite extreme from the libertines as well.

At the assembly: don't mingle only with the like-minded. Visit the booths of Lutherans Concerned/North America and similar groups. Talk to them like the serious, committed, loving people they are. Express your genuine concerns for homosexual persons at risk: at risk of condemnation under the righteous law of God; at risk from persecution and prejudice at the hands of narrow-minded bigots; at risk from the consequences of certain lifestyle choices; at risk from being used in a power struggle in the church. Prove to them that you are truly on their side—whatever the political divisions between you.

At the assembly: be a theologian of the cross and call a thing what it is. Make sure that the real, deep, besetting issues are discussed, not the superficial or splashy ones.

After the assembly: amend your church constitution to require all future pastors to subscribe to the 1993 Visions and Expectations document—and clarify that “chaste,” as applied to single pastors, has always been understood by the Christian tradition to mean “abstinent.” Make it clear that this applies to *all* unmarried pastors, heterosexual and homosexual alike.

After the assembly: preach more doctrine, if you are clergy, and demand more doctrine of your clergy, if you are laity. Doctrine, let us be clear, does not mean stultifyingly dull exposition of esoteric topics. It means talking about *God*, the real meat of the Christian faith, and not the milk of beginners. Tell, and demand to be told, about God.

After the assembly: avoid the temptation to let renewal groups and movements become ends in themselves, making them just one more choice among many, the very ecclesiological error that the task force documents propose. Renewal groups exist to put themselves out of business. The teaching they promote is the church's teaching, not a faction's teaching.

After the assembly: clergy, reclaim the pastoral office. Your divine calling is to preach, teach, and administer the sacraments. You took public vows to do these things, as well as to pray. The pastoral office is cluttered nowadays by many other responsibilities—worthy ones, but not all of them are *your* job! Simplify, simplify. Laity, allow your pastors to reclaim the pastoral office. Give space, time, and understanding for your pastors to do what pastors are uniquely called to do. The rest—is *your* job!

... in Love

In Christ there is no choice between truth and love. In Christians the choice is regularly made for one or the other, the ultimate heresy of which all of us are guilty. The true Christian teaching on love has been co-opted and voided in these discussions of sexuality and “binding consciences” through their abandonment of the truth.

But if we are to speak the truth, we must confess our failure to love—and rectify it. Here again repentance at home is the first step. We have been poor witnesses towards homosexuals. The very fact of this movement in our church is a condemnation of our lovelessness towards them. How many “conservatives” have gone out of their

way to say that all gay people are welcome, precious, loved by God—the way that “liberals” have? How many have devoted their time and energy to denouncing all forms of public and private discrimination, abuse, reviling? Do these “liberals” of clergy and laity alike not have legitimate grounds for critique against us, that we have failed in love, that we have preferred a kind of legalistic purity against the leveling, all-encompassing love of God?

Here is the grain of truth in the charge of homophobia against those on the “right.” The word, to be sure, can be employed as a kind of club itself, to silence the truthful speaking of the hard word of the Scriptures. But honesty demands us to acknowledge: rarely has any voice in our time been lifted up asking for church discipline against single, heterosexual, sexually active pastors. Why not? Why is it that we demand discipline against the homosexuals but not the heterosexuals? If it is really about fidelity to a biblical ethic for our clergy, why has church fellowship not been broken by the tolerance of divorced pastors? They are as inadmissible as sexually active gay pastors. No wonder we are accused of hypocrisy.

We are faced now with the specter of false teaching in these documents, but there is no small amount of false teaching on the “traditional” side as well: not only in the moral failure to defend homosexuals, not only in the convenient overlooking of heterosexual sins, but also in the ecclesiological failure to recognize that through baptism alone God creates and justifies the church. Structures, guidelines, documents, and the office-holders of the moment do not make (or break) the church.

Taking the long view, we should be thrilled that our church disputes have progressed to this point. No one is going to get executed. No one is calling in the authorities to enforce church law. Our opponents are arguing because they are convinced of the unmerited love of God for all people. How wonderful that, if they make any

mistake at all, it is on the side of grace and not law! How much better a naïve antinomian than a well-armed legalist! We can work with this. The hard facts of a lawless world will of themselves in time expose the inability of their position to stand up to scrutiny. But thank God for good “enemies”—“enemies” who profess Jesus as Lord and want his loving lordship to be fully applied to homosexuals.

Therefore, I propose the following forms for taking the “more excellent way.”

Before the assembly: let every thought and act from now on be held to the high standard of God’s holy love.

Before the assembly: learn to love those who disagree with you. Learn to love even those who threaten the church and the truth of its teaching. No one is won over to the truth by shame, reviling, or condemnation. Only love can win as God would have us win.

Before the assembly: if you suffer from it, then overcome your disgust with or discomfort around homosexuals. Learn to see them as God’s precious children. Speak boldly on their behalf, insist on their full inclusion in the church on account of their baptism, and protect them from cruel prejudice. Or, if your sympathies run in the other direction, cure yourself of dishonest compassion. Learn to speak the word of God faithfully and accurately, even when it embarrasses or distresses you. Accompany your genuine love with the truth.

Before the assembly: pray for those who promote false teaching. Pray for them by name. Tell them you are praying for them. Ask them to pray for you too.

Before the assembly: take the time from work and worries to love your spouse. If you are unmarried, recommit yourself to the chastity of abstinence.

At the assembly: watch your mouth if you speak publicly. Be above reproach in every word. Do not for a moment indulge yourself in grandstanding, apocalyptic prophesying, shaming, finger-pointing, name-calling, exaggeration, or distortion of the facts. Americans are incapable of hearing

any message if the medium is not exactly suited to it, and not without good reason. You can do untold damage with your words—so don’t.

At the assembly: take time to love your spouse, if you are married. Recommit yourself to the chastity of abstinence if you are not.

After the assembly: whatever the outcome, keep doing these things. Let love be genuine and not falter for a moment. Short-term victory or defeat actually means very little. Love is what changes hearts, and therefore in the end love is also what changes minds.

After the assembly: if you are married, love your spouse! If you are unmarried, recommit yourself to chaste abstinence!

After the assembly: last of all, love the poor, poor ELCA. I say this in full acknowledgement of how ridiculous it sounds. Nobody loves the ELCA: not those who will push their agenda whatever the cost; not those who are willing to buy a few more years of false peace through appeasement; not those who are ready to walk out in rage or disappointment. Nobody loves the ELCA but God. And God loves it for reasons we *all* find offensive: because God has always loved and favored the ungodly. While we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Although we Lutherans have contributed to the church catholic our profound doctrine on theological anthropology—our *simul justus et peccator*—we have never quite had the courage to follow it through to its ecclesiological correlate, that the church is also *simul justus et peccator*, forensically justified through the gifts that come from without of baptism, communion, and the preaching of the word, and in which sanctification is always a small harvest of the first fruits, sometimes barely visible in the larger cornucopia of sin. The ELCA is the ecclesiological form of the sinner: it comes before God, alternately proud and despairing, with hands full of sin, death, and the devil. For the very reason we would kick it away and leave it to die at the side of the road, God

comes to this very unappealing bride, takes away the ugly things she has to offer, and in their place gives her righteousness, life, and His own gracious self, not because she is worthy to receive them, but precisely because God comes to the unworthy.

I plead with all of you who adhere to traditional Lutheran teaching shared by the church catholic on this issue: *do not abandon your brothers and sisters who are in error*. Do not abandon your sin-, death-, and devil-ridden church. Love them, stick by them, and do not cease to witness to them until love and truth come back together again.

St. Paul, the consummate speaker of both truth and love, should have the last word here, from Romans 12:14–21.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. ✠