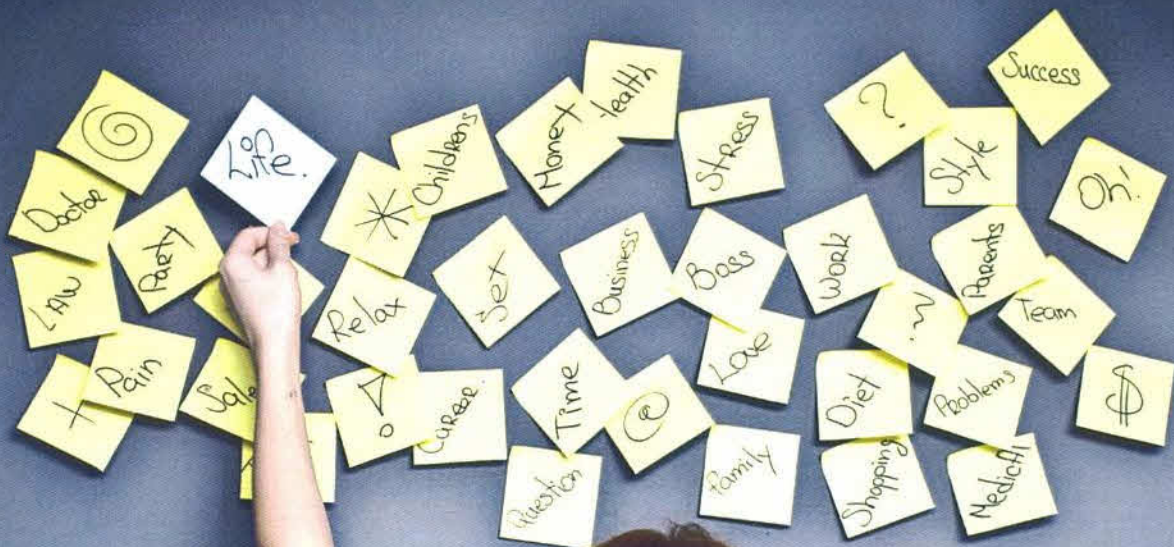




What About Homosexuality?

What the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions Have to Say

by William Bakewicz



Topical Reader Series

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ed. by Steven E. King

WordAlone & Sola Publishing

2299 Palmer Drive, Suite 220

New Brighton, MN 55112-2202

1-888-551-7254 or 651-633-6004

Produced and distributed on behalf of the WordAlone Network, by Sola Publishing, New Brighton MN

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Author's Introduction

In 2009, the Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) decided to endorse gay "marriage" and to allow pastors to be in same-sex relationships. In so doing the assembly voted to remove the ELCA from the universal Christian consensus on marriage and homosexual behavior and departed from the teaching of the Bible as understood by Christians for 2,000 years.

Since the beginning of the ELCA in 1988, the topic of sexuality and homosexuality has been on the front burner. In March of 1988, Bishop Herbert Chilstrom wrote a pastoral letter to all the congregations of the ELCA focusing on the issue of homosexuality. In 1994, *The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective* was issued as a first draft of an ELCA social statement on this topic, and in 2004, *The Church and Homosexuality - Journey Together Faithfully, ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Part Two* was released. Finally, in 2009, the ELCA adopted *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*.

As a Lutheran pastor for the past thirty-five years I have seen many people wrestle with the issue of homosexuality and their Christian faith, especially in light of our society's growing acceptance of homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle.

And so the question, "What About Homosexuality?"

My purpose in writing this booklet is to answer that question by looking at what the Bible has to say, what Lutheran doctrine has to say, and then to take a look at what our attitude should be as Christians towards those who identify themselves as homosexuals. My prayer is that this booklet will help *you* answer the question "What About Homosexuality?"

Rev. William Bakewicz
American Lutheran Church
Long Prairie, Minnesota
September, 2009

CHAPTER 1

What the Bible Has to Say

In the context of being asked a question about divorce, Jesus spoke of God's intention from the beginning regarding the marriage of one man and one woman. He said:

Jesus said: "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Mark 10:6-9)

In this text, Jesus limits the appropriate place for sexual relations to the marriage of husband and wife. His command is based on God's created order, and the "reason" for the existence of two complementary sexes to begin with. It is over against this intention of God that all other sexual relationships are measured and defined as inappropriate.

With regard to homosexuality, there are a number of Scriptural texts that directly address same-sex erotic behavior. For example, God specifically laid down in the law of Moses:

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (Leviticus 18:22)

In the same way, within the context of announcing the power of the Gospel, the Apostle used homosexual behavior as an example of the consequences of human sin:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and 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 of their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. (Romans 1:26-28)

Paul relates homosexual conduct with disobedience toward God. He also talked about the eternal implications of persistence in sin, saying:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

In Genesis 19, homosexual behavior is used as an example of sin and rebellion against God, in the story of God's destruction of the city of Sodom. In this story, when the angels of the Lord had come to Lot's house to rescue Lot and his family, the men of Sodom surrounded the house saying,

"Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Behold, I have two daughters who have not known man; let me bring them out to you, do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." (Genesis 19:5-8)

While offering meager resistance, it is amazing how quickly Lot was willing to surrender his children to the will of cultural pressure. But before this could happen, Lot and his family were rescued, and Scripture summarizes the encounter, saying: "Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord" (Genesis 13:13).

In the New Testament, the apostle Peter refers to this story from Genesis, as an example of God's grace as well as his wrath. Of Sodom and Gomorrah, Peter says,

If by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction and made them an example to those who were to be ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked (for what that righteous man saw and heard as he lived among them, he was vexed in his righteous soul day after day with their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. (2 Peter 2:6-10)

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, homosexual behavior is not only listed among many sins, it is described as "contrary to sound doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:10), incompatible with the Gospel of Christ. Paul clearly understood homosexual behavior as sin. Among other forms of immoral conduct, such behavior is something unacceptable in the sight of God. Paul emphasized to his Christian audience that God calls His people — especially those in leadership in the church — to a life that is above reproach. He wrote:

Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater) has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. (Ephesians 5:1-5)

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these

things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8)

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you once walked, when you lived in them. (Colossians 3:5-7)

Human sexuality as a part of God's created order for the world affirms the marriage of man and woman as God's intention for humanity from the beginning of creation. As Genesis 1:27 states, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Jesus reaffirmed this same created order in Mark 10:6-9. Throughout over 2000 years of Christianity, the biblical and historical teaching of the Church has recognized same-sex intercourse as sinful.

The blessing of same-sex unions, and the ordaining, commissioning and consecrating of people in such relationships, strikes at the very foundation of biblical authority as well as the Lutheran Confessions' doctrine of Original Sin. Such actions divide the Christian Church, undermine its mission and diminish its witness to the power of the Gospel in our world today.

Reflection & Discussion:

- a. Why was it more important for Jesus to describe what God *intended* for sexuality, rather than list what God did *not* intend?
- b. How would you define the words *immorality* and *impurity*? What do they have in common?
- c. In what way is an offense against God's creation an offense against God himself?

CHAPTER 2

Understanding God's Word as both Law and Gospel

Historically, Lutheran doctrinal writings have had much to say about God's Word as both Law and Gospel. A defining statement is provided in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V, Law and Gospel:

We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between law and gospel is an especially glorious light that is to be maintained with great diligence in the church, so that, according to St. Paul's admonition, the Word of God may be divided rightly. (p. 478, Tappert)

Law and Gospel in the Word of God are distinguished according to their function and purpose. The Law teaches what we are to do and not to do; the Gospel teaches what God has done, and still does, for our salvation. The Law shows us our sins and the wrath of God; the Gospel shows us our Savior and the grace of God. The Gospel tells us what God has done for us by His grace through Jesus Christ.

Law and Gospel are always at work in God's Word, and both are necessary in the preaching and teaching of the Church. If either were missing, God's Word would not function to accomplish God's purpose, because the two work hand in hand.

We are all sinners who are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (the good news of the Gospel). At the same time we need to recognize that God justifies sinners rather than justifying sins. That is why the Law must be proclaimed to all people — especially to impenitent sinners. But at the same time, the Gospel must be proclaimed to sinners who are troubled in their minds because of their sins.

In understanding how this works, it is important to recognize that there is a difference between *forgiveness* and *acceptance*. The two are not the same. God forgives sinners and accepts

and loves them (and we should too), but God's acceptance of sinners does not mean that God accepts sins. This is the proper distinction between Law and Gospel.

The true Gospel is the Good News that "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The love of God is found in the fact that he does not leave us as we are. God does not desire us to perish in our sins, but that we would be saved.

Contrary to this biblical message, the false gospel of "acceptance" denies the power and centrality of the cross by denying the reality of sin. Regarding homosexuality, the statement is often made, "If you love a person, then you have to accept them the way they are." This is not true. To say that God loves the sinner does *not* mean that God condones all the behaviors and actions in that person's life. In love, God does come to us the way we are — even in our sin and failings — but He does not leave us there or say that it is okay to stay there.

If it were true that God simply accepts us as we are (sins and bad behavior included) then there would have been no need to send Jesus into the world to die for us on the cross. Jesus could have simply come announcing the message "God loves you and accepts for who you are." But He didn't do that. He came to earth to pay the penalty for our sins, and gave his life to deliver us from sin, death and the power of the devil. Christ came to redeem us (to buy us back) with his lifeblood as the price.

That is the Gospel of Redemption — not that Jesus leaves us in our sin, but that He delivers us from it. Jesus himself proclaimed, "unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). He told his disciples:

Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations. (Luke 24:46-47)

This dual message of forgiveness and repentance is the Good News that Christ sent us to bring to all people. God loves us so much that He does not leave us in our sin, but He redeems us from it.

Any theology that seeks to express God's will on the basis of Gospel alone fails to recognize that God's Word is *simul lex et promissio* — both Law and Gospel, at the same time. To say "God loves you as you are; go and do what you like" is an attempt to have the Gospel without the Law, but in the end it denies both.

To suggest that God's forgiveness demands that we affirm and endorse all forms of human sexuality distorts the role of the Law and Gospel in addressing our human lives. Any description of human relationships within God's creation should naturally flow from the Law as it describes God's intention for us and for society. God uses the Law both to order the world and to reveal our sinfulness. Lutheran doctrine places sexuality within the doctrines of creation and the Law.

The law is a divine doctrine that teaches what is right and God-pleasing and which condemns everything that is sinful and contrary to God's will. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VI, p. 478, Tappert)

Disregarding God's Law leads to chaos. Ethics — what people ought to do — is a matter of Law. Jesus summarized the Law and maintained its order when He gave the two great commandments: love for God and love for neighbor (Mark 12:29-31). Grounding ethics in the Gospel turns the Gospel into law.

The Lutheran Confessions make it clear that as long as we live in this world as simultaneously saint-and-sinner, we live under

the demands of the Law as well as the promise of the Gospel.

We believe, teach, and confess that although people who genuinely believe and whom God has truly converted are freed through Christ from the curse and coercion of the law, they are not on that account without the law; on the contrary, they have been redeemed by God precisely that they should exercise themselves day and night in the law (Ps. 1119:1). In the same way our first parents even before the Fall did not live without the law, for the law of God was written on their hearts when they were created in the image of God. (p. 480, Tappert)

Incarnation and justification are key to understanding salvation, but creation and God's Law shape Christian understanding of sexuality and ethics. God uses Christ's birth, death and resurrection to provide salvation, but God uses creation and the Law, including Jesus' teaching, to reveal God's intentions for sexual morality. It is impossible to ground our ethics in Scripture and the living voice of the Gospel if we ignore the clear and consistent Scriptural words about sexuality as stated in the Law.

Reflection & Discussion:

- a. What happens when we hear the Law without the Gospel? What happens when we hear the Gospel without the Law?
- b. How would you describe what "forgiveness" means, in a biblical sense? How is this different from "acceptance"?
- c. According to the Lutheran Confessions, how do we as human beings know the difference between right and wrong? In general, is Truth something that comes from the inside or the outside?

CHAPTER 3

“Orientation” and Original Sin

Generally speaking, when people refer to sexual “orientation” they are referring to the self-understanding of a person’s sexual identity, in terms of which gender they are attracted to. Most people are heterosexual in orientation, meaning that they are sexually attracted primarily to persons of the opposite sex. Those who are homosexual in orientation are attracted to those of the same gender, and may identify themselves as gay men or lesbian women. Those who are bisexual experience significant erotic attraction to both males and females.

This understanding and recognition of sexual orientation raises the question: Is homosexual orientation “normal,” simply because it exists? The psychological professions, as a whole, no longer consider homosexuality to be a pathology in need of cure or change. This understanding is supposedly confirmed by the healthy, well-adjusted, productive lives of many individuals who are gay or lesbian. But does this necessarily imply a theological affirmation?

So what about the question of *orientation*? What does Scripture have to say about the sinfulness of a given *condition*?

Scripture makes reference both to sin as specific actions as well as conditions. For example, when Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matthew 9:12), he was speaking of sin as a condition, not simply as an action. Jesus’ words indicated the need for him to address not only our individual sins, but our inherently sinful nature. As we saw in our discussion of Law and Gospel, it is the Holy Spirit that brings us to a recognition of our fallen condition so that we turn to God’s mercy and grace in Jesus Christ.

In looking at how we deal with the entire issue of human sexuality, we must begin with the recognition that we cannot look only to ourselves for the truth, since we are still at our spiritual core sinful beings.

The fundamental concept of Sin as an “orientation” is addressed in the Lutheran Confessions in the doctrine of Original Sin. The subject appears in many places, including: Article II of the Augsburg Confession, Article II of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, and in the Formula of Concord. The human orientation to sin may take many forms, such as an orientation to steal (kleptomania), or an orientation to substance abuse (alcoholism, addiction), as well as internal desires of a sexual nature.

The sum and substance of the doctrine of Original Sin is that since the fall of Adam, all people are born in sin and are “full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers’ wombs... Moreover, this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin...” (Augsburg Confession, Article II, Original Sin, p. 29, Tappert).

Luther addressed the question of “orientation” as it relates to Original Sin when he stated in the Smalcald Articles,

This hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand it. It must be believed because of the revelation in the Scripture: Psalm 51:5, Romans 5:12ff., Exodus 33:20, Genesis 3:6ff. (Smalcald Articles, Part III, 1. Sin, p. 302, Tappert)

In a similar manner, the Formula of Concord states:

We believe, teach, and confess that original sin is not a slight corruption of human nature, but that it is so deep a corruption that nothing sound or uncorrupted has survived in man’s body or soul, in his inward or outward powers. It is as

the church sings, 'Through Adam's fall man's nature and essence are all corrupt.' This damage is so unspeakable that it may not be recognized by a rational process, but only from God's Word. No one except God alone can separate the corruption of our nature from the nature itself. This will take place wholly by way of death in the resurrection [emphasis mine]. Then the nature which we now bear will arise and live forever, without original sin and be completely separated and removed from it. (Formula of Concord, I, Original Sin, Affirmative Theses, p. 467, Tappert).

Popular reasoning infers that since orientations are “natural” to a person, they must be okay. The argument that “this is the way I am” or “this is the way God made me” is used to establish rightness and acceptability. Yet, the central doctrine of Original Sin expresses that being sinful is the natural “way we are” as human beings, and that our sinful nature is neither right nor acceptable.

Any honest discussion of human sexuality must begin with a recognition of our own completely lost and hopeless state. Our society (and in many cases the Church) finds it much less painful not to look at our true spiritual state. We like to focus on the fact that Christ came to show us God's love, and tend to forget the *reason* he came — to save us from our inborn sinful nature. A true Gospel faith must begin with the acknowledgment of our need for Christ. Because we all are born in a sinful condition, we cannot be freed except through Christ.

Having acknowledged our sinful state, we must further admit that each one of us acts out of our sinful condition. Romans 3:23 says “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” Since “None is righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10), we are all in need of redemption. We are all righteous only through the work of Christ.

Because of our fallen condition, each of us is faced daily with many temptations, including

sexual temptations. To ignore the influence of inborn desires and orientations in leading to sin would be a critical mistake. Our response to temptations, as Christians, must follow a godly pattern of obedience and self-discipline (1 Corinthians 10:13). God has defined patterns for Christian behavior. As Christian people, it is our responsibility to be intentional in trying to live out those patterns, relying on the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives to reveal both sin and righteousness, and to empower us to live life the way God wants us to.

“Orientation” does not automatically mean that a behavior is acceptable. Since we all have an orientation to sin, it means that we have a nature that works contrary to God's intentions for us. Even if a behavior can be proven to be genetic, or learned at a very early age, this does not mean that such behavior is acceptable. By accepting an orientation-driven ethic in the case of sexual behavior, we would deny the truth that we are each hopelessly entangled in sins from which only the grace of God can free us. Defending homosexual behavior on the basis of “orientation” is contrary to both Scripture and the doctrine of Original Sin.

Reflection & Discussion:

- a. How have you experienced sin as an *act* as well as a *condition*? Which is the deeper problem?
- b. If Jesus came as a physician to heal the sick, what do we have to gain by pretending not to be sick? How is admitting a condition the first step in dealing with it?
- c. In what sense is homosexuality simply one example of the human orientation to sin? How can this be equally true of heterosexual (opposite sex) desires as well?

