

Sunday Symposium #1 October 18, 2009
 Bethany Lutheran Church, Spencer, Iowa
 Pastor Scott A. Meier

Welcome and Good Evening to all of you,
 My name is Pastor Scott Meier, senior pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Spencer,
 Iowa.

Let me begin with a reading from God's Word.

2 Corinthians 4: 5-10

⁵For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

Biblical Authority: is the topic.

In recent years, more and more of us have come to know homosexual persons. They are friends, family members, co-workers and church members. Questions concerning homosexuality are being debated in churches, on campuses and in legislatures. For Christian churches, there seem to be two questions, "Is homosexuality contrary to the will of God?" "What is to be the churches attitude and care towards homosexuals?"

First of all, I want everyone to understand that pastoral care for people who identify themselves as homosexuals is the same as care for people who identify themselves as heterosexual. I have known gay and lesbian persons for all of my adult life, some are family members, some are college friends, some are people in the community that I have gotten to know and worked with – just like many of you. We care for them with the same love and respect we have for all people. Gay bashing is wrong, any acts of violence or hate towards Gay and Lesbian people are wrong.

Please understand that Pastor Dan Taylor and myself were not intending to single out homosexuality as a topic for preaching or teaching or discussion. It was not in our plans to focus so much time and energy towards this topic. But the circumstances of the votes at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Churchwide Assembly this past August have forced us to acknowledge the need for education and discussion on this topic.

Some of the news reports have stressed that the ELCA is now accepting Gay Clergy. This is not entirely accurate.

Since the 2005 National Assembly – where this type of a vote was delayed until 2009, the national church has formed a taskforce to propose a Social Statement on Human Sexuality. Another social statement in a long list of social statements on this topic. This taskforce created a Social Statement that opposed sexual abuse in any form, opposed marital infidelity **but supported** Gay and Lesbian sexuality in monogamous, committed relationships. This departed from the current understanding by many in the church that sex outside of marriage between one man and one woman was sinful.

The Assembly voted to accept the Social Statement on Human Sexuality(2/3 vote required and passed by exactly 2/3) and then also voted to accept 4 resolutions on Ministry policies.

Resolution 3 was voted on first and asked this church whether, in the future implementation of these commitments, it will make decisions so that all in this church bear the burdens of the other, and **respect the bound consciences of all**.
Yes- 771; No-230

Resolution 1 asked the assembly whether, in principle, this church is committed to finding ways to **allow congregations that choose** to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships.

Yes – 619; No-402

[That means establishing two lists of congregations – those that can and will choose from a roster that includes gay pastors and those that will choose from a roster of heterosexual pastors)

Resolution 2 asked the assembly whether, in principle, this church is committed to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as professional leaders of this church.

Yes- 559; No-451

[That means allowing gay and lesbians in accountable and monogamous relationships (civil unions or gay marriages) to serve as ordained pastors.]

Resolution 4 asked the Church to bring into conformity all policies and procedures of the ELCA with Resolutions 1 and 2. (Implementation)

Yes-667; No-307

Many of you might ask – how did we get to this point in history that the church is taking votes on matters of sexuality. Part of the historical record about this topic of acceptance of homosexuality in the church goes back over 20 years – before the ELCA was formed in 1988. There were individuals who were leaders in the church; pastors, college and seminary professors and lay leaders that were advocates for homosexuals in the church. There have been studies and social statements that have progressively opened the door for greater acceptance of homosexual persons in the church – just as there has also been advocacy for homosexuality in the public sphere – on television talk shows, television sitcoms, movies, and school curriculums. Recently, the advocates – the progressives –

have made their argument based on Jesus' proclamation of the two greatest commandments – love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself. In other words, this is a gospel of acceptance and justice.

According to the progressives, to love your neighbor is to accept them for who they are and also it is not just or fair to exclude people who are homosexual. The conversations on this issue thus far have largely focused on personal experience and the sharing of personal stories, rather than on the teaching of Holy Scripture and the theological and confessional witness of the church. There have also been appeals to questionable scientific theories, the suppression of inconvenient data by researchers and a continued reliance on individual experience which is always subject to contemporary culture and values.

So now, I would like to turn our conversation on this topic towards the Holy Bible – the Scriptures. Amongst Christians, followers of Jesus, inevitably the Bible is used in conversations and debate about the topic of Homosexuality.

Inevitably – people reference particular verses or passages or stories in the Bible – inevitably someone always says, “It depends on your interpretation!”

Then debate becomes more like a contest of shooting scriptural bullets at each other – and one person's interpretation is pitted against another person's interpretation. Each person may then try to trump the other by referencing or quoting so called “experts” – professors or authors.

Then after the debaters have quoted scripture and exhausted that avenue – often they turn to relating scripture to scientific evidence and personal experience. This puts the debate in a foggy maelstrom where one interpretation often looks as good as another. Then often the debate sinks into the quicksand of personal experience and opinion. Stuck in such a bog – the debaters have trivialized the Word of God.

What is often not seen or acknowledged is that there is something deeper than merely scientific data or human experience or simple quotation of particular Bible verses with varied interpretation of the verses.

What people are not seeing or understanding is that many people are not asking the question “What is God's Will – What is God's Word to us in regards to this question of homosexuality?”

Has God communicated his will to us in regards to Human sexuality – Has God's Will in regards to homosexual behavior been communicated?

If in fact God has not spoken into the world, then there is no solid basis for any moral distinctions, nor can we have any knowledge of what moral distinctions are. If God has not spoken – then we are only left with human opinions and we are in no position to say which is better than the other.

This is so important – This is so foundational – the concept of God's Word communicating God's Will to people. This is sometimes called the Biblical-Historical understanding of Scripture as God's revelation to people.

Through our own reasoning and experience we get to know the world we live in. We people have wonderful thinking powers that help us to discern and understand the world we live in. We gain experiences in our daily life – we see the wonders of the world – the big picture wonders and the microscopic and personal wonders.

Yet – this all important aspect of human reason and human experience are in themselves insufficient and inadequate.

Finally – we have to rely on something outside of our selves – the Christian, the follower of Jesus relies upon God’s Revelation to us: to tell us who we are, how we are to live, and to understand the nature and shape of the world around us.

Even to try to understand how important this concept of God’s Word as God’s Revelation to us humans – I will use an example from nature.

If you travel west on Interstate 80 in the United States – eventually you will arrive at a location that has an elevation of approximately 7000 feet – in the Colorado Mountains – between Rawlins and Rock Springs, Wyoming. It is almost imperceptible to the human eye. It is a location that gets plenty of snow in the winter months – and there that snow sits until the spring. When it begins to melt, one portion of the run-off heads west – making its way through streams and valleys and rivers finally to the Pacific Ocean. The other portion of snow that melts in the very same region begins its way eastward and south – meandering first in streams and then also in mighty rivers until it arrives in the Gulf of Mexico of the Atlantic Ocean. The waters quite literally divide as they melt and flow – we call this the Continental Divide of the United States.

The great divide in the homosexuality debate is the Authority of Scripture – the Authority of the Bible – The AUTHORITY OF GOD’S WORD that speaks to us. Yes – I am finally getting to the nuts and bolts of tonight’s topic.

One side of the divide says that their essential understanding of Scripture is that they were written by humans using their own experiences to try to understand God’s ways. On this side of the divide, authority essentially flows to the experience of people. For this side of the divide, Human reason and experience are the ultimate authority in the interpretation of Biblical texts. In this view – human interpretation has the final say, the final authority. In addition, when the Scriptures are used this way they become relativistic. Each individual from such a diverse set of life’s experiences shares their own relative point of view (we call that an interpretive lens) and the end result is a multitude of interpretations of the same scripture. You should here this for what it is – people actually say things for example, “But really its fine to have a diversity of interpretations, its ok even if they contradict each other. We can just live in the tension. We can find unity in diversity.” For this side of the divide, truth and authority are relative. That means – each individual sets their own truth and there is absolutely no authority. For them its about diversity and their code phrase is: “Let’s all just get along.”

The other side of the divide is that the Scriptures are essentially the effort of God to communicate God’s will to us – so that we can understand our experiences.

In this view, the Authority of Scripture comes from God's initiative. Scripture is understood as God's revelation to us humans. This understanding sees the Bible as God's Word to us and for us. The ultimate authority for faith is tied to the Scriptures. This is understanding of Martin Luther and the reformers – they tied their faith to the Authority of God's Word as a Word communicating God's Will to us.

The first side of the divide – a majority of Seminary professors amongst the 8 ELCA seminaries, and probably a majority of college professors at church or secular schools belittle and verbally assault those professors on the second side of the divide. The ones on the first side of the divide see a reliance upon the Bible as God's particular revelation as unthinkable. These professors and the pastors and the church's leadership on the first side of the divide charge the people on the second side of the divide as "literalists".

That is what is called a straw man argument – it is hollow and has no substance. Because even people on the second side of the divide do not believe in absolute literal interpretation – no one thinks that mountains and hills clap their hands, no one thinks that Jesus called King Herod a fox because he had a bushy tail and ran around on all four limbs. Yet those on the first side of the divide make that hollow charge. Those on the second side of the divide are also labeled as having made the Bible an idol – and worshipping the paper pages of the Bible and not worshipping God. The first side of the divide argue that our trust is to be in God and not the pages of a book. This is also a hollow argument- what philosophers call a straw man.

Those on the second side of the divide who consider God's Word as final authority in their lives should challenge and have every right to challenge those who accuse them of literalism and bible idolatry.

A helpful illustration is shared by Pastor and theologian – George Muedeking, he says to imagine you have received a phone call that says, "Scott, your house is on fire. You better get home quick." First, in order to believe the phone call – you must first discern if you trust the messenger. Is the messenger a prankster, a liar or just mean. If they are mean or a prankster – then disregard the message. But if the messenger is trustworthy – then you will go on to consider the second order, Do you trust the message? That is – you could trust the messenger – but possibly the message is a confusion with the house next door, or a daydream or a joke. To act on the phone message – you must therefore trust both the messenger and the message. In the same way, Jesus is the messenger who speaks the Bible's message – in fact, Jesus himself is the message of the Bible. Jesus makes the Words of the Bible authentic. Jesus is the authority – that authorizes the Authority of the Scriptures.

For me or you to have eternal life and to live the new life that Jesus offers to us, we must believe both the Words of the Bible and Jesus who graciously offers them to us.

Pastor Martin Luther, 500 years ago, spoke of the Scriptures as the manger in which Christ lies. This analogy would mean that we are to believe in both the manger and in the Christ Child. Without the manger (The Holy Bible) we would have no knowledge of Jesus. Without Jesus we would not have the manger (the Bible). WE must believe and trust both the messenger and the message.

But today – the Words of Luther are twisted by those on the first side of the divide – the Progressives in the Church argue that Christians do not worship the manger, rather they worship the Christ whom the manger contains. The Progressives argue that we are to have confidence in the God of the Bible, not in the words of the Bible. They use that straw man argument and say that trusting the words of the Bible is to be a literalist and a person who worships the paper and ink of the Book.

So – how will I speak to you of the Bible? I find myself on the second side of the divide – for me the Bible is a means of God’s Grace – God’s Word is Authoritative because the Word is the message and Jesus, is my personal messenger that speaks God’s Word to me and for me. This means that God’s Word is often over and against my human ways and reasonings. This means that God is the Authority for the authority of the Bible over us. Both the messenger, Jesus, and the message are the object of our faith at the same time.

So in this great debate about homosexuality – we need to understand that the Authority of Scripture is the Continental Divide.

We are either dealing with the view that Biblical Authority arrives at human interpretation of the text as the final word and that the Bible can be understood to say something quite different from its plain sense meaning

Or

We are having the view that sees the Holy Bible as God’s revelation to us and the Authority of God’s Word rests within itself because it is given by God.

But of course, even the second viewpoint in this continental divide involves interpretation of Scripture. But there are rules that have been adopted in order to guide this interpretive work. First of all – those on the second side of the divide – understand and respect that they are trying to interpret and understand the Revealed Will of God and not simply human writings. Both sides of the divide use their best human cognitive and reasoning abilities. Interpretations may be vastly different and sometimes they might even be similar. Even on the same side of the divide there may be differences.

If the reader and listener to the Bible yields or submits themselves to God’s Will – they necessarily need to understand there is a call upon their lives to obey God’s Word, to live according to God’s Word. We are no longer in the comfortable world of the literature of the Old and New Testament – for if you take the second viewpoint you must deal with God’s Word, Jesus and God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures.

Finally – I must talk about where I particularly stand on this concept of the Authority of God’s Word.

In my ordination vows:

The Church in which you are ordained confesses that The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and are the norm of its faith and life.

We also acknowledge the Lutheran Confessions as true witnesses and faithful exposition of the Holy Scriptures.

This is what myself and generations of the Lutheran pastors have agreed to in their ordinations.

From ELCA website –

This church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This church confesses Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe

This church 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.

This is also what I agree to – except that it evidently is either understood differently by the Progressives or it is ignored by the Progressives. This wording of a faith statement seems consistent with second side of the divide as well.

From Lutheran CORE: a group who are currently within the ELCA, they state -

The canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has revealed himself most fully and completely in Jesus Christ. The Bible bears witness to and receives its ultimate authority from the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as definitively revealed in, by, and through Jesus the Messiah, the incarnate Word of God, from and through whom the written Word came to be.

Now – this statement is something that I am more secure with. This gives specific authority to the Triune God and Jesus as messenger and to the Bible as the message of God that spoke to men of old – to Abraham and his descendants and speaks today to us.

I am opposed to the viewpoint of the progressives that allows for Biblical Authority and also Human Experience and Tradition to be added together. The “tripod” that is often quoted in the Sexuality study documents and the statement on Human Sexuality.

I am for the Authority of the Bible that understands that that the Bible is God’s effort to communicate God’s Will to us, humans. I am for the understanding that the Bible is Authoritative because the Bible interprets our experiences for us – and not the other way around.

Finally – let me outline for you briefly – the rules for Biblical interpretation that flow from the understanding That God’s Word is Authoritative – in fact, the final authority that is the Biblical Proclamation to rule our faith and life.

This witness includes the biblical diagnosis of sin as the catastrophic infection affecting every human being. All human beings are sinners, turned inward upon themselves, under the judgment of God. This condition is so pervasive and dire that it can be overcome by

nothing less than the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in whom the Old Testament's history of Israel is fulfilled and consummated. The Scripture's own distinction between law and Gospel informs and guides the church in faithful proclamation; the spoken Word is used by the Holy Spirit so that sinners are convicted of the truth that they are indeed dead in their sins, and redeemed and forgiven for the sake of Christ Jesus who transforms them for lives of new and fruitful obedience.

the centrality of Christ in Scripture,
 the plain sense of Scripture,
 the distinction between Law and Gospel,
 the relationship between Scripture and Church and between Scripture and Confession,
 the unity of the Bible as the inspired and written Word of God,
 Scripture as its own interpreter, and
 the authority of the Bible as *Sola Scriptura*. (That God's Word is enough).

Use of the words: inerrant and infallible
 in descriptions concerning Biblical Authority.

Historically – these terms speak to the trustworthiness of the Holy Bible, but they have become loaded terms that politicize groups of Christians. One group relies upon these descriptive words to hold to their viewpoint and other group(s) think of these words: inerrancy and infallibility as code words for literalist interpretations. Even among Lutherans – a long time before there was only ELCA and LCMS, earlier denominations and synods were picking sides in debates and throwing these words around. Today, some would use the term “limited inerrancy” to describe where most conservative Lutherans are in regard to the Bible. Which is a recognition that there are historical and scientific inaccuracies in the Bible, but that the Bible is Authoritative and does speak to us and shows us God's Will for Faith and Life. One of my respected colleagues, Dr. Mark Hillmer, put it in this sense, “The aim of the Bible is to teach us about the Rock of Ages, not the ages of rocks”.

So I leave you all with the thoughts and concepts for you to ponder, you have quite a lot of thinking and talking to do on your own and with each other and especially to pray and seek God's leading in regards to this continental divide concerning Biblical Authority.

Next week, we will come together again to hear Pastor Dan Taylor present to us The Biblical View of Human Sexuality.

May we pray,

Thank you for setting aside the time and listening to this presentation,
 And Good Night !