

## Human Sexuality and the ELCA: The Conversation Continues

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### **Delight, Design and Destiny: Toward a Doxological Ethics of Sexuality**

*A Critique of the ELCA Human Sexuality Statement and the  
Report and Recommendation on Ministry Policies, 2009*

By Amy C. Schifrin

The cosmetic separation of ethics from doxology is a frequent problem when Christians take human response and action as the starting point in determining how they are to live. The proposed ELCA Social Statement, "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust" is not unusual in this approach, but such a move determines the misguided course of the nature of the "Report and Recommendations on Ministry Policies" that will follow.

The Social Statement asks what can be considered a sort of third-use-of-the-law type of question, "How do we understand human sexuality within the context of Jesus' invitation to love God and love our neighbor?" The 'how' of this question applies to what sort of actions we, as Christians, will take once we understand what Jesus "invites" us to do.

The framing of the question is a thin veneer for its theological underpinnings, for within its introductory statement command is turned to invitation, and obedience into pretense. In a few short moves love will become tolerance, sincerity will replace truth, and the bound conscience will no longer be bound to Holy Scripture

but to its own Old Adamic interpretation of human experience apart from the One whose Word speaks us into life.

**How does God use His creation of sexually differentiated beings in service of His own commandments to love Him and to love our neighbor?**

A prior question to the one proposed in the document might be, “How does God use His creation of sexually differentiated beings — male and female — in service of His own commandments to love Him and to love our neighbor?” If we do not trust that His creation of us as male and female — complementary; other; made for love — is good. . . if we do not trust His design, or that He delights in His design, or that His design is connected to the destiny He intends for His good creation, our questions are rooted in a suspicion that will only lead to our own death. The social sciences have many things to tell us, but they seek meaning empirically, not doxologically. When it comes to understanding sacramentality, whether it be the sacramentality of the design of God’s creation or the sacramentality of word and water, bread and wine, their suspicions leave them bereft. The gifts that come from God’s steadfast love direct us to His heart — He who is the author and giver of all life (Gen. 2:7); He who draws all people to Himself (John 12:32); He who is preparing us to meet Him as one prepares a bride to meet her beloved husband (Rev. 19:7).

If the ‘experts’ in our secular society observe the wanton behavior of people and find it common, or even normative, they are not bound to speak both law and gospel for the sake of their neighbors.<sup>1</sup> The Church, however, the body shaped in the

cruciform body of her Lord, is so bound. The Church born in the sacramental love of the Triune God, and which has no life apart from Him is His herald, one which calls all people to worship Him — in Spirit and Truth (John 4:23); with their own bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1); with His law written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33); and with His praise on their lips (Psalm 100).



Our consciences are bound here and nowhere else, and as unpopular or counter-cultural as it might be, the triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — has promised to sustain us until Christ comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead. We are bound to care for our neighbors, and we are called to do so within the sacred frame of God's holy and never-ending love. People may claim in all sincerity to be acting in good conscience, but if their conscience is misinformed, can it be good in the sense that what is good is also what is true?

The elevated value of 'tolerance' that accompanies the ELCA documents with regard to the bound conscience is an attempt to silence what has been passed on as the deposit of faith. Rather, it is the apostolic witness that should be privileged. In saying that we must respect all the voices, the solas of the faith are reduced to

one voice among many. The voices that are given equal weight come from those whose interpretation of raw experience apart from the apostolic witness, like all such interpretation, is inevitably self-serving — for the self is, indeed, turned in upon the self.<sup>2</sup>

The social statement and ensuing recommendations ask us to believe that these proposed changes are for the sake of the neighbor. In some way, we and all of our neighbors seek the companionship of human community. In some way, whether appropriately ordered or destructively disordered, all people desire love, touch, a place to rest and comfort. To hold out that they can receive God's intention for us to have such goodness in a same-sex union is the equivalent of false advertising.

We need to distinguish between the need and a distortion of the need. For no matter how much we might pretend that it were not so, the complementarity between the one who cries "this at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" and the one whose creation was designed for unity with him, can never come to fulfillment or fruition between two members of the same sex. The gift of the fullness of erotic love can be simulated, but like all disordered loving, at the same time that it offers momentary pleasure, it also diminishes who God has intended each one to be. Neither document examines the multiplicity of reasons or experiences that could lead an individual to come to the self-identification of homosexual. Anything from familial abuse, or the bullying that exacerbates a young person's variations from the media's images of masculinity and femininity, or resentment, or

the use of one's body to make a political statement may shape such self-identification. To regularize such an identity (which in its development may be quite fluid) and then bind one to that identity in a relationship blessed by the church is to lock someone into a state that God never intended.

Monogamy and longevity, public accountability and commitment will never turn a same-gendered partner into a sexual other, one whose complementarity allows for the fullness of love written into the creation. Since we are called to care for our neighbor, placing such a barrier to the neighbor's spiritual and relational growth is the opposite of the healing that comes when one is living in the freedom of God's goodness.

While the state may regulate, it is the Church, speaking and acting in trust of the promise of the Triune God that blesses such unions of man and woman. State laws can change with the vote of the people, a bill in a legislature, or a court decision, but the blessing of God comes through faithful apostolic witness, proclaimed in the assembly and enacted in ritual designed to mirror God's intentions.<sup>3</sup>



Marriage rites are not simply about our commitments to each other, but about God's commitment to us. And God in His wisdom uses this union of man and woman as an eschatological sign of how intimate his love is for us — a love stronger than death, for the Bridegroom will love his Bride, the church, eternally.

If same-sex unions are placed on a par with marriage — and they will have to be if the ELCA adopts the structurally flexible option (How can pastors who are homosexual in their self-understanding be in publicly accountable monogamous relationships without such rites?), the significance of a marriage and the marriage rite will be summarily reduced. If one commitment is just as good and right and valid as another, the eschatological sign written deeply into the creation is lost to the church . . . and if lost to the church, where will it be spoken?

This is the place where the egregious nature of the recommendations is exposed. A series of changes to the standards for the life of clergy ("rostered leaders") is proposed with an oft repeated refrain to "find a way" to accomplish the changes, while at the same time there is an explicit restriction against speaking of changes or additions to the rites of the church.

Did the majority of the task force think that there would be any other way for pastoral candidates who are homosexual in their self-understanding (i.e., whose homoerotic affections and inclinations speak more loudly to them than any other voices) to live a "life-long, committed, monogamous, same-gendered relationship" without a public ritual that celebrates, protects and

bleses such a union? The reason given<sup>4</sup> that a Rite of Same-Sex blessing is to not be proposed does not ring true, because the changes in the standards would precipitate an official rite in order that there be public and ecclesial accountability.

New worlds are made in ritual enactment. We weren't there when the world was made, we weren't there when the world was made new in the bursting of the tomb, and we may not be there when life on this earth as we know it comes to an end. However, in our ritual life, these events are made ours as we are drawn into the resurrected life of our Lord, He who was there when the waters were formed and who will call our names when crystal fountain flows.

In our ritual, liturgical life we enter into the mystery of His passion. In our liturgical assembly, the life of faith is given us in word and sign, and our maturity in this same faith is also expressed and confirmed in the rites of transition that surround birth, death, and marriage. These rites are epiphanic, that is, through them we at last see what God intends for us to see in faith.

The rite of marriage is an event in which we act out what we believe about our creation, and we discover even more about the One in whom we believe — He who has created us for love. With the eyes of faith, we see why God gave us the sexual differentiation of male and female — we were made to love each other. And now this love will serve as yet another reminder of the all-consuming love that Christ, our Lord, has for His church.<sup>5</sup>

The rites of the church are God's way of giving us a means to live to the praise of His glory. The designing of a rite that binds two people of the same gender together for this life is without this epiphanic dimension, for the binding together of two people of the same gender will leave them with themselves, untransformed. The Report and Recommendations sets before us two positions, one of continuity and one of change, and it seeks to set these positions before the assembly as equally valid. Here, as it consistently uses the term "same-gender" with regard to particular "orientations" and "relationships," it claims a distinctive identity for those who want the church to approve of their homoerotic desires and inclinations as being natural, right, and fitting.

The social statement has made a clear case for the superiority, appropriateness, and emotional and spiritual health of lifelong, monogamous, committed relationships (which hitherto have been reserved for a male-female relationship) as opposed to transient and/or cohabiting arrangements where the potential for pain is ever immanent. Now the recommendations will use that information as they present the "new" position of affirming lifelong, committed, monogamous, same-gendered relationships, because if its good for male-female relationships, how can we deny that it would be good for male-male or female-female relationships, if indeed same-gendered "relationships" are just as pleasing to God?

Without the key piece — i.e., the doxological expression that shapes our faith — one can follow this line of logic all the way up

to claiming the church's institution of a Same-Sex Blessing and the ordination of folks who seek life-long, monogamous, same-gendered relationships to be acts of justice, of civil rights; but the ground upon which this argument is built is where the fallacy lies. Males and females were not given the gifts of sexual expression for such homoerotic activity.

**The Holy Scriptures have no word of blessing for acts of homoeroticism.**

The Holy Scriptures have no word of blessing for acts of homoeroticism — regardless of relational contexts, and the church's attempt to sacralize such pairings would work against the health of the neighbor now and for generations to come.<sup>6</sup> *Lex supplicandi legem stauat credendi!*<sup>7</sup> Such 'ecclesiastical' rites would work to change the beliefs all those who participate in them.

**Because the proposed social statement starts in the wrong place, the recommendations end in the wrong place.**

Because the proposed social statement starts in the wrong place, the recommendations end in the wrong place, modeling themselves on democratic rather than Biblical justice. True justice and righteousness are rooted in God's steadfast love, so that when our lives reflect His righteousness we are doing what He has made us to do.

So indeed, how does God use His creation of sexually differentiated beings — male and female — in service of His own commandments to love Him and to love our neighbor? Because He has made us in such a way, fitting, complementary, opposite, and paired, He gives us the holy estate of marriage in which

lovemaking is an act of faith that He has provided a beloved spouse as a sign of His eternal goodness. For such goodness we give Him praise and from the strength of our homes we work together to care for all in need.

God has made us in such a way that sexual expression and spiritual identity are closely bound, for in His establishment of marriage the nakedness of heart and the nakedness of the body flourish in a covenant of trust and love — and the lovemaking of a husband and wife, with all its joy, delight, tenderness, and passion are among the dearest of His gifts.

For those who receive such a great gift, loving a spouse within God's covenant is both an expression of obedience and a sign to the world of how deeply He loves us all. Trusting that it is He who provided this earthly other for us, trusting that His establishment of marriage for men and women is good, our everyday actions of caring for a spouse become a living doxology, and incarnate ethics of praise.

*The Rev. Dr. Amy C. Schifrin*

*Intentional Interim Pastor, Lower Susquehanna Synod, ELCA*

*Currently serving Holy Trinity, Hershey, Pennsylvania*

## **Endnotes**

1. They may use common sense, but they're not even bound to do that.
2. If this can happen with the sexuality issue, why not with any other issue? In this way the sexuality issue is a symptom that reveals a far greater problem in the ELCA, where popular culture's ways of reading scripture and designing rites become the great shapers of how the Church prays when we gather in Christ's name.
3. Even in Luther's 1529 "Order of Marriage for Common Pastors" (LW 53:111), vows were exchanged at the church door, but the words and gesture of blessing

occurred in front of the altar, where the pastor, with hands raised, spoke the words of Genesis 2:18, 21-24, which then served “as a kind of words of institution for marriage.” Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship: Lutheran Liturgy in Its Ecumenical Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 459.

4. The Report and Recommendations acknowledges that “this church does not have biblical or theological consensus on the matter,” so that at this time, ritual matters will be left to local congregations (lines 319-325). A chaotic proposal at best, idiosyncratic rather than ecclesial, it may mirror the worst of the wider culture’s influence on the design of the church’s rites for marriage, so that the emphasis of the rite is on the couple’s “personality,” not on the faithfulness of God.
5. “Lord Jesus Christ, as you freely give yourself to your bride the Church, grant that the mystery of the union of man and woman in marriage may reveal to the world the self-giving love which you have for your church; and to you with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory and honor, now and forever. Amen” Post-Communion Prayer for Marriage, LBW, Minister’s Desk Edition, 192.
6. It would also work against the life of the church because how one deals with the issue of blessing the unions of self-identified homosexuals will become the litmus test within the call process.
7. “The law of prayer determines the law of belief.” Prosper of Aquitaine.