

Reflections on the ELCA Churchwide Assembly and the Bible

- [Timothy J. Wengert](#)

[1] If there is one rule we need to follow in the wake of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, it is this: Do not break the eighth commandment (against false witness) in order to defend the sixth (against adultery and other sexual sins). Both those who supported the changes in policy and those who did not need to remember this. We must speak what we know and not cast aspersions on those who disagreed with us. Luther's comments on the eighth commandment in the Large Catechism are helpful here. Even when forced by one's office to speak out, one must not lie or distort the truth.

[2] In light of some implied (and explicit) attacks on the decision, however, it is also necessary to make one thing clear. The change in policy was grounded in Scripture. In fact, the calls for justice toward gays and lesbians in committed relationships and the recitation of examples of healthy same-gender relations, as important as these are to some folk, finally do not in themselves constitute a complete standard for changing church policy, since even calls for justice must for Christians be grounded in and normed by sound interpretations of Scripture as God's Word for us.

[3] What does this argument from Scripture look like? It is an argument from the law but in this fashion. The social statement on sexuality began with reference to the question posed to Christ about the greatest commandment. As we know, Jesus recited two commandments: love God above all else and one's neighbor as one's self. As Luther pointed out in his interpretation of Galatians, when Paul in both Galatians and Romans mentions only love of neighbor, it is not because he meant both commandments, as the church father Jerome had argued. Instead, Luther stated, Paul realized that the command to love God with all one's heart, mind, soul, etc. is indeed fulfilled for us through justification by grace through faith on account of Christ alone. As a result, Christians are free by faith to serve the neighbor.

[4] What we often forget in Jesus' answer to the question of commandments is the next phrase, "on these depend the law and the prophets." The word in Greek is literally "hang." The debate over sexuality in the ELCA in some ways "hangs" on these words of Jesus. The ELCA with its decisions at the churchwide assembly is now stating that in this passage Jesus gave us a key to understand the Scriptures, that is, a lens through which we may interpret every other command in Scripture. Every command in Scripture must be focused by this question: "How does following this commandment enhance love for God and neighbor?" By asking this question of every other scriptural command, one remains truly faithful to Scripture.

[5] There is also another way to claim faithfulness to Scripture, and that is to interpret this saying of Jesus in the opposite way. Then one would say that commandments in Scripture define what the love of God and neighbor should be. Then the Christian responsibility is a matter of following the laws of Scripture and applying them to themselves and others precisely because they reflect that twofold love. As I listened to the debate in Minneapolis this past week, it seemed to me that some opposed to these changes were arguing along these lines. There are commandments in Scripture referring to homosexual activity; these determine how we must love God and neighbor; therefore we cannot change church policy. To those who support the first way of interpreting Jesus' statement, however, this approach would seem to turn his statement on its head and to assume that the command to love God and neighbor is normed by, hangs on, the commands in Scripture and not the other way around.

[6] Along with this difference in approaching laws in Scripture comes a second matter, and that has to do with whether a particular passage in Scripture applies to the present. For some, the question might even be whether we have the right to "pick and choose" one passage over another. Here Martin Luther can help us. In the mid-1520s, he was opposed by Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, among others, who argued that Old Testament commandments, including those regarding the Sabbath and tithing, must be rigorously applied to Christians. In response to such claims, Luther wrote the following. One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has spoken it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day. ... The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. ... The false prophets pitch in and say, "Dear people, this is the word of God." This is true; we cannot deny it. But we are not "the people." (LW 35: 170.)

[7] Thus, the scriptural argument for changing the ELCA policy toward gays and lesbians in committed, lifelong, monogamous relationships—and it is a scriptural argument—has at least two parts. In the first place, it is argued that the Scripture passages dealing with homosexual actions are not at all aimed at homosexual orientation and behavior in the present but at very specific issues regarding, in Leviticus, standards of holiness that set the people of Israel apart from the pagan temple cults and, in the Pauline material, the coercive relations of male-on-male sexual activities. (For the specific arguments, see the biblical study commissioned by the task force and referred to in the social statement.) The passage in Romans 1, which includes the only biblical reference to female sexual activity, must also be seen in the context of practices among Gentiles that Paul's Jewish readers would have easily condemned, and it actually sets up the condemnation of those very readers in Romans 2. Thus, the argument, far from being unscriptural, takes Scripture very seriously but says, using Luther's advice, this does not apply here. (It is important to note, however, that the argument is not "this never fostered love of God and neighbor." In their original contexts and in similar ones in our day and age, these commandments arose out of concern for the neighbor and continue to protect the neighbor from idolatrous or coercive behavior.)

[8] But, in addition to the question of whether these passages apply in this case—something Luther invites us to ask—we have the command of Jesus and must ask a second question: how do I best love my neighbor in this situation? Luther, too, referred to this principle when dealing with the Wittenberg church's insistence that people receive the cup in the Lord's Supper in order to fulfill Jesus' command. He said that they were right about faith (the principle involved) but lacking in love and patience (the practice). Love of neighbor norms how Christians apply God's law in specific situations.

[9] How might one decide whether this question outlined above regarding the law of love and the commands in Scripture is an accurate one? For this we have the example of Jesus himself. Jesus did two things vis-à-vis the law. First, by including in the simple commands against murder and adultery (among others) hatred, slander and lust, he made it impossible for us to boast that we can keep the law. We are all mortal sinners. Second, he broke specific, God-given laws for the sake of love of neighbor. One of the best examples he left us in this regard comes with the man who had a shriveled hand (Mark 3:4; Matthew 12:12; Luke 6:9). It was the Sabbath; the man was not in mortal danger; so the traditional response of a physician would be, "Make an appointment with my secretary and I'll see you tomorrow." That way the man would be healed and the Sabbath would be kept holy. Jesus, however, asks a different question: "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?" That is, does the command to love the neighbor (doing good to the man) norm (we might even say trump) the third commandment to keep the Sabbath holy?

[10] This concern for the neighbor's situation is not, however, a subtle scheme to undermine the law. Indeed, Jesus' behavior itself functions as law in condemning legalists who cling to the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit. Moreover, in several places in the gospels he explicitly condemns just this sort of misuse of the law for neglecting weightier matters or imagining that externals were more important than what comes out of a person's heart. These specific questions ("Does this apply to my neighbor?" and "How do I love my neighbor?") do not destroy the law but rather use the law in ways that do not harm the neighbor in need. Thus, this approach to the Bible, far from being "antinomian" (against the law), as some have alleged, actually insists upon taking Jesus' command to love the neighbor with complete seriousness.

[11] Thus, the following biblical questions lie at the heart of the present debate. How does one best love the neighbors who are homosexual, living in lifelong, monogamous committed relationships? Can one welcome them as they are? Can one support them publicly with the prayers of the community and the promises of God? Can one open to them places of leadership within the ELCA? Within the ELCA there have come to be at least two responses to this question. The Churchwide Assembly voted to affirm one biblical response while, at the same time, recognizing that there are many Christians in the church whose consciences are bound to a different, opposing scriptural response. Whether we can live into this disagreement remains to be seen. What is important for all participants to respect, I believe, is that both sides, not just one, employ thoroughly biblical arguments at the heart of their positions.

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