

The Unbound Conscience Implications of the ELCA's decision to accept homosexuality.

A shudder convulsed the Body of Christ on August 21, 2009. At least it should have. On that day the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, (ELCA), voted "to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships." By a 60% margin the ELCA took another step away from being "Evangelical" and "Lutheran" and part of the "Church." That it is "of America" is without question.

Much of the debate on this motion that took place at the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in Minneapolis, revolved around the question of a "bound conscience." Both sides claimed that their consciences were bound to a particular course of action, either in favor of, or opposed to the acceptance of homosexual behavior as a God-pleasing alternative lifestyle. The appeal to having a bound conscience, without clarifying that which has the authority to bind, demonstrates the "of America" characteristic of the ELCA. In other words, it is very American to allow everyone to believe whatever they want to believe. This manner of claiming to be bound by conscience makes each individual their own highest authority. The result is the chaos and its child, heresy.

There is a history in the Lutheran Church of claiming to be bound by conscience. It goes back as far as Luther himself. When he stood before the Emperor and was asked to recant all that he had written he answered, in part, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God." You undoubtedly noticed the difference between Luther's position and that which informed the ELCA on that fateful day. This is what Lutherans believe about bound consciences- only the Word of God has the authority to do so. Anything else that attempts to do so is of the evil one. This would mean that in order to claim that your conscience is bound to a particular course of action you would have to be able to demonstrate that it is based on the Word of God.

For the sake of argument let's look at what the Word of God does say about homosexuality. Paul writes in I Corinthians 6:9 "*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*" And again in I Timothy 1:10 he includes homosexuality in a list of sin, "*Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine...*" In Romans 1:24-27 Paul notes the perversion of God's plan for sexual relations as a cause for destruction, "*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; 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 themselves the due penalty for their error.*"

These three texts, without reference to other portions of Scripture dealing with the issue, make it clear that no one can claim that their conscience is bound to accept homosexual behavior as God-pleasing. So what happened in Minneapolis? It cannot be that the 60% found their conscience was bound to Scripture. Rather, they consciously unbound their consciences. By this vote the ELCA abandoned any meaningful understanding of the authority of Scripture. Compare the above texts to what was published above the signatures of over 100 “teaching theologians” of the ELCA in support of accepting homosexuality. “...the biblical texts that are frequently cited on the issue of homosexuality are not directly pertinent to the 21st century discussion because...(they) do not take into account issues like ‘sexual orientation,’ and presuppose that all would agree with a particular interpretation of what ‘nature’ teaches.” They claim that because God did not take sexual orientation into account when He called homosexuality a sin we are free to ignore His word.

The “unbinding” of consciences from the Word of God will result in radical consequences for the ELCA as well as the LCMS. Surprisingly, the first result may well be the abandonment of reason. The ELCA is determined that the opposing positions on homosexual behavior “will not be divisive among us.” That means that right now in the ELCA one member can believe, teach and confess that homosexual behavior is a damnable sin while another member can believe, teach and confess that it is a God-pleasing alternative lifestyle. Such mutually exclusive confessions can be held in tandem only by the willfully blind and those who have decided that reason no longer has a place in human discourse.

Once the Word of God and human reason have been abandoned in favor of what is “directly pertinent to the 21st century discussion” all bets are off. There is no rule and norm of faith and practice in the ELCA now. Each member is allowed to follow his own bound conscience. The only peaceful way to resolve this individualistic approach is through majority rule. This raw democracy, a second result of the unbinding of consciences, makes a mockery of what is to be “the Body of Christ”.

What will happen if 60% of the members agree that Jesus did not rise from the dead? This question leads us to the third, and most profound result, of unbinding consciences, its impact on the Gospel. Since all humans are sinners and by nature deny the Gospel, when they are left to their own consciences, they will do exactly that. This argument is often called the slippery slope. The thought is that when one sin is allowed an inexorable slide down the slope to allowing more and more has begun. The truth is there is no slope. It is an awful chasm of death. Once we have determined that we do not need to be saved from certain sins there are, in effect, no sins from which we need to be saved. We cannot be unbound from the law without being equally unbound from the Gospel.

This public action by a “Lutheran” denomination will certainly have an impact on congregations and individual members of the LCMS. Some in the community will not be capable of recognizing the distinction between brands of Lutheranism and will wonder what our position actually is. There will be pressure on Pastors, teachers, DCEs, and every church worker to defend the “outdated and mean-spirited” position of opposing homosexual behavior. There will be a certain percentage of members of LCMS congregations who will lobby for softening our stance so that we don’t offend the

community. There will be some who are deeply offended by this article. These results are assured.

On the other hand God promises that His Church will prevail. Since all of the promises of God find their “yes” in Jesus, we know that God will manage the results of unbound consciences. He will guide faithful believers, you and your congregation, to appropriate and beneficial responses to the actions of the ELCA. His faithful people will stand firm on the law’s condemnation of homosexual behavior, while at the same time lovingly proclaiming the Gospel. This is not a time to panic. It is a time to stand firm. God does not change. His Word does not change. The Word is the means He will use to keep you bound to your confession. He is holding you, bound by the power of His Word. God is faithful. He will do it.

Finally, the impact that this 20 year glacier-like movement toward accepting homosexuality has had on members of ELCA congregations is hard to estimate. Assuming that at least 40% are in disagreement we can conclude that there are a lot of hurting people in ELCA congregations. Most of these people don’t know what to do. Many of them don’t even know how these things happened. They only know that the Church where they were baptized, confirmed and married, and had their kids do the same, has just voted for something with which they cannot agree. Please keep these people in your prayers. If they come to your congregation treat them with gentleness and respect. They need to hear about the power of forgiveness. Share the Good News of salvation and love in the name of Jesus.