

HOMOSEXUALITY

TO: Church Council and members of Lutheran Church of the Resurrection.

FROM: Pastor Martin Wager

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The people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, gathered in a national assembly, passed a resolution adopting a social statement on Human Sexuality. The assembly also passed resolutions to authorize congregations who choose to do so to ordain gay or lesbian pastors living in committed monogamous relationships. I believe as members of the church council and Lutheran Church of the Resurrection you have the right to know my stand as a retired clergy on the roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a student of the Bible for many years, and one of your former shepherds.

My faith journey concerning these issues has been long and slow. It has not been an easy or quick decision. It has come as a result of my involvement in five major areas of faith and study.

1. Biblical study that focused on how the Bible was written and the faith context of the people.
2. Natural science that focused on the nature of homosexuality as a condition of birth and not a choice.
3. Behavioral science that focused on psychological attributes and sociological evolution in history.
4. Cultural changes that focused on the growing adaption of society as new understanding appeared.
5. The continual revelation of our God of Creation who guides us in new insights of our universe and life.

My first source of decision making is the Bible which I consider to be the inspired Word of God. I read the Bible as the faith story of a people inspired by God to form a new community that separates them from the rest of the world. I have never believed that God dictated the words to inerrant hands. The challenge of Bible study is to separate the Word with a capital "W" that is God's message from the words with a small "w" that are our human effort to communicate God's message in a given time and place. While we may discuss God's Word or message to be inerrant and infallible the human words we read on the pages of the Bible are not.

Throughout my confirmation ministry I had the students write in the front of the Bible, "This is a religious book. This is not a science book. Science asks the how of creation. Religion asks the why". The why is the opportunity to praise the glory and majesty of God in creation and to grasp God's grace and forgiveness in our imperfect human struggle. An article in a recent Lutheran magazine told how three years before his death Martin Luther was confronted with Copernicus' theory of the solar system which stated the earth revolved around the sun. Luther stated that Copernicus was wrong because the Bible said that the earth stood still for a day which proved the earth was stationary not the sun. Luther was wrong. However, both were right in their faith in the majesty of God's universe. Luther's faith was not wrong, his science was wrong.

Science has given us new truth about the nature of our universe as well as our human nature. We now have an awareness of how the x y chromosomes work to shape our sexual identity. No one is totally male or female but a blend of the two. At one time I counseled with a couple whose baby was born with both male and female physical sex configuration. It was difficult to decide whether to raise the child male or female. Following medical advice the parents switched back and forth. Either choice involved corrective surgery, life long hormone therapy, and the inability for reproduction.

We now know the earth is not flat with four corners as stated in the Bible. If we read the two creation stories in Genesis only to discuss the possibility of seven twenty-four hour days, we miss the opportunity to grasp the larger vision of God's power of creation in our lives today. The Bible is the Living Word that contains the Incarnate Christ who speaks to us today in our changing understanding of the world. We need to keep these things in mind that Bible scholars have revealed to help us understand the faith and the world in which the Bible writers lived. With God's help we discern how that applies to our world today.

Genesis issued a call to "Be fruitful and multiply". This created a society in which any act that interfered with this was an abomination. This included spilling semen on the ground, homosexuality, menstrual blood, and other examples. The Roman Catholic Church still considers it a sin to use contraception as a means of birth control. Leviticus contains many laws that helped the people to be a unique society that was separate from those around them. This included not living like the Egyptians or Canaanites, rituals for purity and animal sacrifice, sexual behavior including ban on homosexuality and incest, dietary prohibitions, worship procedures to avoid idolatry to name a few. Most of these laws are no longer

accepted in our society today while some are. The prophet Isaiah said that God no longer wanted sacrifices but a contrite heart. The Jewish community ended sacrifices in 70 AD with the destruction of the Temple by Rome. It is fair to ask why some of these rules are still accepted by society while others are not. Clearly not all the rules in the Bible are still valid. These are examples of why it is necessary to read the Bible in light of our current science. The question before us today in our ELCA Social Statement on Human Sexuality is whether or not the Leviticus prohibition on homosexuality still applies.

Leviticus 18:22, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" says that homosexuality was a sin at the time it was written. We can ask if it is still a sin today given the revelations of science that homosexuality is a condition of nature not one of choice. Some Bible scholars say that it is while other Bible scholars say it is not. This has caused our church in assembly to resolve that both views be honored by each other. An extreme example of a law that is no longer valid is Leviticus 20:9, "If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death". I compared these two because I believe that at the time they were written they were equal in value and in acceptance. The need to honor the family structure was interconnected to the need to populate.

We all have opinions based on our culture and society about many moral issues. The issue on homosexuality is one in which cultural opinion and Biblical truth interphase. There is a great temptation in Bible study to search the Scriptures for a verse that will justify an existing cultural position. Scholars call this isogesis or reading into the Bible. Exegesis is the effort to read the Bible with an open mind so the Bible is free to inform and shape our cultural opinions. This can only be accomplished by reading the Bible as a whole and not argue verse by verse.

There has been considerable attention given to Martin Luther's, "Here I Stand" before the emperor and officials of the pope based upon his bound conscience. What is not often quoted is the rest of his appeal that states, "unless someone can show me by reason or Scripture that I am wrong". This suggests that Luther was open to change his bound conscience if acceptable evidence was presented. None was. I can say with bound conscience that I do not believe homosexuality is a sin. However, if new revelations of science or Biblical scholarship proves me to be wrong, I will willingly recant. Furthermore I also believe the expression of their homosexual attraction to each other is as natural as that behavior expressed by heterosexual couples.

It is fair to ask how I arrived at this conclusion. It has been a long and slow journey of faith. In my childhood I did not think about it nor was I aware of it. As a young adult I more or less accepted it as sin without giving it much thought. In mid-life I began my call as a pastor and became acquainted with other pastors who were gay and lesbian advocates. I was exposed to considerable data on the Bible and scientific information. I slowly became a quiet supporter of their ministry. Now in my retired life I have come to the point of full acceptance.

I believe it is vital that we teach our children in home and church to love all of God's creation which will lead to compassion and respect for all people. If we teach our children to judge some as sinners because of who they are we will teach them to hate which is dangerous to their brain development as well as giving rise to acts of violence. I believe it is easy enough to tell children that a small percentage of people have a physical make up that attracts them to other people of the same sex. I do not believe that such information given in a loving spirit will motivate them to become homosexual in opposition to their own natural sexual makeup. It is inevitable that we will have children in our Sunday School and Confirmation classes who have homosexual friends in school, are themselves struggling with their sexual identity, or come from families in which their parents are gay or lesbian. There is no way I would suggest to these children that their friends, themselves, or their parents are living in sin. Nor would I suggest that other children shun them. On the contrary I would encourage the other children to accept them and encourage parents to accept them and their parents.

I understand how some people find homosexuality is personally distasteful as it once was for me. I certainly honor the opinion of those who after considerable study of the Bible believe that homosexuality is a sin. My appeal is that they honor the integrity of my conclusion after considerable study of the Bible that homosexuality is not a sin. I feel personally insulted by the accusation that I have dishonored the Bible or have caved into a whimsical society because my conclusions are different from theirs.

I believe that God has given us a great opportunity to grasp the message of God in the Bible and to honor the people of God and the ministry in our congregation as well as church wide. Jesus calls us to love one another as we love ourselves. Society calls us to be civil in our relationships. Both are a challenge but with the help of the Spirit both can be accomplished.