

FAQ About Recent ELCA Decisions

What did the ELCA just do?

The highest legislative body of the ELCA, the Churchwide Assembly, approved a Social Statement on Human Sexuality describing, among other things, 4 positions on homosexuality and same-gendered relationships that are accepted within the ELCA. In light of these positions, it also changed ELCA ministry policy to allow the ordination of people in same-gendered, publicly-accountable, lifelong, monogamous relationships.

How did this happen all of a sudden?

While acceptance of homosexuality has been discussed for the last 20 years, it is only with this recent change that many churches are now aware that this is a topic at all. Although the ELCA has passed resolutions concerning same-gendered relationships in 2001, 2005 and 2007, and encouraged further dialogue and discussion during the drafting and revision of the Social Statement on Human Sexuality, some congregations were not comfortable or able to discuss this issue. While the ELCA is a church committed common mission of spreading the Gospel promise, it is not perfect, and many in the church regret that they were unable to prevent this change from coming as a complete surprise to any.

Are you sure it wasn't a small, but wealthy, gay lobby that did this?

Yes. This is an easily testable assertion, since most synods adopt memorial resolutions calling on the Churchwide Assembly to take a given action on resolutions important to the synod. This also gives a more accurate picture of the whole church, since delegates to synod assembly are chosen and sent by each church in the synod. If you look at the results from the 2009 synod assemblies, you can see that the majority of synods adopted memorial resolutions favoring both the Sexuality document and the Ministry Policy Recommendations.

But I hear about a lot of synods that are redirecting giving and resolving never to call people in same-gendered relationships.

The actions currently being taken are by the synod councils. These are small groups of people with power trying to make policy for an entire synod. While synod councils should be fostering dialogue between concerned parties, the best place to make any permanent decisions is at the synod assembly, where members of all the churches in the synod will have an equal voice in the proceedings.

How are these ministry policy changes consistent with Lutheran theology and the Word of God?

This is the question that many are now struggling with—are these changes contrary to the Word of God? In order to answer this question, we need to go back to the Lutheran Reformation, and look at what breakthroughs they made. The biggest breakthrough, as we all know, was in justification—that we are saved from our sins by faith alone in Christ's death and resurrection alone. However, soteriology—how we are saved—is never separate from how we read the Bible. That means

another breakthrough the Reformers made was in how to read the Bible.

How did Luther and the Reformers read the Bible?

Put simply, Luther saw a double revelation in Scripture—that it contained both God's Law and God's Gospel, and that these were two very separate things. While the Law condemns, it is trust in God's Gospel promise that saves. It is this that truly makes the Gospel the Good News: Good in that faith is sufficient for our salvation, and New in that faith is now the criterion for everything that can be considered Christian—morals, beliefs and behaviors included. This is the heart of the Augsburg Confession and Apology, and laid out in Article IV of that document—that there are exactly two measures of anything claiming to be Christian—that it necessitates Christ and spreads the benefits of Christ such that devout consciences are comforted. The Law is important in that it maintains creation and reveals our sin. Much as a doctor first sees outward symptoms of a deep, inner problem, so too God's Law shows not only our outward failures, but also our inner failures, which themselves are caused by our rebellion against God. However, the Law cannot fix our rebellion against God; it is Christ who reconciles us to God and through that reconciliation gives us new life. This means two big things for reading the Bible. First, we must always ask two questions of Scripture—what does the Law diagnose as sin, and how does the Gospel promise heal that sin? We cannot simply ask "how does God want us to live?" because that question fails to account for both the fact that we will fail in such an endeavor and that Christ is a necessary component of our lives. Second, Scriptural descriptions of Law are the diagnosis of a particular person/culture/nation and not automatically diagnoses of us. This is why Luther called many of the Old Testament laws *Juden-sachsenspiegel*, meaning they have as much universality as the civil law codes of 16th century Saxony, yet he saw the same God behind them.

But some passages condemning homosexuality are in the New Testament!

It is unlikely that the words *arsenokoites* and *malakoi* (used in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10) are correctly translated "homosexual" (for example, Luther translated *arsenokoites* as *Knabenschaender*, which means "child abuser"). The end of Romans 1, though, does appear to directly address homosexuality. However, in order to properly put this in context, we must remember that Paul employed the same method of reading the Bible that Luther and the Reformers did. Romans 1 is an excellent example of the first half of this method. Paul walks the reader through the outward sin, which stems from internal sin, which results from rebellion against God. Here, Paul identifies homosexual intercourse as the outward sin, homosexuality as the inner sin, and idolatry as the fundamental problem. In this diagnosis, Paul is entirely caught up in the first century Jewish *Zeitgeist*—that homosexuality was completely incompatible with being a Jew, and indeed, the phrase "homosexual Jew" would have been an oxymoron. While Paul's method is correct, today we understand that homosexuality is not correctly assigned as a result of idolatry.

Therefore, in this light, we see that this is another example of *Juden-sachsenspiegel*, even though it is in the New Testament, and the same-gendered relationships spoken about today are understood very differently.

So are these new policies consistent with the Word of God?

Yes. They do not fail the tests provided by Article IV of the Augsburg Confession and Apology—recognition of same-gender relationships and ordination of people therein does not eliminate the need for Christ, nor does it stifle the message of Christ. If anything, this is one answer to the prayer Christ suggests in Matthew 9:38: “Ask the Lord of the harvest, to send out workers into his harvest field.” While there is still some confusion on exactly what form “publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous relationships” will take, it is best understood as part of God’s ordaining for creation known as the estate of marriage. The Reformers understood the estate of marriage to be located in the “left-hand” kingdom of the world (as contrasted with the “right-hand” kingdom of the church), and as such, the configurations of existence within this estate change over time. Polygamy and Levirate marriage are two configurations for marriage that we no longer use. Changing configurations of an estate are most clearly seen in that of government, as we now have a republic where once empire and kingdom reigned. The church’s task is not choosing a specific configuration of government or marriage (remember that when Paul speaks of authority in Romans 13:4, “it is God’s servant for your good”, he is referring to Emperor Nero and the Roman Empire). Instead, its mission is the right-hand task of spreading the life-giving Gospel to the world. Thus, changing one configuration within the left-hand kingdom does not alter or negate the church’s mission. In this particular case, these changes signal a firm commitment to include all people in the mission and life of the church, and will strengthen the church with the addition of the gifts those in same-gendered relationships will bring to the ministry.

What about this "cheap grace" I keep hearing about?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor who led the confessing church against Hitler, and was hanged for being involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler, popularized the term in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. He explains cheap grace as “the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.” In contrast, “costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light.’” This is another way of viewing Article IV of the Augsburg Confession and Apology—cheap grace does not necessitate Christ, whereas costly grace comes at the cross to sinners who understand that they cannot save themselves. As explained above, these ministry policy recommendations are consistent with Article IV, and as such are not promoting cheap grace. They do not remove the need for Christ’s death and resurrection from the life of either the ELCA or the person in a same-gendered relationship. Instead, these ministry policy changes are a slight reorganization how we live in marriage and how we organize the church, much

like the reorganization in our government when desegregation was required and the government resolved to protect and uphold the rights of all people, regardless of race, gender or ethnic background.

Should my congregation withhold benevolence to the ELCA because of this?

This decision is one that is ultimately up to the congregation. However, the decision to redirect giving over these matters reflects a lack of Christian unity. Historically, Lutherans have always been very interested in Christian unity—Martin Luther intended to reform the Catholic church, and the Lutheran denomination only grew out of the Catholic church’s rejection of Luther and his followers. Similarly, venerable Lutherans may remember how the Missouri Synod rejected its own seminary students and teaching faculty back in the 1970’s. The ELCA has resolved to not reject anyone over this decision, no matter how they feel about either the Human Sexuality Statement or the ministry policy changes. These policies have not changed the mission of the ELCA, which is to bring the light of the Gospel to the nations. Indeed, the ELCA still participates in all of the ministries it previously did, and your congregation’s money will still go to funding those ministries.

Is the ELCA about to fall apart?

No. There are congregations that will leave (and have left) the ELCA over this decision, but they are less than 1% of the church. While some regions of the country are more enthusiastic about these changes than others, the majority of the ELCA is committed to living together and understanding that we will not always agree on everything. Even within your own congregation, there are people who have mutually exclusive ideas about a wide range of other church matters. The miracle of God’s reconciliation of the world to Himself is that we are all reconciled to the same Christ regardless of our differences. When we live in that reconciliation, we can no more reject fellow siblings in Christ than they can reject us.

What can I do about all of this?

There are a lot of ways that you can directly help the ELCA in these troubled times. Most importantly, keep your trust in Christ, remember that Christ is God’s promise of reconciliation to the world, and that as Christians we are tasked with carrying this promise into the world. Commit yourself to reconciliation as these decisions are implemented so that your congregation can move forward as one healthy whole, even if it disagrees on some issues. Continued dialogue on this matter is important, but it is also important that dialogue occur between siblings, not enemies. Continue to show your support of the ELCA in both its local and global mission through your time, energy and money.

Where can I get more information?

The ELCA website: www.elca.org

For more theology, see the Crossings Community’s website: www.crossings.org

For questions about building a welcoming church, see Lutherans Concerned: www.lcna.org