

Editors note:

The article which follows is by Larry Rinehart a member of Christ Church who felt the need to respond to Dr. Wengert's arguments also posted on this site. Other views are welcome at any point.

TIMOTHY WENGERT'S REFLECTIONS: A LAYMAN'S RESPONSE

Professor Wengert is to be thanked for clarifying the argument from Scripture, which purports to provide a foundation for the recent changes in ELCA sexuality policy. Taken in logical order, this argument is structured as follows:

- (1) The "Scripture passages dealing with homosexual actions are not at all aimed at homosexual orientation and behavior in the present"; they merely represent specific, timebound responses to particular historical conditions.
- (2) Nevertheless, assuming for the sake of argument that there were Scriptural prohibitions of homosexual behavior, the whole point of such prohibitions (the Law) is to show us our dependence on grace; and Christ himself pointedly violated parts of the Law as an example.
- (3) And anyway, the entirety of the Law reduces to, or is trumped by, the commandment to love the neighbor as oneself; so how can we best show Christian love for the homosexual neighbor?

As regards the first prong of this three-pointed structure, let's look at one example from Scripture, *Romans 1:24-27*. The Apostle is voicing the traditional teaching, that God's wrath acts upon those who turn away from Him by giving them up to their own worst impulses: "For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another ...". One blushes to write it out in full, yet this is the Word of the Lord. What Luther would call the plain sense of this passage is clearly that homosexual *behavior* is a transgression of the Law.

But the second prong of the Professor's argument from Scripture, trumps the Law, which indeed exists in the first place to teach us our need for grace, by which we are forgiven our transgressions through faith in Christ. Yet our transgressions are forgiven only as we acknowledge them as transgressions; and without the standard of the Law, the grace of the Gospel grows meaningless.

Although justified through grace alone, through faith, we are to acknowledge the standard of the Law, and strive to fulfill it as a fruit of faith, even while knowing we always fall short. This is illustrated by one of the instances in which Christ set aside the Law, or at least its consequences: the forgiveness of the woman taken in adultery. Christ shamed her would-be executioners by referring them to their own sinfulness, then forgave her sin; and finally admonished her to go and sin no more. He did *not* say, you are forgiven, do as you please; but *sin no more*. By contrast, the Professor's argument implies that, since our transgressions of the Law are forgiven by grace, we need not concern ourselves with its prohibitions.

In any case, the third prong of this argument condenses the whole of the Law and its moral standard into the great commandment to love the neighbor as oneself. So the question becomes, how does one show Christian love for the homosexual neighbors? The assumption seems to be that the way to do this is to assure them that the Law does not apply to their sexual behavior; or that even if it does, they are forgiven and need not concern themselves with the acknowledgement of transgressions. But Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions insist upon confession, repentance and contrition regarding transgressions of the Law, as *prerequisite* to their forgiveness by grace. In this light, to assure sinners that their sins are not sins, is a truly pernicious counsel, which places their eternal salvation in jeopardy. Is this the way to show Christian love for the neighbor?

It is reported in the Forum Letter for October 2009 that the following clause was added, without debate and by overwhelming majority, to the new social statement on sexuality: "Recognizing that this conclusion (Christian marriage between homosexuals is theologically valid) differs from the historic Christian tradition and the Lutheran Confessions ... ". Whether one applauds the candor, or rues the temerity of this clause, it is much more to the point than Professor Wengert's effort to claim the support of Scripture for these outright innovations.

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