

A Crisis of Faith in the ELCIC

The delegates to the 2011 National Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC), held July 14-17, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, made history. They approved a new Statement on Human Sexuality ("Statement"). The adoption of the Statement permitted the delegates to pass resolutions which empowered ELCIC clergy to solemnize and/or bless same gender marriages, and empowered congregations to call and ordain non-celibate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) people as parish pastors. The Statement characterized these monumental changes as moral matters upon which Christians may agree to disagree and still maintain unity.

The Statement is based on assumed Christian freedom. The Statement, relying on the Apostle Paul, asserts *'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything.* (1 Corinthians 6:12). The Statement further asserts that Reformer Martin Luther also proclaimed that Christians have great freedom. Luther saw Christian freedom as a paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to all." The Statement reasons that this freedom enters into every aspect of a Christian's life, including the expression of our human sexuality. Our freedom to express our human sexuality has one major constraint, namely, it must be expressed in committed, monogamous loving partnerships regardless of the gender of the partners. The Statement, following the principles of freedom and Canadian law, redefines marriage as between two people (ignoring the Biblical imperative that marriage is between one man and one woman). The Statement further reasons, if Christians have this kind of freedom, then matters of sexuality and morality are not issues of salvation. It logically follows that, if matters of sexuality and morals are not issues of salvation, and Christians are free to enter into same gender marriages, then a married GLBT person may be ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The Statement's reasoning is compelling. Its message will resonate well with GLBT people, progressive Christians and a Canadian culture that is suspicious of a Church which rejects same-gender marriage and all sexual relations outside marriage. The Statement allows congregations of the ELCIC to create enclaves where the partnerships God wishes to form, bless and encourage are redefined to include same-gender couples. However, the question that must be asked is whether the freedoms proclaimed by the Statement, assumed to be buttressed by the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther, really exist? Does the Church have the authority to normalize homosexual behaviour and redefine marriage?

In his letter to the Galatian churches the Apostle Paul made this bold statement about Christian Freedom: *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."* (Galatians 5:1) In the verses that follow, the Apostle defines the yoke of slavery the Galatians were freed from: (1) their belief that they are able to make themselves acceptable to God through scrupulous observance of the Law given by Moses; and (2) their belief that the grace of God, through Christ, permitted them to indulge the lusts of their sinful nature. Paul declared: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery" (Galatians 5:19). In His letter to the church at Rome, Paul declared that same-gender sexual relations were opposed to the heterosexual structure of God's created order, thus sinful and like all other sin

separates them from God and one another. (Romans 1:18-32). Paul also declared that adulterers, homosexuals, and drunkards, among others, will not inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). The Apostle Paul did not see Christian freedom as permitting a Christian to engage in homosexual behaviour.

Our Lutheran Confessions declare that the estate of marriage is ordained by God and imprinted upon creation. God made the two sexes for one another. Both the Old and New Testament scriptures declare that God created the male with a sexual desire for the female and the female with a sexual desire for the male. God's most passionate desire for the expression of human sexuality is between one man and one woman in a lifelong partnership of physical, emotional, social and spiritual union. Luther wrote in his writings entitled the Smalcald Articles that the church is powerless to ignore the distinction between the sexes in marriage. Same-gender marriage by definition ignores the distinction between the sexes in marriage and forbidden by our Lutheran Confessions.

In the final analysis, neither Scripture or our Lutheran Confessions supports the position taken by the ELCIC with respect to same-gender marriage. If homosexual sexual relationships go against Scripture, those engaged in homosexual relationships should not be ordained to the Pastoral Ministry. To the extent that the clergy of the ELCIC solemnise or bless same gender marriages, and/or congregations call and ordain non-celibate GLBT people, they break faith with the historic witness of the Christian Church. They leave home and go down another path.

The Gospel according to St. Luke records a parable of two sons (Luke 15:11-32). The younger son could not stand the restraints of living at home. So, he asked his father for his inheritance in advance and he left home. The father knew that he could no longer reason with his son. The boy had to learn his lesson the hard way. He had to experience the behaviours the father forbid in order to understand why the father forbid them. The son engaged in wild living in a foreign land. He practiced things that his father would never condone. He made new friends and they sucked him dry. When he was totally bankrupt and destitute, he came to his senses and returned home. The boy resolved to confess his sins and ask his father to take him back as a hired hand. The father could have scorned the wayward son. Yet, we learn that the father had been waiting and watching for his wayward son to return. When the son came home he began to confess his sin and the father kissed him and welcomed him home as a son that was dead and was now alive again. The father arranged a great feast for his younger son. When the older brother heard his younger brother was home, he refused to accept him and join the party. The father tried to coax the older boy into joining the party. The older son chastised his father for hosting a party for a sinner. He added insult to injury by implying his father had no love for his "good" son who had stayed home and worked hard for his father. The older son declared that his father had failed and refused to allow even a small party for his "good" older son and that son's friends. The father in this parable is God and we in the Church are the sons. The ELCIC is poised shake off the restraints of living at home and go down a path that leads to living in a way that the father will not condone. God knows they must walk down this path to learn a lesson. God waits for them to come to their senses and come home. It would be easy for those who stay behind to be bitter about those who leave. However, our Father calls us to wait and watch with him and to pray that like the younger son, they will come to their senses and return home.

In Christ,

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For a more thorough analysis of the Statement and the Motions which were passed by the delegates at the ELCIC's 2011 National Convention, see "A Crisis of Faith that Requires Action - CALC's Response to the Adoption of the ELCIC's Social Statement on Human Sexuality and Associated Motions".