

# What Should Faithful Lutherans in the ELCA Do?

by **Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.**

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; [www.robagnon.net](http://www.robagnon.net); [gagnon@pts.edu](mailto:gagnon@pts.edu)

Sept. 30, 2009

*I give my permission for this article to be circulated widely in print, email, and on the web.—RG*

With a process that gives new meaning to the expression “stacked deck,” the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August 2009 voted to allow for the blessing of homosexual unions and the rostering of pastors in homosexual relationships. I salute the efforts of the renewal group Lutheran CORE, which courageously fought against the homosexualist agenda at the assembly (I had the great privilege of addressing them). Just this past weekend they had a meeting attended by 1200 persons that began the process of defining a new vision and structure for those who recognize the ELCA’s hard-left departure from normative Christian faith and practice.

How should faithful Lutherans—that is, Lutherans who affirm the male-female requirement for sexual unions so important to Jesus and the scriptural witness to him—deal with these new heretical and immoral actions? In particular, do the recent actions of the Churchwide Assembly justify beginning a trajectory that will lead eventually to disaffiliation with the denominational structure known as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America? Let me suggest a syllogism that goes something like this:

A MAJOR PREMISE

**A denomination renders itself illegitimate when, through enactment, it willfully ordains persons actively involved in adultery, incest, polyamory, or like acts, and blesses sexual unions constituted by such behavior.**

B MINOR PREMISE

**Adult-committed homosexual practice is, according to Scripture, at least as bad as—and probably worse than—adult-consensual adultery and adult-committed incest and polyamory.**

C CONCLUSION

**A denomination renders itself illegitimate when, through enactment, it willfully ordains homosexually active persons and blesses homosexual unions.**

Simply put, would you stay in perpetuity in a denomination that officially sanctioned adult-consensual incest, adultery, and polyamory (i.e. concurrent multiple-partner unions) and even set up as leaders of the church persons who engaged unrepentantly in such immorality? If the answer is “no,” consider this: Scripture treats homosexual practice of any sort as at least as bad as, and probably worse than, these offenses. And the ELCA hierarchy has now endorsed adult-committed homosexual practice.

Few will contest the major premise (A) that a denomination ceases to be a faithful representation of the body of Christ to the world once it endorses adultery or consensual, adult-committed incest or polyamory. Perhaps a few *would* argue for the continuing legitimacy of a church that both blessed such unions and rostered leaders unrepentantly involved in such unions. Yet such advocates would be a tiny minority that could be identified and isolated as extremists.

The main point of contention will be over the minor premise (B); namely, over whether adult-committed homosexual practice is at least as bad as (and probably worse than) consensual adultery and adult-committed incest or polyamory. Yet the point can be easily demonstrated by three considerations. As I note in an online piece entitled “How Bad Is Homosexual Practice according to Scripture and Does Scripture’s Indictment Apply to Committed Homosexual Unions?” (<http://www.robagnon.net/articles/HomosexHowBadIsIt.pdf>):

1. ***Homosexual practice, committed or otherwise, is the violation that most clearly and radically offends against God’s intentional creation of humans as “male and female” (Gen 1:27) and definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman (Gen 2:24).*** According to the story in Genesis 2, the differentiation into man and woman is the sole differentiation produced by the removal of a “rib” or (in my view a better rendering) “side” from the originally undifferentiated human. It is precisely because out of one flesh came two sexes (a story line that makes a transcendent point about the exclusivity of male-female complementarity) that the two sexes, and only the two sexes, can (re-)unite into one flesh (2:24). Since Jesus gave priority to these two texts from the creation stories in Genesis when he defined normative and prescriptive sexual ethics for his disciples, they have to be given special attention by us. Paul also clearly has the creation texts in the background of his indictments of homosexual practice in Rom 1:24-27 and 1 Cor 6:9.
2. ***Every text that treats the issue of homosexual practice in Scripture treats it as a high offense abhorrent to God.*** That this is so is evident from (a) the triad of stories about extreme depravity, Ham, Sodom, and Gibeah (which incidentally are no more limited in their implications to coercive acts of same-sex acts than is an indicting story about coercive sex with one’s parent limited in its implications only to coercive acts of adult incest), to (b) the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic legal and narrative materials that rail against the homoerotic associations of the *qedeshim* as an “abomination” or “abhorrent practice” (men who in a cultic context served as the passive re-

ceptive sexual partners for other men), to (c) the Levitical prohibitions (where the term “abomination” or “abhorrent practice” is specifically attached to man-male intercourse), to (d) texts in Ezekiel that refer to man-male intercourse by the metonym “abomination” or “abhorrent act,” to (e) Paul’s singling out of homosexual practice in Romans 1:24-27 (compare 1 Cor 6:9) as a specially reprehensible instance, along with idolatry, of humans suppressing the truth accessible in the material creation set in motion by the Creator, labeling it sexual “uncleanness,” “dishonorable” or “degrading,” “contrary to nature,” and an “indecent” or “shameful” act. These views are also amply confirmed in texts from both early Judaism and early Christianity after the New Testament period, where only bestiality appears to rank as a greater sexual offense, at least among “consensual” acts. There is, to be sure, some disagreement in early Judaism over whether sex with one’s parent is worse, comparable, or less severe, though most texts suggest a slightly lesser degree of severity. Yet while Scripture makes some exceptions, particularly in ancient Israel, for some forms of incest (though never for man-mother, man-child, man-sibling) and for sexual unions involving more than two partners (though a monogamy standard was always imposed on women), it makes absolutely no exceptions for same-sex intercourse. Indeed, every single text in Scripture that discusses sex, whether narrative, law, proverb, poetry, moral exhortation, or metaphor, presupposes a male-female prerequisite. There are no exceptions anywhere in Scripture.

3. ***The male-female prerequisite is the foundation or prior analogue for defining other critical sexual norms.*** Jesus himself clearly predicated his view of marital monogamy and indissolubility on the foundation of Gen 1:27 and 2:24, texts that have only one thing in common: the fact that an acceptable sexual bond before God entails as its first prerequisite (after the assumption of an intra-human bond) a man and a woman (Mark 10:6-9; Matt 19:4-6). Jesus argued that the “twoness” of the sexes ordained by God at creation was the foundation for limiting the number of persons in a sexual bond to two, whether concurrently (as in polygamy) or serially (as in repetitive divorce and remarriage). The foundation can hardly be less significant than the regulation predicated on it; indeed, it must be the reverse. Moreover, the dissolution of an otherwise natural union is not more severe than the active entrance into an inherently unnatural union (active entrance into an incestuous bond would be a parallel case in point). The principle by which same-sex intercourse is rejected is also the principle by which incest, even of an adult and consensual sort, is rejected. Incest is wrong because, as Lev 18:6 states, it involves sexual intercourse with “the flesh of one’s own flesh.” In other words, it involves the attempted merger with someone who is already too much of a formal or structural same on a familial level. The degree of formal or structural sameness is felt even more keenly in the case of homosexual practice, only now on the level of sex or gender, because sex or gender is a more integral component of sexual relations, and more foundationally defines it, than is and does the degree of blood relatedness. So the prohibition of incest can be, and probably was, analogically derived from the more foundational prohibition of same-sex intercourse. Certainly, as noted above, there was more accommodation to some forms of incest in the Old Testament than ever there was to homosexual practice. Adultery becomes an applicable offense only when the sexual bond that the offender is cheating on is a

valid sexual bond. It would be absurd to charge a man in an incestuous union or in a pedophilic union with adultery for having sexual relations with a person outside that pair-bond. One can't cheat against a union that was immoral from the beginning.

**For further study:** Additional brief arguments are put forward in my online article, "What the Evidence *Really* Says about Scripture and Homosexual Practice: Five Issues" (7 pgs.; <http://www.robgagnon.net/articles/homosexScripReallySays.doc.pdf>), especially p. 7 under "5. Significance" and p. 1 under "1. Jesus." For more on the analogy with incest and polyamory see my "Why Homosexual Behavior Is More like Consensual Incest and Polyamory than Race or Gender" (7 pgs.; <http://www.robgagnon.net/articles/homosexIncestPolyAnalogy.pdf>). For a more extensive analysis of Scripture texts, see my *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Abingdon, 2001; 500 pgs.); my 55-page contribution in *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress, 2003); and, with some updating, my 120-page "Why the Disagreement over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice?" in *Reformed Review* 59 (2005): 19-130, esp. pp. 46-100 (online: [http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon\\_autm05\\_0.pdf](http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon_autm05_0.pdf); table of contents at <http://www.robgagnon.net/articles/homoReformedReviewTableCont.pdf>).

### ***The Exploitation-Promiscuity and Orientation Arguments***

Claims have been made by ELCA "homosexualists" that Scripture's indictment of homosexual practice is an indictment only of promiscuous or exploitative forms of homosexual practice and not an absolute indictment of homosexual practice per se. This argument is akin to asserting that Scripture's indictment of incest or the New Testament's implicit indictment of polygamy extends only to promiscuous or exploitative forms of these relationships and not to adult-committed forms. The exploitation-promiscuity claim shows ignorance of the historical record. Both the conception and reality of adult-committed homosexual relationships existed in the ancient world. Moreover, we have texts where Greco-Roman moralists and Church Fathers acknowledge the presence of love and commitment in homosexual unions and yet still reject the unions as unnatural and immoral. Finally, Paul gives numerous indications that his indictment of homosexual practice is absolute, including his echoing of creation texts, his nature argument, his indictment of lesbianism, his stress on the mutuality of affections, his derivation of the term "men-lying-with-males" (*arsenokoitai*) from the absolute prohibitions in Leviticus, and the historical context of early Judaism's absolute opposition.

As even Louis Crompton, a homosexual historian and author of a massive and influential historical-cultural study of homosexuality, has written:

According to [one] interpretation, Paul's words were not directed at "bona fide" homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual

devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian. (*Homosexuality and Civilization* [Harvard University Press, 2003], p. 114)

Note the similar comments by the lesbian New Testament scholar Bernadette Brooten, who has written the most important book on lesbianism in antiquity and its relation to Rom 1:26, who criticized both John Boswell and Robin Scroggs for their use of an exploitation argument:

Boswell . . . argued that . . . “The early Christian church does not appear to have opposed homosexual behavior per se.” The sources on female homoeroticism that I present in this book run absolutely counter to [this conclusion]. . . . The ancient sources, which rarely speak of sexual relations between women and girls, undermine Robin Scroggs’s theory that Paul opposed homosexuality as pederasty. (*Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996], 11, 361)

In addition, the claim that the ancients knew nothing akin to our concept of homosexual “orientation” and had no conception of congenital influences on homosexual development is also false. Such theories did exist in the Greco-Roman world. Some are close to modern theories, others more distant, but all presuppose the critical point that at least some homosexual behavior is traceable to influences beyond a person’s control. Also erroneous is the claim that knowledge of homosexual orientation would have made a significant difference to Paul’s indictment of homosexual practice. Let’s remember that Paul defined sin in Romans 7 as an innate impulse passed on by an ancestor, running through the members of the human body, and never entirely within human control.

As classicist Thomas K. Hubbard notes in his magisterial sourcebook of texts relating to homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world:

Homosexuality in this era [viz., of the early imperial age of Rome] may have ceased to be merely another practice of personal pleasure and began to be viewed as an essential and central category of personal identity, exclusive of and antithetical to heterosexual orientation. (*Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook*, 386)

Classicist and church historian William Schoedel in a significant article on “Same-Sex Eros: Paul and the Greco-Roman Tradition” (an article that, incidentally, favors ecclesiastical acceptance of homosexual unions) states that “some support” exists in Philo for thinking that Paul might be speaking in Rom 1:26-27 “only of same-sex acts performed by those who are by nature heterosexual.” But he then dismisses the suggestion:

But such a phenomenon does not excuse some other form of same-sex eros in the mind of a person like Philo. Moreover, we would expect Paul to make that form of the argument more explicit if he intended it. . . . Paul’s wholesale attack on Greco-Roman culture makes better sense if, like Josephus and Philo, he lumps all forms of same-sex eros together as a mark of Gentile decadence. (*Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, pp. 67-68)

Schoedel also acknowledges that a “conception of a psychological disorder socially engendered or reinforced and genetically transmitted may be presupposed” for Philo (p. 56).

Similarly, Martti Nissinen, who has written the best book on the Bible and homosexuality from a homosexualist perspective and whose work I heavily critique in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, acknowledges in one of his more candid moments:

Paul does not mention *tribades* or *kinaidoi*, that is, female and male persons who were habitually involved in homoerotic relationships, but if he knew about them (and there is every reason to believe that he did), it is difficult to think that, because of their apparent ‘orientation,’ he would *not* have included them in Romans 1:24-27. . . . For him, there is no individual inversion or inclination that would make this conduct less culpable. . . . Presumably nothing would have made Paul approve homoerotic behavior. (*Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* [Fortress, 1998], 109-12)

The ecclesiast who claims that the authors of Scripture would not have opposed a committed homosexual union entered into by homosexually-oriented persons simply doesn’t know the historical evidence well; or, if knowing it, has deliberately sought to hide the historical evidence to others in the church. Our so-called “new knowledge” about homosexuality is not so new after all.

**For further study:** For a brief presentation of evidence against the use of exploitation and orientation arguments see again my “[What the Evidence Really Says](#),” especially “3. Rom 1:24-27 and the Erroneous ‘Exploitation Argument’” on pp. 3-4; my “[How Bad Is Homosexual Practice](#) according to Scripture and Does Scripture’s Indictment Apply to Committed Homosexual Unions?,” especially pp. 6-8; and my “[Why the Disagreement](#) over the Biblical Witness on Homosexual Practice?,” especially pp. 62-83. For a look at the Greco-Roman evidence for committed homosexual relationships and the conception thereof see my “A Book Not to Be Embraced: A Critical Review Essay on Stacy Johnson’s A Time to Embrace” [Part 1: the *Scottish Journal of Theology* article] (Mar. 2008; 16 pgs.; online: <http://robgagnon.net/articles/homosexStacyJohnsonSJT2.pdf>), especially pp. 5-8; and for a more detailed look at orientation theory in antiquity see my article “Does the Bible Regard Same-Sex Intercourse as Intrinsically Sinful?” in *Christian Sexuality: Normative and Pastoral Principles* (ed. R. E. Saltzman; Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2003), 106-55, especially pp. 141-46.

*Since* it is the case that Scripture treats homosexual practice *per se* as at least as bad as, and probably worse than, adult-committed forms of incest and polyamory and adult-consensual forms of adultery, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly by its recent decisions has forced the faithful, against their will, to give sober and painful reconsideration of long-term affiliation with the ELCA.

Scripture does not offer any refuge for those who claim that their “bound conscience” requires them to support committed homosexual unions. The argument about unity in Rom 14:1-15:13 applies only to what the Stoics called *adiaphora*, matters of indifference such as diet and calendar, not matters of significance involving sexual immorality (contrast Paul’s remarks in 13:12-14; 6:19-22 with 1:24; 8:12-14; 11:21-22; 1 Cor 6:9-20; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Thess 4:2-8; Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-6; 1 Tim 1:9-11). When Paul encountered some at Corinth who prided themselves in their ability to “tolerate” a case of adult-consensual incest (1 Cor 5), he didn’t say, “respect the bound consciences” of those who think adult-consensual incest is acceptable. He didn’t proclaim: “All sides are being faithful on this issue.” He didn’t put church unity over church purity; rather he defined church unity christologically rather than sociologically. Unity around immorality wasn’t worth a warm bucket of spit. Only the unity centered around the will of Christ is worth anything. So Paul insisted “in the name of the Lord Jesus” that they put the offender outside the community for the sake of the offender (who needed a wake-up call lest he be excluded from God’s kingdom), for the sake of the church (lest members get the mistaken notion that sexually impure behavior does not incur God’s judgment), and for the sake of God (who redeemed the community with the precious blood of the Jesus, the new Passover lamb, and who can still “take us out”).

The ELCA has gone beyond the Corinthian community. It has allowed for sexual immorality that Paul (and Jesus) would have regarded as even more extreme than the specific case of incest at Corinth. Furthermore, it has not only tolerated such immorality but also allowed for its blessing and the rostering as active *leaders* of the church the very persons engaging in the immorality. Moreover, unlike Corinth, this outcome is not just a recent development but part of an orchestrated effort for promoting homosexual behavior over the past decade. The faithful in the ELCA have been more than patient.

At some point—perhaps not immediately but surely down the line—those who remain in the ELCA run the risk of becoming enabling accomplices to a regime that has betrayed the illustrious heritage of the Lutheran communion, to say nothing of the worldwide church, Scripture, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. No doubt there is pain ahead, but also the joy that comes from dying to self and living for God. May God grant them wisdom and courage in their future decisions, which only they can make.