

ELCA Ordination of Persons in Same Sex Committed Relationships

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I am an opponent, past and present, of the ELCA decision to ordain persons in a same sex committed relationship. I have been asked what I intend to do as a result of the ELCA action affirming such ordination. My first answer is simple. I am and intend to remain a faithful, fully participating and supporting member of the ELCA. I do not believe this matter is of sufficient confessional import to require division among disagreeing brethren. There are faithful, Bible believing, confessional Lutherans on both sides of this issue. The debate will continue. My second answer is that I am a dissenter with respect to the action taken. Continuing dissent is not for me a new reaction to ELCA decisions. I am also a dissenter and outspoken critic of the ELCA action with regard to CCM, which I consider to be a greater mistake than the ordination decision. I do not, however, consider either issue to be of such confessional import that it should lead me or anyone else to separate ourselves from our fellow members who disagree with us. My suspicion is that most ELCA members dissent from some portion or another of ELCA organizational and ethical traditions. I do not believe such differences rise to the level of confessional disagreement.

It is my conviction that a distinction must be made between issues that bear directly on the heart of the Christian faith and issues that are comparatively peripheral. I do not believe the issue at hand threatens the gospel of God. The Lutheran Confessions do not explicitly address the issue. That is not to say that comparatively peripheral matters are unimportant. It is to say that there is room for disagreement on various issues that are important but not all-important. My ancestral church body, the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, came into being as a result of a church merger in which the members declared their unity in spite of strong, differing convictions regarding predestination. Those differing convictions have continued to this day. It is such an example that I believe to be appropriate in regard to both the CCM and homosexual ordination.

There are, however, grounds for opposing the ordination of persons in same sex committed relationships. The action of the ELCA Assembly has not changed them. I here list reasons that led me to oppose the action.

1. The ELCA constituency is deeply conflicted with respect to Scripture interpretation and authority. Taking definitive action to change church polity and ethical positions in the face of that conflict is an invitation to continuing conflict. Clearly the re-interpretation of salient Biblical passages has not been found convincing by large numbers of ELCA members. The interpretation of the relevant Bible passages is the main issue and the two documents, "Human Sexuality---Gift and Trust" and "Report and Recommendations," simply conclude that there are "different opinions" without a thorough examination of the pertinent Bible passages.

2. A fundamental flaw is that the two above named documents do not base their recommendation for change on a careful exegesis of contested Biblical texts. Rather the recommendations are made in order to accommodate everyone's "bound conscience."

Lutherans have insisted that the conscience is bound by Scripture. The question is not whether or not the conscience is bound but whether it is bound by the Scriptures.

3. An overwhelming majority of church bodies in the ecumenical church believe that faithfulness to the Scriptures demands opposition to ordination of persons in same-sex committed relationships. Their voices have barely been noticed in ELCA documents.

4. The two kingdoms concept should have received greater attention in the ELCA documents. Sexuality is not a matter of salvation, God's kingdom on the right. Sexual ethics belong to God's kingdom on the left which deals with the good of society.

5. Proponents of ordination of persons in same-sex committed relationships, to my knowledge, have not responded to the widespread charge that the relevant ELCA documents ground ethical action on the gospel rather than the law. In the opening section the ELCA document does describe the Lutheran understanding of the law and briefly mentions Luther's understanding of the two kingdoms, but in the subsequent discussion of sexuality (III-VII) neither the law nor the two kingdom concept is mentioned at all.

6. The virtually unanimous witness of Christians for 2000 years declares opposition to homosexual practice on the basis of Biblical injunctions. For the ELCA to take solo action in the face of such heavy historic consensus suggest that the ELCA has some superior insight in the matter. I am not aware of the bulk of ELCA members being given opportunity to hear the reasoning of non-Lutheran Christians or even from partner Lutheran churches who are overwhelmingly opposed to the ELCA action.

7. The assertion that the change in ELCA ordination of persons in same-sex committed relationships is comparable to historic changes made in matters of slavery, adultery or the ordination of women is highly debatable. Each of those issues must be dealt with on its own.

Looking to the future the good news is that congregations will have to make their own way in dealing with this matter. This puts the ultimate decision where it should be--in the basic unit of Christ's church, the local congregation.