

Paper for WordAlone Theological Advisory Board

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Recollections

1. I was ordained at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, on June 1, 1969, forty years ago this past summer. A month-and-a-half later I returned as associate pastor to Christ Lutheran Church, Pacific Beach (San Diego), where I had served as an intern with Pastor Quentin Garman. Three signal events occurred during that summer, only two of them coming to my attention at the time. One was the journey of the Apollo 11 crew to the moon, with the historic July 20 words of Neil Armstrong, "One small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." The other was the horrific, murderous rampage of the Charlie Manson gang in southern California, in early and mid-August ... right up Freeway 5 in Los Angeles.
2. The one that escaped my attention—indeed the attention of most Americans at the time—was an event of June 28 in New York that, in retrospect, can be seen to have provoked the onset of the gay rights movement: the NYPD raid of the Stonewall Club. The GLBT movement toward first social acceptability and now outright blessing got its beginning under the cultural radar, in an event at the time virtually invisible to the wider society.
3. At a Reformation service in the mid 80s, in Kannapolis, North Carolina, I first learned of the "gay rights movement" within the Lutheran Church. I was in the pastor's study, removing my vestments after worship, when a young man whom I had taught at Lenoir-Rhyne came in to say hello. He had gone from L-R to seminary, so I asked him how his progress was going. He replied that he had dropped out of seminary—his grades, he said, were not so good—and that now he was a member of Lutherans Concerned. "That's nice," I replied, uninformed altogether as to the movement. "I don't think you understand," he said. And he told me the mission of Lutherans Concerned. "Oh," I said. And thus my introduction to the movement. My ignorance up to that point was less my own scholarly neglect than the "under-the-radar" character of what was going on.
4. My journey within the ELCA misadventures in sexuality began in 1989 after the initial sexuality task force "discovered" at its first gathering that it did not have in its number a "conserving voice." Word went out to the bishops of this oversight, and North Carolina Synod Bishop Michael McDaniel of sainted memory nominated me. I was thus seated on that task force as a "conserving voice," along with Professor Eric Gritsch, then of Gettysburg Seminary. At the time I found the designation a bit puzzling, as I considered myself rather more "moderate" than "conservative," by the definitions of those days. But I accepted the appointment as part of service to the "wider church."
5. The January 1990 meeting of the first Human Sexuality Task Force was held in Chicago, in a former monastery, of all places. Each participant was invited to prepare a paper, in advance, to address the topic. The one that was read aloud in the first session was by Pastor Joy Bussert, then a graduate student in social ethics at the University of Minnesota, more recently an associate pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in St. Paul. Pastor Bussert argued that human sexual relations ought to be assessed—measured, evaluated—by "quality rather than by kind." In the discussion, I responded that I had no quarrel with "quality" as to "loving, caring, committed, and just." But there are some "kinds" of human sexual relations that are simply out of bounds as to the Christian faith: adultery, incest, pedophilia, and bestiality ... to name a few (but not to name the sort she wanted to include). She acknowledged the exclusions, but insisted on "quality over kind" in her assessment.

6. At the refreshment break, another member of the Task Force, a staff person with the ELCA Commission on Women, came to me and said, “we need to talk.” I said ok...so we agreed to talk at supper. We sat opposite each other in the cellar of the monastery, talking first about what we had in common: both of us had sons who had played Little League baseball the previous summer. Then she asked, “Where do we begin.” I figured I’d aim high and straight: “Give me faithfulness in marriage and chastity outside marriage.” Which I understood to be the biblical norm. She replied, “I consider marriage a patriarchal invention of power designed to subjugate women.” To which I responded, “I could just as easily argue that marriage is an invention of women, designed to curb the male libido by exchanging access for exclusivity. But I’d be just as wrong with my George Bernard Shaw as you are with your Karl Marx. ... As a matter of both fact and faith, the Holy Scriptures declare marriage to be an holy estate, ordained of God, to be held in honor by all. And it becomes those who enter therein to weigh with reverent minds what the Word of God teaches concerning it. The Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him an helper fit for him. ... For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife. And they shall become one flesh. Wherefore they are no more twain but one flesh.’ What God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” The conversation ended there.
7. Two footnotes to that first Task Force ... First footnote: the final draft came by mail, to be “signed” by members of the Task Force by consultation over the phone. The chair, Karen Bloomquist, called me to affirm my signature. I said that I could not sign it, given the content. “OK,” she replied, “we’ll leave your name off”. To which I responded, “No, you won’t. You will say that I dissented.” I got lots of calls and letters on that account—no e-mail in those days—thanking me for being the lone member who refused to sign.
8. Second footnote: at a subsequent (final) meeting of the task force, convened by Bishop Chilstrom at Higgins Road a year after the study was first released in final draft, the Bishop thanked the members for their efforts, despite the negative reception by the ELCA parishes and members. It was, he said, his own conviction that recognition for gay and lesbian relationships should be granted by the church. To which Anita Hill, a task force member from St. Paul, stood up and, trembling with emotion, retorted: “Sir, I would that you had the courage of your convictions.” Bishop Chilstrom replied with level gaze, “I will not split this church.”
9. The August ’09 Minneapolis ELCA assembly was not of such mind, with a different bishop and a different perspective. Bishop Hanson, in a September 23rd letter to ELCA pastors in the wake of the assembly, reflects no recognition or concern that what was voted is contrary to the plain teaching of the scriptures, and to the teaching and practice of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church across two millennia. The ELCA vote in fact reflects a willingness to ignore or dispute the scriptures as to the status of homosexual relationships and behavior among members in the church. Though the founding documents of the ELCA invoke the Holy Scriptures as norm and rule for faith and life, and embrace the authority and content of the Lutheran Confessions, the Minneapolis vote reflects more prominently the moral climate of post-modern autonomian man.¹

¹ Wrote the presiding bishop (09.23.09) to ELCA pastors in the wake of the assembly:

Dear Colleague in Ministry,

I give thanks to God for your faithful leadership and your committed partnership in the gospel. I am mindful of the varied responses to churchwide assembly actions on human sexuality -- joy, anger, hope, confusion, ambivalence, perhaps even detachment. In this letter please join me in reflecting on our witness together as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, particularly as we continue to live into the implications of assembly actions.

I am encouraged by the thoughtful and prayerful conversations of people with diverse perspectives who are gathering to discern what the assembly actions regarding human sexuality mean for our continuing life and witness.

The State of Contemporary Humanity: Homo Autonomous

10. November 22 is the Sunday of Christ the King ... one might well on this occasion reflect on the meaning of both the Sunday and the title.The distance between Dante (+1321) toward the end of the Medieval period, and Machiavelli (+1527) in the middle of the Renaissance is two centuries and several light years, the former measured in time and the latter in philosophical difference. For Dante, what counts is the reign of Christ eternally. The pilgrimage of life is informed negatively by agonies of the inferno, positively by beatific vision – the former to be avoided in terror, the latter passionately sought. For Machiavelli, the political is the proper arena for allegiance, with the eternal deferred, the reign of Christ put aside in pursuit of power according to an accurate-if-cynical understanding of human nature. If the prince is cunning, even cruel, his actions are in the proper service of power. The kingdom of this world is the kingdom that counts. Leave to God the affairs of God.
11. The allegiance of post-modern man is neither to God nor to the state, but to himself. Some trace this to Luther, with his stand at Worms, unwilling and unable to concede to church or empire any recanting of his views, God help him. It is the individual who decides whether to submit to the authority of the state and the church in matters of conscience and faith. The political and the ecclesial alike come under the scrutiny and judgment of the reflecting and asserting individual. If Luther is responsible for this framing of individual autonomy, it is a charge more serious than that of his later anti-Semitism giving aid and comfort to Hitler. But Luther's bound conscience is *captive to the Word of God*; in his freedom he is subject to no man, but at the same time he is responsible servant to all. Luther's liberation is not from *Christus Rex* but for and by Christ the King. Luther's respect for the state is as the left hand of God, ordained for civil order. Luther was a theological revolutionary but a political conservative. He consistently rejected, even railed against, political appropriation of his newly asserted freedom, rediscovered in the writing of Paul.
12. Others trace the problem of individual autonomy to Jefferson and his co-signatories, denying both divine right and inherited privilege to kings and emperors. Government, they insisted, in their innovation of the grand American experiment, "derives its just authority from the consent of the governed." Governments are both the creation and concession of the people, rather than an institution by divine mandate to the legacy of kings. Russell Hittinger observes that it was only a small move to shift the conferral of "just authority to govern us" from the political to the theological: we will concede to God only what we deem appropriate. *We* will determine the content of right and wrong, rather than be governed by the intrinsic divine authority of God.

My heart rejoices with those who are ready to live into the future of our shared mission. Many who had remained strongly engaged in the ELCA with their time, talent and treasure, despite feeling marginalized or unwanted, now feel more fully embraced. My heart aches as I listen to the pain and distress of those who feel confused or even abandoned by others, not only in the decisions of the churchwide assembly but also in the decisions that are being made in congregations and by individuals.

I am disappointed that some are encouraging congregations and members to take actions that will diminish our capacity for ministry -- for example, to plant and renew congregations, to raise up and train leaders in seminaries and campus ministries, to send missionaries, to respond to hunger at home and abroad, and to rebuild communities after natural disasters.

Although these actions are promoted as a way to signal opposition to churchwide assembly actions or even to punish the voting members who made them, the result will be wounds that we inflict on ourselves, our shared life, and our mission in Christ. And yet, as devastating as such actions could be for our shared life and for our global and ecumenical partners, my greatest sadness would be if we missed this opportunity: to give an evangelical ... witness together to the world. ...

Bishop Mark Hanson

13. The shift in allegiance from submission to divine authority toward Hittinger's "uncommanded man"¹ may have been a small move, but it was some time coming, after Jefferson. For him, the endowment of the people with "unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is *by nature and nature's God*. A Deist, Jefferson knew only a humanity "endowed by their creator," not a humanity emergent from primal slime by material cause and evolution only. Jefferson did not acknowledge Christ the King, but neither did he assert *homo autonomus*.

The distance between Luther and Nietzsche, between Jefferson and Derrida, is the disjuncture between freedom and truth, as John Paul II observed.² What has facilitated this move from the theoretical and intellectual to the practical and physical in the popular culture is the influence of the mass media and the various accompanying cultural revolutions. If the invention of the printing press enabled Luther's reformation, the age of instant information has augmented instant gratification and the emancipation of the individual from responsibility either to God or to the state, much less the neighbor. Even parents must now resist – or not – the temptation to pursue life according to their own interests at the expense of their children. They can choose not to have children, even after those children are conceived and gestating.

14. In such a climate of fundamental and radical autonomy, truth is "only perspectival," or primarily a "function of power." Next Sunday's renewed assertion that Christ is King must now sound almost as strange as it did to Pilate, almost as quaint as the sign above the cross. To the faithful it must be proclaimed that we need radically to examine our allegiance. The tyranny of totalitarianism, defeated in the preceding century several times at enormous human cost, is no more a threat than the tyranny of radical autonomy. Both deny the lordship of Jesus Christ. The signers of the Barmen Declaration knew it; they asserted that the church is "solely Christ's property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and from his direction in the expectation of his appearance, rather than under the subordination of the state." The people in our congregations need to hear it, too. If Christ is King, then I am not. It is as simple as that. The Roman Empire could not understand it and thought it, at first, irrelevant – then dangerous. The danger to my personal control of my allegiances is both radical and destructive. But also salvific. As St. Paul so poignantly writes, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:19b-20)

The Minneapolis vote reflects prominently the moral climate and self-assertions of post-modern autonomous man ... rather than the teachings of the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church."

Gravitas

15. The content of the votes has been measured in different levels of gravity by various quarters in the church, from celebration in Goodsoil to affirmation and embrace at Higgins Road. Among those who reject the hegemony of autonomous man the yield is reckoned from "error" as least severe to "apostasy" as the most severe. To judge the yield of the votes as "error" is to argue that the recognition of committed, long-term public gay or lesbian unions, though contrary to the teaching of the scriptures and the church is, at that least level of severity, a circumstance that can be endured in other persons or parishes even if one does not embrace it locally, as person or congregation. On this reading, the ELCA is at that point in error, in its embrace of heterodox teaching and practice. A

¹ Hittinger, who teaches at the University of Tulsa, coined the term and has written extensively concerning the asserted moral autonomy of contemporary man.

² *Veritatis Splendor*

congregation, or a pastor, or a layperson can continue in fellowship and roster, and simply agree to disagree.

16. This view of the ELCA assembly's vote as "in error" does not require a radically "congregational" ecclesiology—at least no more radically congregational than the ELCA rubric that allows congregations to declare their willingness or unwillingness to accept the sort of clergy couple referenced in the vote. In fact, at that level, one can argue that the ELCA vote has *empowered* congregations vis-à-vis synods, if not vis-à-vis Higgins Road. That is, Higgins Road holds the policy cards, and will see to it that the "implementing resolutions" permeate the entire church structure. And congregations have the power to reject the vote locally, as to the clergy they will accept—as well as to the degree they remain tied to the ELCA in terms of offerings, curricula, bulletins, programs, beneficiaries ... the option to accept or reject gay or lesbian clergy at the congregational level has empowered congregations, *in principle*, in multiples of other dimensions. And, to that degree, synods (and bishops) become much less relevant.
17. There is about the vote and the policy a reckoning more severe: that the ELCA is, at that point, in heresy, though some disagree. Witness this view, from Pastor Richard Johnson, editor of *Forum Letter*: "Some (have gone) so far as to accuse the ELCA of heresy—a bit over the top, seems to me. Heresy generally involves a specific and overt repudiation of some key doctrine of Christian faith. What the ELCA has done is serious error, to be sure, but I don't think it rises to the status of heresy."¹
18. But what has occurred is an overt challenge to—and alteration of—the content of the Sixth Commandment. Presupposed in the sixth is that "marriage is an holy estate, ordained of God and to be held in honor by those who enter therein." Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning made them male and female and said, 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife. And they twain shall become one flesh. Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh.' What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." Both the "ordained of God" and the "male and female" are normative as to marriage. Adultery consists in sundry violations—actions, thoughts, imaginings, arrangements—of the normative conditions for the exercise of human sexuality: Violations apart from marriage (i.e., by those not married). Against marriage (overt adultery). Other than marriage (something not male and female). God made us male and female, and ordained marriage for the purpose of bringing forth and nurturing children, for love and companionship, and for lifelong fidelity.
19. Thus what precisely occurred in the Minneapolis vote is a direct challenge to both the content and authority of the Sixth Commandment. But more than that, the vote, in challenging the content and authority of the Sixth Commandment, challenges also, and more significantly, the *first commandment*. That is, it challenges *the authority of God to make any commandments whatsoever*. I argue that such a challenge is an "overt repudiation of ... (a) key doctrine of the Christian faith." To challenge the authority of God gets at the source of the matter.
20. There is more. The Minneapolis vote regarding gay and lesbian clergy assaults all three articles of the Apostles Creed. It challenges what constitutes—and belongs in—God's good creation. At no point do the Holy Scriptures acknowledge (much less assert) that homosexual relations reside in Genesis chapters 1 & 2. The debate is precisely that fundamental: that homosexual *behavior* or *relations* are part and parcel of Genesis 3 and beyond. In the Minneapolis vote, the first article of the creed is challenged by expansion ... as to what constitutes God's good creation.

¹ *Forum Letter*, Volume 38, Number 11 November 2009, p. 2

21. And likewise the second article vis-à-vis the redemption resident in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. If homosexual relationships are part and parcel of life in Christ, then no repentance is needed for the relationship, *per se* ... only for sins otherwise committed in it, or during it, or before it, or after it. What the church has previously taught, based on the teaching of the Holy Scripture, is that the church does not bless, or accept, that kind of relationship. One does not need to repent of marriage ... only for sins he or she commits within the marriage, or apart from the marriage. For marriage is an holy estate, ordained of God. The Minneapolis move incorporates into the “God blessed” category a relationship not acceptable to Holy Scripture—and introduces a relationship that does not immediately, in itself, require repentance and amendment of life.
22. And again the third article, like unto the second: how one lives his or her life in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church is now expanded to include a category of intimate human relationship universally scorned by Holy Scripture in all its manifestations.
23. So on this read, the Minneapolis vote challenges specifically the content of the Sixth Commandment and, moreover, the First Commandment—the authority of God to command in such fashion whatsoever ... as well as all three articles of the creed as to creation, redemption, and sanctification. That’s not simply heresy (specific and overt repudiation of some key doctrine). The cumulative rejection of Creed and Commandments amounts to apostasy...an overt repudiation of the faith, while still claiming allegiance to the faith, believing that the innovation is itself consistent with the received faith. Such is the *gravitas* of the situation.

Congregations and the Way Forward

24. What to do? Pray. Pray without ceasing. Pray for those whose faith is shaken by this perfidy. Pray for those who are convinced that the innovations are God’s will for the Church. Pray for those who are in discernment about what to do.
25. There are various avenues on the way forward. I grew up in Daniel’s Lutheran Church, organized in 1774, and now serve Grace Lutheran Church, organized in 1797. Daniel’s and Grace were until 1952 together as a two-church parish. Both congregations were members of the Tennessee Synod, a confessional synod organized by the Henkel family and others in response to an early 19th century movement that advocated a “general Protestantism,” an amalgamation of denominations that would have required the Lutherans to shed the Confessions and much of the liturgy, as well as, for the most part, also the creeds. This was a kind of post-American revolution “Americanized *sola scriptura*” that wanted to repristiniate the religion of the American eastern frontier at the expense of, in our case, *Lutheran* identity. Dr. Samuel Simon Schmucker, a professor at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, is credited with the emphasis, if not absolutely the generation, of what amounted to an anti-confessional movement.
26. Confessional faithfulness arose against the pan-protestant amalgamation, in an overtly self-conscious *confessional* response that locally went by the name of the Tennessee Synod, though most of the parishes were in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia. I presently work at Lenoir-Rhyne, which was founded by Tennessee Synod pastors in 1891, and declared, in its charter with the state of North Carolina, “that the college will teach the scriptures and the Lutheran confessions, *even if the synod* (i.e., the North Carolina Synod) *does not*. [Since the college was in 2008 re-chartered as a university, I suspect that the supra-confessional language has disappeared, if only for reasons of “political correctness.”].

27. However, *in principle*, what is afoot with the CORE “free synod,” in conversation with WordAlone, is of a piece with that kind of response to a confessional challenge to the faith. More precisely, and akin to the Tennessee Synod, is the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Texas, established in 1851 and re-established in 2009, since the August Minneapolis Assembly.
28. For congregations, the circumstance is more local, and more attuned to local circumstances. Four or five models have already emerged, by example. First are the congregations who have voted to leave...for former ALC parishes, such a vote is twice by 2/3 majority in the affirmative, with at least 90 days and consultation with the bishop in between. For former LCA parishes, such a vote is twice by 2/3, with at least a 90-day interval and consultation with bishop, and then approval by the synod council. Many congregations are in a process of discernment and “watching and waiting” in this regard. Others, including the church I serve, have voted to join the Lutheran CORE “free” synod to extend a period of discernment and await the emergence of a new direction for Lutheranism in North America. Still others have voted locally “no” to being willing to call gay or lesbian pastors who are in committed, long-term, public relationships. Many parishes, in various stages of discernment, have voted to re-direct offerings to Lutheran CORE, or WordAlone, or directly to ELCA institutions of caring, education, missions or mercy...but not to synods and, especially, not to Higgins Road.
29. Some parishes are now embroiled (or paralyzed) in conflict, either between or among various factions within the parish, or between parish and pastor(s). The fracture lines are almost idiosyncratic as to individual parishes.
30. Grace Lutheran Church in Newton, North Carolina, where I serve, voted unanimously on Sunday, November 8, the following:
- The Grace Lutheran Church Council unanimously recommends that the congregation consider and adopt the following actions for Grace Lutheran Church (in addition to adopting the 2010 budget):
- Join the New Free Synod created by the Lutheran CORE organizational gathering.
 - Remain for the time being in the North Carolina Synod of the ELCA, while continuing in a process of discernment with joint membership in the Lutheran CORE Free Synod.
 - Redirect benevolence offerings from the North Carolina Synod to Lutheran CORE and other recipients to be considered by the Council (for instance, North Carolina Lutheran CORE, greater amounts to local benevolence).
 - Continue to use educational materials from Concordia Press (and materials that are now being begun by Lutheran CORE and WordAlone).
31. We are indeed all in a period and process of discernment, not only as to the *gravitas* of what the ELCA voted and endorsed, but also as to what to do about it. What I am waiting to see is something that I do not expect to see: a bishop and synod council in one or more of the sixty-couple ELCA synods call a special session—*ad interim*—synod assembly, for the purpose of considering—and by vote formally disavowing or rejecting—the ELCA vote regarding homosexual clergy in “committed, public, long-term relationships.” That would show some genuine episcopal leadership, which has thus far been in the radically short supply.
32. p.s. ... Of course, the immediate response to any such suggestion is that a synodical vote would be unconstitutional. In reality, the votes at the assembly in August were “unconstitutional” in that they, in effect, abrogated chapter 2 of the ELCA constitution, the chapter entitled “Confession of Faith.”