

Commentary regarding Dr. Paul Hinlicky's attack on the LSTC faculty

By Kurt Johnson, SR

July 13, 2009

PART ONE – BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

During the period of June 25 through July 8, a five-part series written by Dr. Paul Hinlicky¹ was posted on Lutheran Forum (www.lutheranforum.org) under the title, *Critique of the new LSTC² faculty statement*. That faculty statement³ addresses and supports two recommendations about human sexuality which are to be considered at the 2009 biennial assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) scheduled for the third week in August in Minneapolis, Minnesota. As a generalization, the ELCA recommendations seek to establish tolerance for the presence of gays and lesbians within the ELCA's *communio sanctorum* (including rostered clergy) who live Christian and spiritually uplifting lives (as do other members of congregations belonging to the church body), within the context of the premise of monogamous, same-sex relationships.

PART TWO – ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kurt Johnson, Sr. (M.Div – 1969): I am a retired Lutheran pastor and a graduate of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. I am active as a writer and business consultant, and I am a professional lobbyist for morally-based, public initiatives. I also am involved in the congregational and institutional life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. My most recent publication is *Glass Walls* (June 2009), a book

1 Dr. Hinlicky is the TISE Professor of Lutheran Studies at Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia

2 Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

3 The statement can be found at www.lstc.edu on the right side of the main page

which analyzes how policy decisions by government and other institutions can be misguided by social, cultural and religious influences within a textbook case setting, with a particular focus on so-called “public-square religion” and related neoconservative propositions.⁴

My wife, Shirley, and I reside in Austin, Texas and are members of St. Martin's Lutheran Church (ELCA).

PART THREE – INTRODUCTION

When I initially read Hinlicky's five-part series in *Lutheran Forum* online, I was taken aback by the pejorative and judgmental nature of his characterizations of the members of the LSTC faculty who signed the statement which he analyzes. In his first paragraph, and in referencing a previous statement he made on the subject, he wrote: “I asserted that this is a truly sad attempt at alleging fidelity to the scriptures as understood in the Lutheran Confessions. Sad, because if what they write is sincere, these teachers need a crash course in Remedial Lutheran Theology”

A few paragraphs later, he characterizes the LSTC faculty's statement as being “as intellectually vapid as it is dishonest” and “religiously deceptive.” A few paragraphs later, he calls the statement a “simplistic progressivist narrative” and then goes on to say that the statement never puts forth “on what grounds the gospel traduces⁵ itself first and foremost as canonical Scripture.” In the final paragraph of *Part Five*, he writes: “I call the signatories of the LSTC statement to repentance, and if they will not publicly repent, I demand for the sake of their own honor, if not for the sake of the people of God who are denied a genuine debate, an answer to the criticisms I have made on these blog posts.”

The LSTC statement signers are not the only group encountering the pejorative language. Hinlicky calls the recommendations made by the ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality a “cowardly dodge.”

4 Additional information about *Glass Walls* is available at www.kurtjohnsonbooks.com.

5 *Merriam-Webster Online* defines “traduce” as “to expose to shame or blame by means of falsehood and misrepresentation.”

Surprisingly, these gritty characterizations are at odds with the *Writers' Guidelines* which are set forth on the *Lutheran Forum* website. The fourth point in those *Guidelines* states that articles “will not contain pot-shots, thinly veiled contempt, messy thinking, reductio and ad absurdum attacks, ad hominem attacks, knock-down arguments, suggestions that one's opponent is not Christian/Lutheran/human, etc., or liberal use of the word 'obviously.' All of these indicate poor thinking and greater delight in the defeat of one's enemies than in the triumph of the truth.”

I'm not passing judgment here myself, but I can relate the clear language of this point's meaning to Hinlicky's five-part article. The reader can draw his or her own conclusion because the evidence speaks for itself.

I don't know why Hinlicky feels like he has the license to invoke this aggressive style and language against other Lutheran academics and pastors who have integrity and credibility in their own right. Obviously a great deal of emotion and enthusiasm accompany his theological reflection, but there remains the unanswered question regarding why *Lutheran Forum* published the series by including the “pot-shots” and “contempt” references in violation of the *Guidelines*. It might be that Hinlicky, as a former editor of *Lutheran Forum*, somehow has acquired the license to violate the *Guidelines*, or at least believes he has. It might be related to the fact that the current editor has Hinlicky as her middle name, though there may be no relationship there at all. (That research is beyond the scope of this article.) Or, it might be related to the fact that *Lutheran Forum*, the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau (its umbrella organization), Lutheran Core and or Word Alone, and/or others with similar views have sufficient cross connections within their collective coterie to justify drawing a bright line between these two, distinct points-of-view about human sexuality, moving the ELCA even closer to a fish-or-cut-bait scenario.

Nonetheless, despite his own pejorative language, Hinlicky shows that he doesn't have a great deal of durability involving criticism when the shoe starts moving to the other foot. In response to Hinlicky's *Part Two*, Dr. Kurt K. Hendel, the Bernard Fisher, Westberg Distinguished Ministry Professor of Reformation History at LSTC wrote: “You (Hinlicky) obviously have the right to argue your theological perspectives.

However, basic honesty, respect for the integrity of sisters and brothers in Christ, love for the church and, above all, faithfulness to God's dialectical word of law and gospel should dissuade you from intentionally and polemically misinterpreting the theology and objectives of sisters and brothers who strive to be faithful to the same message of judgment and of grace and freedom in Christ that you seek to proclaim.”

In response, Hinlicky wrote to Hendel, “You are quick to defend your own honor by impugning mine, yet slow to defend the actual text that you and your colleagues produced and signed.”

Clearly, Hinlicky doesn't want to even pause in the process of getting at the meat of the argument by dealing with the gritty, adversarial and “pot-shot” references. This fact is obvious at the same time that this process itself will get at the meat of the argument soon enough.

The specific targeting of the LSTC faculty's statement-signers is further illustrated by the gauntlet Hinlicky threw down at the end of *Part Five* and his response to me when he became aware that I was writing this article on the subject. After I posted a comment at the end of *Part Five* indicating my intention, Hinlicky wrote back: “I will be happy to read what you write, but as, so far as I can see, you are neither a signatory of the LSTC faculty statement, nor a faculty member of that institution, whatever you write is not the 'response which Hinlicky seeks...’”

This statement is code: Hinlicky is going after the LSTC faculty's statement signers for some purpose beyond engaging the detailed merits of this debate at a granular level. I never suggested that I could or would speak for the LSTC faculty. But as one who supports the statement which many of them signed, and as one qualified to write about the subject, I was viewed by Hinlicky as potentially clouding the waters within which he has a laser-beam focus for holding those faculty members accountable: either they need to repent *or* explain themselves, and no one else should get in the way.

And so, something in this matter has become personal for Hinlicky rather than issue-centered. It's unclear from his writings how he arrived at that point. My own view is that he is so utterly convinced that he is right regarding scripture and Lutheran tradition on this subject that he believes others who have stated a commitment oath to

that scripture and tradition are among the damned if they disagree (with Hinlicky) without repenting and effecting a course-correction in their thinking, and he's personally offended by that. That's the reason why he is salivating over the prospect of a continuing debate, and it really nags at him that his distinguished peers in theological academia would assert a viewpoint which sides with an interpretation of that same scripture and Lutheran tradition in such a way that it supports the two recommendations to the ELCA biennial assembly—recommendations which he believes promote apostate policies which have no place in the *communio sanctorum*.

And so we now have reached the meat of the matter regarding what is driving Hinlicky's (and others') high-octane energy in this debate which isn't open to a compromise involving highly complex subject matter. Homosexuality in ecclesiastical structures is a highly-charged issue which sucks much of the oxygen out of any effort to have a meeting of the minds.

One of the significant elements in this issue which Hinlicky is overlooking is that key principle of the Lutheran Reformation known as “the priesthood of all believers.” It is up to the members of the LSTC faculty who signed the statement--and not Hinlicky--as to whether or not they should repent or should feel the need to repent. Obviously, the filter for that decision involves the manner in which one views scripture and Lutheran tradition, but therein is the rub. Though Hinlicky and those of us who disagree with him are using the same referential documents, our respective views differ. And every person on all sides of this debate has the right to hold and promulgate personal views within the venue of discussion without the backlash of personal invective. Whether a member of the LSTC faculty or not, I'll say what I want and repent when I'm ready, but I won't judge others' need for repentance on matters of conscience where such substantial subjectivity is involved.

The problem is that Hinlicky and those who agree with him won't budge from their belief that on some points (such as homosexuality), insisting that scripture and Lutheran tradition are so clear that all alternative views (other than theirs) should be discarded. This principle regarding who has the authority to speak for the faith is at the heart of this entire problem involving the homosexuality debate. I agree that the

detailed ingredients for arriving at thoughtful conclusions about this matter should be discussed and debated vigorously, so the doors should be left open for reasonable give-and-take without the rancor.

Unfortunately, minds and doors are sometimes closed before and during what should be the real debate. For example, after I announced in a *Lutheran Forum* post that I intended to write this article in response to Hinlicky's five-part series, Dr. Jack Kilcrease, who teaches theology at Marquette University, posted this response: “ ... I must defend him (Hinlicky) in regard to his skepticism about your response. In light your party (sic) within the ELCA's previous response to those who uphold confessional and biblical standards of practice and teaching, it is highly unlikely that you will not simply present more of the same arguments that both I and Dr. Hinlicky find implausible.”

How's that for closing the door and making assumptions before my involvement in the conversation even has begun? Does Kilcrease's viewpoint suggest a closed mind from the beginning, or does it not? I had never heard of him before his post to me, but I found interesting (using the magic of the Internet) to read what one student at Marquette posted about him.⁶

There will be more about Kilcrease in a later section of this article when we get to the subject of the components which really drive this debate.

PART FOUR – SOURCE AUTHORITY AND THE FREEDOM TO THINK

The very center of this debate should focus on the authorities which are at the center of the analysis—Lutheran tradition, the confessions, and scripture. Surely Hinlicky and his like-minded colleagues in their coterie should agree with that.

Take the confessional documents, for example. The coterie more or less insists that the understanding is literal, and that there are no fungible components, even for those who use the freedom of thought⁷ made possible by God's gifts of individual

⁶ <http://www.ratemyprofessors.com/ShowRatings.jsp?tid=1226048>

⁷ One uncredited statement on this subject posits that: “People use the freedom of religion, which they enjoy, in order to neutralize the freedom of thought, which they avoid.” It may have been Mark Twain.

human intelligence and insight. So, if we are to have this unflinching and uncritical allegiance to the confessional documents with regard, for example, to a Hinlicky-supported understanding of how homosexuality is to be treated within the *ecclesia* and the *communio sanctorum*, then what do we do about the credal and confessional exceptions? For example, are the confessed statements about Jesus being born of a virgin understood as statements of physical historicity, or are they subject to interpretation? If they are not subject to any kind of interpretation, and if they have to be believed as historical, physical facts as a literal, mandatory component for faith and salvation, then the coterie will have marginalized itself beyond its ability to recover simply by virtue of the God-given, cerebral sophistication of the faithful in the pew, including me. We are not robots. We know how to think reasonably. We understand the difference between the symbolic and the physical and the difference between the literal and the metaphorical. Did those who constructed the creeds have better information than we do regarding these distinctions? Conversely, we actually have better information available to us now, and we are able to make faithful sense out of our greater body of knowledge without kicking dirt into the face of confessional faith.

Nonetheless, if there are exceptions to the literalism involving any single issue, then there can be exceptions to literalism involving all issues. Unlike the Catholic church, past and present, confessional Lutheranism does not believe that the church can make pronouncements which are on an equal plane with scripture referable to revelation. Better understandings are not clear-cut amid changing conditions, but those are the cards which we have been dealt. Finding reasonable answers which preserve faith is hard work, and the work can't be bridled by the autocratic faith mandates of those in the coterie who want to replace that hard work with easy, in-place answers.

Martin Luther was contemporaneous with the Renaissance, so he was more enlightened than the theological pundits of the Middle Ages, but if we are going to respect him as an authority, we must see the complete Luther and let our effective filters sift his brilliant contributions from his not-so-brilliant contributions. And if we must engage this sifting referable to any single component of his brilliance, then we must sift all the components.

For example, would anyone in the conservative coterie agree with Luther's point of view involving the peasants in the context of the Peasants' War? Or would any in the coterie agree with Luther's viewpoint and advice involving the Jews and the burning of their synagogues? No, typically, faithful Lutherans who want to preserve respect for Lutheranism don't do that. We avoid the information, for the most part. We don't want to hear the part where Luther said that the synagogues should be burned down. Is there anyone, other than a member of the Flat Earth Society, who would agree with Luther's insistence (in Table Talk) that the solar system is not heliocentric? He was not a scientist, and this pronouncement he made regarding science was dead wrong, and yet science plays an important role within this debate about these homosexuality issues within the ELCA. Is there any better argument for the fact that everything he said must be screened in light of what we know now as opposed to what he knew in the 16th Century, especially in light of the current dilemma involving science and homosexual behavior?

The importance of the scriptural component for faith is actually more important than either Lutheran tradition or confessionalism (if one is to believe Luther – *sola scriptura*.) And yet, for those whose faith is viewed through the lens used by those in the conservative coterie, there is a lesser amount of interpretation and a greater amount of literalism.

But any affinity for literalism must be viewed in context. What is the filter for determining just how meaningful faith is delivered based on how *sola scriptura* actually works? As Hinlicky states in his *Part One*: “The dispute in which we are involved is about the gospel.”

And so, what is the meaningful center of the gospel, according to the coterie, as distinguished from some other understanding of the meaningful center? Hinlicky explains it, at least from the coterie's point of view: “When Christ as example (*exemplum*) is theologically elevated over Christ as gift of our salvation before God (*sacramentum*), even the example of Christ's love is misunderstood. So also then are its implications for the life of the church. Here the radical love of Christ does not mean, as it does Luther, the 'love of the cross, born of the cross, which does not seek a good to

enjoy, but a good to confer on a bad or needy person.' Instead, in this theology, the 'marginalized' are precisely *not* bad or needy persons. Rather, they are the victims of bigotry. Their only need (is) to be freed from their devaluation by others. Inclusivism becomes the operative ecclesiology-missiology. Not repentance and faith.⁸ Not the new life of obedience.⁹ Not the new life of obedience.¹⁰ Not reconciliation by the body and blood of Christ, proclaiming His death until He comes again."¹¹

What the coterie attempts to accomplish through this argument is to claim that the signatories of the LSTC faculty statement (and those with whom they are aligned) have to make mutually-exclusive choices among primary elements of Lutheranism's benefits—in this case, the salvific dimension versus the dimension of earthly justice. The proposition is a red herring, a straw man, and a false predicate. These values do not compete with each other—unless, of course, one wants to take the position that homosexual behavior in a committed, monogamous relationship in which the two participants are committed Christians and true believers in the salvation of the cross and the sacraments are damned to oblivion unless they ask for forgiveness and cease to have that relationship. Based on everything those in the coterie aver, this specific point is the essence of that perspective. Laying the truth bare in this way reveals the essential elements of this complex controversy. It's not a premise that's easy for anyone in the coterie to admit, but it is there, and there's no denying it.

And so, the defense of homosexual rights or ethnic rights or gender rights or economic rights or political rights or environmental rights is not a mutually exclusive ingredient separated from salvific Lutheranism. But that's the way the coterie wants to cast the debate. Such a premise isn't true, and it doesn't work when viewed objectively. I have acquaintances who are gay and lesbian and who live in monogamous, committed relationships (one a Lutheran pastor), and none of these Lutherans would take the position that their minority rights are mutually exclusive from salvific Lutheranism—that one must choose one or the other but cannot choose both.

8 Sentence fragment.

9 Sentence fragment.

10 Sentence fragment.

11 Sentence fragment.

Nonetheless, the view of the coterie appears to be that the justice sought for this homosexual minority is too high a price to pay. Referencing the notion of homosexual rights, Kilcrease wrote to me in a post: “ ... I do not think that it is the 'civil rights movement of our time.' Neither do I think that Christians will remember it that way in 100 years. Also, the backbone of the denomination [people who go to rural Churches (sic) in small town mid-western states] (sic)] are being alienated by this. They are being alientating (sic) merely because a select interest group is demanding public recognition. This will make them push for a break up in the denomination.”

So, according to Kilcrease, these practical, efficient ends displace whatever else we might find as useful in the gospel regarding justice. In his next paragraph he states, “This is something I've never understood about most Christian denomination (sic) in the US (sic). Why not just stick to doing the work of the gospel? Just fund the seminaries, fund foreign missions and call it good! Why all these absurd crusades which only lead to trouble, division and a lot of intellectual gymnastics, just to abandon the historic Christian position on any number of issues. (sic) In the end, you just make a big mess and undermine the Church's (sic) mission.”

It's hard to argue with that kind of theologically-shallow logic when the major issues of hermeneutics and epistemology are left out of the discussion. One wonders what someone like—say—Dietrich Bonhoeffer might think about it.

When dealing with the heart of the authoritative question, namely *sola scriptura*, Hinlicky proposes his answer: “The deeper problem, however, is that the LSTC statement regards overcoming certain ideological abuses of Scripture as the fundamental theological task, when it never tells us why and on what grounds the gospel traduces itself first and foremost as canonical Scripture. How can anyone discern abuse apart from a prior account of right use? The result of this superficial procedure is that abstract ideas like grace or liberation functionally replace authoritative texts as the material of theology; pre-eminently, the notion of grace as sheer acceptance or radical welcome replaces the historical, biblical Christ whom we meet in the Bible.”

All of this sounds pretty good at first, but the first sign of trouble is that Hinlicky doesn't tell us how to discern the “authoritative texts” from the non-authoritative texts.

If his answer to this problem of distinction is that the Augsburg Confession and other Lutheran confessional documents emphasize some texts over others, then doesn't that argument violate the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers, in that the individual and not the church has the priority with regard to determining what scripture really means? Is some clear-cut formula available for separating authoritative texts from non-authoritative ones? Inasmuch as Luther didn't care all that much for the books of *James* and *Revelation*, should we read these portions of scripture in a different light than, say, the Sermon on the Mount? If so, how do we decide to give weight to the difference? Given the fact that this problem opens the door to subjectivity referable to the interpretation of texts, does the problem impact some of these critical texts cited by the coterie in these arguments involving homosexuality, ecclesiology, and the proposed statements on sexuality which will be objects of votes in Minneapolis in August?

You can bet it does! So, how do we deal with it?

We have to work at it.

Those of us who can read the biblical languages have a head start, but everyone can participate in the process. One becomes more enlightened about proof-texting (and the point is especially true for the laity) when digesting a higher-level understanding regarding just how the canon was sewn together and what pieces were used. And one does not step outside the box of credibility when getting to that level of understanding by using the research and insights provided by contributors such as Bart Ehrman,¹² who provides not only a credible and scholastic insight but also a reasonable explanation which can be understood by laity and appreciated by academics.

This mastering of our sources, if we have the courage to engage it objectively, is the first step out of the controversy the ELCA and other mainstream Protestant denominations now face.

The second step is equally crucial and involves the courage to face up to the facts regarding the historical details involved in how scripture was assembled and the manner in which those contents were processed. Based on the input already received, it appears that some representatives of the coterie, if not the coterie itself, have abdicated

¹² Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

from the discussion. Here's the message Kilcrease sent to me in a July 10 post on *Lutheran Forum*:

Being close minded (sic) is actually (a) rather different thing than being experienced. For example, I would not be close minded (sic) if I hung up on a telemarketer without listening to what they are selling. In your case I will actually listen to what you have to say, but I have experience and am certain I know what will be said already. Similarly, I do not even believe that the subject of the morality of homosexual practice is worth debating in the Christian Church. The moment God spoke and said "let us make them male and female"¹³ and "for this reason a man shall leave his mother and father..."¹⁴ the issue was settled.

I agree totally with Hinlicky--the discussion is over. We're not really talking anymore and really just waiting to see how the denomination is going to enforce a decision they made a long time ago without any logic to it. I have literally never heard an even remotely convincing argument in favor of it. I will read your piece, but I suspect it will be more of the same.

Anyone who is “certain what will be said” in the future, though presumptuous, is a step ahead of the starter's gun, but he may be headed in the wrong direction. My position is that more dialogue is needed. For example, with regard to these recorded statements which, according to Kilcrease, resulted from God speaking, a number of questions ensue and should be part of further discussion.

How did God approach the scribe who wrote down the Genesis quotes? Did a cloud open and the voice emerge? Did the words come from a burning bush? And after the initial composition was finished by the scribe and it subsequently was edited by redactors, eventually culminating in the Masoretic text, was any thought given to how this matter folded into the homosexual issue under consideration as it would be addressed by ELCA Lutherans in a subsequent millenium? Is the theological genius of the verses found in the fact that the statements yield a Hebrew view of the importance of procreation to build a population, and that God was responsible for that emphasis? Do the verses mean to say that sex is only important as relating to procreation, and if

13 Kilcrease's apparent reference is to Genesis 1:26-27.

14 Inasmuch as Kilcrease attributes the statement to God, the reference seems to be Genesis 2:24 rather than any of the New Testament variations.

not so limited, then how do we know that sex within a committed, loving relationship is precluded?

In the above paragraph, I'm not trying to be trite or cute. The questions raise a major issue. For texts which those in the coterie call "authoritative", what is the basis in epistemology for making that call? One might argue that, in addition to the "plain sense" related to the reading of the text, we have some 20 centuries of ecclesiastical tradition in which substantial vetting has occurred. One would assume that, after such a lengthy assessment, these major issues would have been settled by now. But they haven't been settled, and a primary reason is that our ability to examine these issues, especially through analyses of scripture, is getting better at the same time that the cultural and other contexts change significantly. And, scholars now have more and better texts available to them than were available to any group of predecessor scholars.

Inasmuch as Hinlicky and Kilcrease believe that my position on the several texts in question involving homosexuality would use the very same arguments which already have been posed by others in a variety of place, I won't repeat them, though I will address one specific text in order to illustrate a point. The overall premise declares that in all of these texts, it is clear that the sin relates to exploitation without a commitment to the relationship—a commitment that cuts both ways within the relationship. The texts do not rule out a sexual component to a relationship which is not exploitive. As such, in the instances where the writer of the text has in mind such aberrations as pederasty, pedophilia, prostitution, sado-masochism, promiscuity or some other variation which debases God's creation by virtue of exploitation, then homosexual, non-procreative sex between two competent adults can be exempted from the aberration list if it is consensual within a committed relationship with love at the center of that commitment in the absence of any exploitation.

Paul clearly teaches against homosexual behavior in the context of his day, but it was a day in which it was not evaluated in the context of committed and loving monogamous relationships as part of the societal order.

We also need to remember that Paul exhorted against marriage itself, but he left a loophole which was contingent upon personal circumstances.

A primary, flash-point text for these discussions is Mark 10:2-12, which is invoked by members of the coterie as a reaffirmation (by Jesus) of the male-female basis for existence in Genesis 1:26-27. Here again, the legal, social and cultural template for the institutionalization of such a primary relationship does not assume a homosexual relationship within the matrix as either a positive or a negative. Look at what a mainstream commentary provides for interpretation:

Mark 10:1-12. Wherever Jesus was, the people flocked after him in crowds, and he taught them. Here he shows that the reason why Moses' law allowed divorce was that they ought not to use the permission; it was only for the hardness of their hearts. God himself joined man and wife together; he has fitted them to be comforts and helps for each other. The bond which God has tied is not to be lightly untied. Let those who are putting away their wives consider what would become of themselves, if God should deal with them in like manner.¹⁵

The verses in Mark 10:10-12 are compelling in this regard, because the basis for the teaching made by Jesus is that the issue is about relationships, not about sex. Regardless of what members of the conservative coterie might offer about this point, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, the editor of *Lutheran Forum*, points out that those with a conservative view involving the ELCA homosexuality question should be consistent. From the *Lutheran Forum* blog (in response to my statement on the subject):

Posted by Sarah Wilson at July 13, 2009 00:07

I have already argued on this site that it is unconscionable for "conservatives" to continue to argue against homosexual ordination as long as they don't also put into effect scriptural teaching regarding divorced pastors. You are quite right about that.

Wilson obviously has concluded that such inconsistencies must be avoided. On the other hand, it then becomes clear that those who would prefer a looser and more tolerant interpretation for rostered pastors (in understanding this text from Mark) then

15 From Matthew Henry's *Concise Commentary*

have an obligation to view in their context the texts involving homosexuality. It is human nature to attempt to work interpretations in order to fit one's personal perspective, as Rev. Samuel Zumwalt has done in these *Lutheran Forum* posts. In the end Wilson is right: Zumwalt and the conservatives in the coterie can't have it both ways. In fact, no one can have it both ways, and that's the real value of a higher-order process for interpreting scripture, no matter whose ox is being gored.

This problem of wanting to bend the rules by utilizing interpretive differences is well-illustrated in the *Lutheran Forum* post offered on this subject:

Posted by RS at July 13, 2009 09:15

Sarah,

I've followed with interest your repeated insistence that scriptural teaching regarding divorced pastors must also be re-enforced for the ELCA's sexual ethics to have any integrity.

One question has always bothered me about the issue of divorced pastors/bishops, and I wonder if you could share your thoughts. It seems to me that divorce is not always a matter of choice on the part of both parties. I know of numerous cases in which a pastor's spouse simply demanded an end to the marriage - no willingness for reconciliation, no "trial separation," just divorce. In several cases, this was very much against the pastor's wishes - as I would put it, divorce was being done TO the pastor and not BY the pastor, even though legally the pastor's name would have to be on the final paperwork.

What about pastors/bishops pursuing effective ministry who divorce, not because they want to, but because their spouses are no longer willing to be married? Is discipline really appropriate in those cases? It seems to me that having a spouse leave you and end a marriage which you held dear is devastating enough without having your ministry opportunities structurally limited as a consequence.

What do you think?

And so, the argument made by RS is that there's more than just the literal content of the text which must be taken into account, a point made in spades by Ehrman¹⁶ in his

16 Ehrman, *op. cit.*

detailed and well-documented discussion regarding the formation, transmission and preservation of texts.

If conservatives in the coterie are going to take a hard-line, intolerant attitude into the discussion involving the ELCA's homosexuality issue, then the same, hard-line, intolerant attitude should be taken with regard to these other texts involving other issues, including Mark 10:2-12.

Hinlicky encounters a similar problem in his response to the ELCA faculty's statement when he takes up the issues of women's rights, the ordination of women, and slavery. One fairly assumes that a coterie conservative's view of these matters would be as scripturally locked as a view of homosexuality, but such is not the case.

According to Hinlicky, "Calling the resultant atomized, individualized condition of women who are now free to act as badly as men ever did 'liberation' is just a lot of theological confusion. It is the needs of the capitalist work force, not directly God's *creatio continua* or the fresh blowings of the spirit, that have pressed Euro-American society toward equal citizenship. As the church in such society we can and must receive such change, but not uncritically, as is habitual in liberal Protestantism. The real issue is always the right kind of change that is to be tested by the written Word of God, rightly interpreted."

Unfortunately, Hinlicky doesn't provide the specific verses which support this view.

And, in a similar methodology of scripture-aversion, the ELCA's policy of ordaining women is contextualized by Hinlicky in his view that the ELCA "and its predecessor bodies never worked through any such theology" but "just bowed down to the imperative of the *Zeitgeist*." Beyond that, his position isn't really clear, but he doesn't speak against the ordination of women at the same time that he doesn't address the view of Paul which seems to speak against it.

Slavery is yet another example of a double-standard. He writes, "On the basis of the Bible, moreover, Christians always knew that both racism and chattel slavery were wrong." But the fact that post-scriptural-era Christians would later come to that conclusion is an obvious proof that the failure of scripture to refute the practice of

slavery was subject to interpretation. Hinlicky tries to appeal to such authorities as John Locke and Thomas Jefferson to “deconstruct” the ELCA faculty's statement, but Locke was a liberal philosopher and not a confessional Christian, and a variety of historical sources point out that Jefferson was regarded as being somewhere between a deist and an atheist. There are no counter-claims to the reports that Jefferson attended church services but did not hold church membership, and he didn't use his office as president for religious or Christian proclamations.

So, attempting to appeal to Locke or Jefferson as a means of affirming an obviously moral anti-slavery position, rather than scripture or the Lutheran confessions is perhaps the best example of how even the coterie needs to view such controversial matters in context inasmuch as not everything can be relegated to a strict-constructionist interpretation that is scripturally-based.

In conclusion, what I have shown in this *Part Four* narrative is that a realistic view of scripture, tradition, the confessions and the historical dynamic cannot be locked in concrete.

Intelligent, free thinkers who also are faithful Christians, if they are sufficiently courageous, inevitably will dissect and evaluate scripture, confessional documents and tradition in dealing with matters of such complexity as the ELCA now faces on the homosexual question. If the answers were clear-cut, we wouldn't have a controversy, but even though they are not clear-cut, many in the conservative coterie want to reject the notion of the big tent (as would be affirmed by passage of the two recommendations to be considered in Minneapolis). In Zumwalt's view, for example, promoting the notion of a big-tent as tolerance won't work because those promoting the big tent are lying (mendacity) about their real and hidden agenda. At this point, after all these many words, is anyone's view any longer hidden? Zumwalt, meanwhile, based on his posts in *Lutheran Forum*, apparently has chosen to be a strict constructionist on the homosexuality issue but not on the divorce issue.

I can understand how someone's personal, emotional view of homosexuality can drive such a divisive position, but there's nothing I can do about that other than carry on the dialogue in as fluid a manner as possible. Tolerance is one of the key ingredients for

a continuing good-faith dialogue and debate. For some, tolerance may well be gone, never to be recaptured. But for others, the useful dialogue can continue.

PART FIVE – THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD AFTER THE ELCA VOTE

One of the major blessings of my adult life is that my three adult offspring and their spouses allow me into their conversations which involve such weighty matters as this issue, and other issues as well. Not only that, they also allow me into their social and peer-group venues so that these conversations can be extended to an even larger circle. An important aspect of this circumstance for me is that it gives me a bird's-eye-view of the next generation and the values which its members embrace. They are not all in homogeneous agreement, of course, but they have a serious importance in the context of the Christian church's future—and the ELCA's future in particular.

My conclusion is that these young and early-middle-age individuals who represent an excellent cross-section of American society and culture don't have a great deal of affinity for the conservative coterie's view of the ELCA human sexuality matter. And it isn't because their general values and other morals are out of touch with Christian faith and practice or Lutheran tradition. They are professional, successful, religious, educated, monogamous people.

Unlike some, who can be found in all age groups, those described in the above paragraph do not believe that homosexuality has elements of moral vacancy to any greater a degree than heterosexuality. There are elements of perversion, promiscuity, aberrant and even illegal sexual behavior among homosexuals and heterosexuals alike, but the general, enlightened consensus is that neither group should be relegated to the moral low ground in deference to the other group. Simply put, there are a great number of homosexuals who live in committed, monogamous relationships and who lead moral and upright lives, making significant contributions to their communities (including their religious communities), who are faithful in their Christianity, and whose need to repent is not selectively distinct from other Christians as a result of their homosexuality.

Describing this circumstance is important because of the way in which it affects

the ELCA's future. In light of the “next-generation” group referenced above, the theology expressed by the coterie on this matter can't quite keep up with the world as it is now speeding forward. And the solution to “keeping up” doesn't mean that ELCA Lutherans must turn loose of their confessionalism and tradition and the primacy of *sola scriptura*. But what it does mean is that we have to understand the broad-brushstroke meaning of scripture and the confessions in the context of the world's present realities, using competent scholarship. Hinlicky uses the term *Zeitgeist* in a manner suggesting that it has negative qualities which overturn the purity of scripture. Despite the horrible-sounding nature of the word, however, it is realistic to understand that scripture, traditions and creeds which cannot speak intelligently to the plight and circumstances of human beings in the present age are going to diminish in their influence. For that reason, we must drill down to an understanding of the messages within these sources regarding the human condition in all its many facets.

Over the last 20 or so years, a serious topic of conversation for mainline, Protestant denominations has been that of analyzing what has been happening regarding declining memberships within a growing general-population base.

A lot of theories have been offered to explain this trend, one of which is that these tradition-rich churches have moved away from their theological roots and have embraced values involving psychology, feminism, homosexuality, or other disciplines and movements which are more secular than gospel. I don't believe the evidence sustains that conclusion.

In my discussions with the younger generation, the relevance they are seeking is somehow missing within the programs of these mainline denominations. One indication of the process is the accelerated growth curves of non-denominational churches which have little or no confessional base in their theology and who focus on a “contemporary” gospel which emphasizes deliverance from personal problems and the benefit of a health-and-wealth deliverance as results of God's contribution through Jesus-the-savior. Unless one is arguing that mainline Protestantism should push its theology in that direction, then other answers are needed. While such an explanation might be a strong step toward finding a palpable answer for the emerging disconnect

between this emerging generation and mainline Protestantism, it obviously doesn't address the entire scope of the problem.

I don't think members of the conservative coterie are willing to see the issue in the matter just described, but it fundamentally relates to the difference between law and gospel.

In the discussion on the *Lutheran Forum* blog regarding whether or not homosexual members in committed, monogamous relationships are welcome in the church, Sarah Wilson wrote:

July 13, 2009 01:19 -- I infer from what you said (and from what I have heard elsewhere from those expressing similar views) that for you, "welcome" means "regarding homosexuality as a gift of God and therefore blessing it." If this is what you mean by welcome, then you are correct, I cannot "welcome" homosexuals in the church. But this is what I mean by welcome: "one sinner joyfully showing another where she found forgiveness of all of her sins, thereby becoming capable of repenting of them." In that sense, I do welcome homosexuals in the church. The question is not whether I welcome, but whether my welcome is wanted.

As of the evening of July 13, Wilson left unanswered one of the key questions in this dialogue. If homosexuals are “welcome” after they repent, do they continue to be welcome if they continue to participate in the life of the church in monogamous, committed relationships. In the absence of Wilson's answer, Kilcrease (speaking to the subject, but not speaking for her) wrote:

July 13, 2009 15:54 -- People who repent and then continue to sin publically (sic) must face Church discipline. Jesus is quite clear about this in Matthew 18. The entire point is of course not to be a "meanie," but rather to bring forth true repentance and faith. Monogamous homosexual relationship are (sic) as much a sin as other kinds--therefore they must be repented of and ended if full communion with the visible Church is going to occur.

I of course realize that the power of the keys is virtually never used in the ELCA anymore--but it's

something that should be looked into in light of it being one of the functions of the office of ministry and essential to the mission of the Church.

If Kilcrease's statement is representative of the general viewpoint of members of the conservative coterie, then it's obvious why this disconnect with the up-and-coming generations is occurring. More precisely, however, a post on *Lutheran Forum* by Rev. Norman Krapf has fine-tuned this issue to the point where it really stands in this entire debate.

July 13, 2009 13:49 -- I thought the biblical witness regarding marriage and sexuality precluded legitimatizing same sex unions and a rite for such. Or are the scientific facts indisputable as to why homosexuals are such--meaning beyond their volition? A clear determination on the above appears lacking. I favor retaining the present standards regarding the ordination and rostering of professionals.

Krapf's effort at mildly and tentatively opening this “choice” matter drives at the heart and soul of the human issue involved. Those who say it is not a choice point to the conclusion that there is no “homosexual gene”, but that doesn't solve the issue. I would wager that those who support such a view are bereft of a conversational association with a gay or lesbian which taps the depths of this question involving choice. For those who haven't had that opportunity, I would strongly suggest that they read: *If you seduce a straight person, can you make them gay? Issues in biological existentialism versus social constructionism in gay and lesbian identities.*¹⁷

I understand that for those whose minds already are made up, it may make no difference. My mind, at one point, was made up, but I changed it after doing a great deal of reading and study—in areas which included the areas of scripture, ecclesiastical tradition, the confessional history of the church, and such contemporary studies as the above citation. My emerging friendships with gay and lesbian individuals also contributed significantly.

Much of the emerging faithful generation of Lutherans and other Christians

¹⁷ The volume is edited by John P. DeCecco and John P. Elia. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1993.

understand this matter a lot better than many of us grey-haired Lutherans who haven't experienced the vitality of altruistic relationships across a spectrum of heavy cross-culturalization. For much of that younger generation, because of both observation and experience, they understand that those who choose a homosexual lifestyle which exists in committed, trusting relationships do so because the lifestyle is as natural as that chosen by heterosexuals in the context of their committed and altruistic primary relationships. These weighty facts cut across creeds, councils and proof-texting out-of-context. Such a statement doesn't mean that we throw out the creeds, councils and scriptural witness, but it does mean that we must engage them in such a way to find out if this God we worship and this Christ upon which we pin our deliverance have taken the low road and carved a certain group of people away from the unconditional grace we believe they provide. So far, different people are deriving different answers.

Insofar as the short-term (and perhaps long-term) future of the ELCA is concerned, it appears that the fuse already has been lit. Those who constitute the ranks of the conservative coterie have made it very clear that (at least for many of them) a theological revisiting of the issue is not on their radar screen. In a *Lutheran Forum* blog posted on March 12, 2009, Hinlicky wrote a narrative which he titled: "I think I want a divorce."¹⁸ His first paragraph begins: "Not from my wife of 35 years, but from my denomination." The dramatic nature of the title and text are more than a metaphorical throwing down of the gauntlet, but the viewpoint is very consistent with the pejorative attitude which he used against those members of the LSTC faculty who signed that statement.

If, as it appears, both of the human sexuality task force's recommendations pass at the ELCA's August assembly, then members of the conservative coterie will have a major choice to make. I don't pretend to know what that choice will be, though I am reasonably sure that one result will be an intensification of the conservative coterie's institutional presence in non-ELCA institutions. If the vote goes the other way and the recommendations are not approved—especially regarding the recommendation involving rostered clergy—I don't expect anyone to bolt from the ELCA outright. The

¹⁸ Hinlicky, "I think I want a divorce," *Lutheran Forum* (blog), March 12, 2009.

long-term scenario will have to be played out through the enforcement process against gay and lesbian pastors and the congregations which support them. That could well be where the divisive battle will really occur.

Nonetheless, the religious snowball which is rolling downhill carries with it an upcoming generation of Lutherans and other Christians—many of them scholars, such as the members of the LSTC faculty—who faithfully can reconcile this matter as it exists in today's world with scripture's view of a reconciling Christ. Those who decide they can't or won't find room in that place will continue to be marginalized as the snowball rolls into the future. After the ELCA vote, especially if the recommendations pass, the ELCA may downsize. Other ecclesiastical organizations may be created. Or, the ELCA may remain relatively intact but accompanied by a great deal of muscle-flexing and power-posturing. Meanwhile, grey-haired Lutherans with constrained views of the scriptures, the confessions, Lutheran traditions, and the broad scope of God's grace and Christ's reconciliation will continue to die off, and the emerging generation with its own experience of a love-centered gospel will move to the forefront.

But in any case, ministry will continue. The burning flame of a living Christ will not be extinguished despite the official proclamations and assertive opinions of presumed earthly authorities.