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The Lutheran World Federation released *Understanding the Gift of Communion* in 2014 to allow churches who hold differing views on homosexuality to remain in fellowship with one another.

COLONIALISM IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: THE IMPERIALISM OF WESTERN SEXUAL ETHICS*

by Albert B. Collver III

“Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another ... it is hard to distinguish it from imperialism.” — Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy¹

Introduction/Background

NATIONS AND CHURCHES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH have long sought freedom from the colonialism of Western nations and Western churches. The dialogue between peoples in the West and in the global South has brought an increased awareness to colonialism and moved the world into a post-colonial era. Organizations such as the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) often speak against colonialism. For instance, the LWF’s Tenth Assembly called for international financial institutions to forgive the debts of developing countries and urged member churches to campaign with individual governments for fundamental human rights, which apparently includes debt reduction/forgiveness by corporate banks. The LWF identified external debt connected to the historic exploitation of colonialism, a modern tool for domination.² The official report of the LWF Eleventh Assembly from July 2010 when discussing the effects of climate change called on the wealthiest nations to “assume responsibility for the ecological debt they have created, and for the disasters that perpetuate carbon colonialism in the developing world.” In both of

these cases, the perpetrators of colonialism were Western powers exploiting the developing world.³

In 2014, the LWF identified another form of colonialism expressed in the rejection of homosexual love. “The failure of the church and Christians to accept homosexual love given in the framework of faithful and conjugal relationships reverts into a condemnation of homosexuality that is a reenactment of exclusionary categories inherited from a colonial and patriarchal past.”⁴ Colonialism historically has been the subjection of a people through political or economic means.⁵ In this essay, the LWF extends colonialism to include the ethical realm, in particular, those who reject homosexual love are the colonialists. In the prior two examples of colonialism, the perpetrators were the Western nations. In this example of sexual colonialism, the perpetrator is the global South, in general, and the Ethiopian

To overcome the impasse that divides churches like the EECMY and the CoS or ELCA, the Gospel must be properly understood.

Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), in particular. The EECMY, although not alone in the global South in its rejection of “homosexual love,” took the bold move of severing fellowship with the Church of Sweden (CoS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA)

³ Lutheran World Federation, *Give Us Today Our Daily Bread* — Official Report (Geneva, Switzerland, 2010), 69.

⁴ Guillermo Hansen, “Faith, Culture and Power: Communion and the Church’s Mind,” in *Understanding the Gift of Communion: The Quest for a Shared Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, ed. Department for Theology and Public Witness, 85–101 (Geneva, Switzerland: The Lutheran World Federation, 2014), 96.

⁵ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Colonialism and the Biblical Revolution in Africa,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 41:2 (1985):59. “Colonialism—the enforced economic dependence of one society on another and often its political subordination — continues in the form of neocolonialism to define the relationship between the nations of the North Atlantic and of the southern hemisphere.”

¹ Margaret Kohn. “Colonialism.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/colonialism/>.

² Lutheran World Federation. “LWF Tenth Assembly: External Debts to Developing Countries Should Be Cancelled,” 2003. <http://www.lwf-assembly2003.org/lwf-assembly/htdocs/News-035-EN.html>.

* Since the writing of this paper, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the International Lutheran Council (ILC) will discuss next year hermeneutics as it relates to the unity of the Church. The goal is to better understand each other’s approach to the Holy Scriptures and discuss how this affects the Church’s unity.

in 2013, impairing the declared “communion” among LWF member churches.

A Brief Examination of *Understanding the Gift of Communion*

The LWF released *Understanding the Gift of Communion* in 2014 to help repair the communion and to allow churches who hold differing views on homosexuality to remain in fellowship with one another. A basic premise of this document is that “ethical” issues are not doctrinally divisive because “ethics” is based upon the Law, not the Gospel. The Augsburg Confession, Article VII, states, “And for the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.” The interpretation of *doctrina evangelii* found in AC VII is key.⁶ The churches of the International Lutheran Council (ILC) typically have understood the phrase *doctrina evangelii* in a broad way that means agreement in teaching and all articles of the faith as well as agreement in the use of the Sacraments. In contrast, the churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) have understood the phrase *doctrina evangelii* in a narrow way that focuses on the definition of “Gospel” as justification.⁷ As a result, the LWF can find itself in communion or fellowship with any Christian group that professes justification by grace and administers the Sacrament. Agreement in articles of faith is not necessary or required. The next step in this Gospel reductionism is an ethical reductionism that does not require agreement on basic ethical matters, nor is it necessary for churches to recognize or agree that certain actions are sinful.

In an essay titled, “Dealing with Difference in Communion Relationships,”⁸ the LWF states that dis-

⁶ Roland Ziegler provides an excellent overview of the different ways to interpret *doctrina evangelii*. See Roland F. Ziegler, “Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 78:3–4 (2014):59–79.

⁷ *Communion: On Being the Church*. (Geneva, Switzerland: The Lutheran World Federation, World Communion of Reformed Churches, 2014), 35–36. “Unity in Word and sacrament is based on agreement on the understanding of the gospel. This agreement begins with the common understanding of the gospel as the message of God’s justifying action in Christ through the Holy Spirit.”

⁸ Elisabeth Parmentier, “Dealing with Difference in Communion Relationships,” in *Understanding the Gift of Communion: The Quest for a Shared Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, ed. Department

agreements over ethical matters are not church dividing. The sorts of ethical matters in mind are not only situations where people debate between two difficult options but also matters that the Church since her beginning at Pentecost has regarded as sin and forbidden by the Decalogue, such as the practice of homosexuality. The essay states, “Ethical unlike doctrinal issues are sometimes said to be not church dividing ... the ecumenical movement has focused on consensus in faith expressed in worship since, so it is believed an affirmation of faith is not troubled by cultural and ethical differences.”⁹ The model for agreement within the LWF is “reconciled diversity,” meaning that a church cannot engage in an activity for itself due to cultural or contextual reasons, but that church may not condemn another member church for practicing what it does not. The essay continues with two examples that divided the Lutheran communion. Important to this discussion are the changes made in the LWF’s constitution in the Helsinki Assembly held in 1963, chiefly the adoption of Article IV, which says the assembly

The acceptance of the Gospel in all its articles, including the Bible’s teaching about homosexuality, is something the LWF relegates to a hermeneutical difference.

can vote not only to admit a church into membership but also to withdraw or expel. “In the course of these developments, it became possible for the churches of the LWF to decide together to discipline a member church.”¹⁰ The ability to discipline a member church became important for one of the examples that divided

the communion, that of apartheid. In 1977, the LWF acknowledged that Christians normally may have different opinions about political questions unless the political and social system is “so perverted and oppressive that it is consistent with the confession to reject them and to work for change.”¹¹ Despite the fact that apartheid is reprehensible on a moral level, looking at the judgment from the perspective of the most recent LWF documents, it is not clear exactly how apartheid is against the LWF’s confession, provided that the churches that practiced apartheid professed the Gospel and administered the Sacraments. Nevertheless, the LWF determined that apartheid was not

for Theology and Public Witness, 69–84. (Geneva, Switzerland: The Lutheran World Federation, 2014).

⁹ Parmentier, “Dealing with Difference in Communion Relationships,” 69.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

consistent with its confession. “The concrete consequence was the suspension (not the expulsion) of these churches.”¹² With the discipline of two “white” churches over apartheid, the LWF has the precedent to “discipline” other member churches who depart from the LWF’s confession. In the present situation, the LWF could “discipline” the EECMY not so much for rejecting homosexual love for itself, but for severing fellowship with the CoS and the ELCA. Although the sheer size of the EECMY, not to mention the difficulty in obtaining votes for a censure from Africa and Asia, make it an unlikely prospect that the LWF will in fact “discipline” the EECMY.

The second example of a controversy that threatened to divide world Lutheranism is the ordination of women. There are parallels to the LWF’s policy toward women’s ordination (which the LWF prefers to call “women in the ordained ministry of the church”). “Since 1984, the LWF has recognized and affirmed the goal of seeing women in the ordained ministry.”¹³ The LWF supports women’s ordination through its gender justice policy. Funding grants are attached to the LWF’s gender justice policy, through which the LWF secures quotas for women’s participation in member church bodies.¹⁴

It seems quite possible that the LWF could encourage the acceptance of practicing homosexuals in the ordained ministry through a policy similar to its gender justice policy. For an example of the way in which women’s ordination provoked a controversy among member churches, “Dealing with Difference in Communion Relationships” provides examples from two different church bodies. The first example involves the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, which began ordaining women in 1975 but stopped ordaining women in 1993. The Latvian church was not “disciplined” by the LWF. The second example involves the Lutheran Church of Poland, which does not ordain women. The article recounts the situation, “When

The portrayal of opposition to homosexuality as a new form of paternalism and colonialism recasts the discussion.

the Reformed Church in Poland decided to ordain women to the pastoral ministry, the Lutheran bishops’ conference of the same country issued a statement forbidding Lutheran believers to participate in celebrations led by a woman. This was clearly a transgression of the Leuenberg Agreement, which requires mutual recognition: the ministry of a female Reformed pastor of this communion has to be at least recognized by the others.”¹⁵ The Lutheran Church of Poland was not “disciplined,” for it “accepted to recognize that the ordination of women in the other churches was not in contradiction to the gospel.”¹⁶

This example is very telling of the direction the LWF seems to be going. Individual member churches will not be required to ordain practicing homosexuals (or lesbians) as pastors, but they will need to recognize that their ordination in other member churches is not in “contradiction to the gospel.” Presumably, if a church such as the

EECMY refused to recognize the ordained homosexual ministers in other member churches they could be disciplined. Even under the “reconciled diversity” model, churches that accept the ordination of homosexuals and those who do not cannot be reconciled. Ultimately, the LWF “communion will need to decide if

a general position is possible and if pastoral exceptions are acceptable.”¹⁷ It is quite ironic that the “problem” in the LWF is seen to be the churches (EECMY, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, et al) that reject a decision made by a minority of members (CoS and ELCA).

In the essay, “Faith, Culture, and Power,” homosexuality is not seen as the “real” reason for the dispute. The essay asserts:

This estrangement cannot be reduced to the ‘ethical’ issue of homosexuality, for the latter functions as a quasi placeholder for a host of issues ranging from cultural biases, economic interests and geopolitical developments to divergent hermeneutical responses and the disruptions unleashed by modernity; industrialization and post-industrialization; identity politics and the anthropological and psychological valuation of desire, to name but a few.¹⁸

¹² Ibid., 73–74.

¹³ “Interview with LWF General Secretary on International Women’s Day,” 2014. <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/women-ordained-ministry-reflects-gods-call>.

¹⁴ Ibid. “I hope and pray that we move from securing quotas for women’s participation to securing conditions for women’s participation. And I hope and pray that more churches will own the commitment to women in the ordained ministry as we engage in open and respectful conversations that are faithful to the Word of God that invites the baptized to become a prophetic sign of God’s powerful reconciliation.”

¹⁵ Parmentier, “Dealing with Difference in Communion Relationships,” 77.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸ Hansen, “Faith, Culture, and Power,” 87.

The rejection of homosexuality is not seen as an ethical issue but connected to among other things such as cultural biases and differences in hermeneutics. The global South, more so than the Western church, tends to read the Bible literally, while the West reinterprets what appears to be a clear prohibition into something like a call for greater hospitality.

Although the essay acknowledges that the EECMY wants to “guard the truth of the teaching of the Bible,”¹⁹ it finds more significant the fact that the EECMY wanted to influence the CoS through communication. The essay states that this was doomed to failure “since there are no organizational mechanisms that create an environment that presupposes the involvement of the ‘other’ in the process of a church’s reaching a decision. In other words, there is no way in which the ‘mind’ of the EECMY can meaningfully interact with the ‘mind’ of the CoS when their ‘bodies’ (churches) pursue autonomous existences.”²⁰ The essay sees a problem with the LWF model, which has declared itself a communion but is organized along the lines of a federation of independent churches. Each independent church can take an action that affects the other churches in the communion, and no mechanism exists for the members of the communion to influence the individual members. The author notes that the inability of one member to influence another member is the only point the EECMY made. He says, “The EECMY has posited a very important issue that is key for the Lutheran communion as a whole.”²¹ Despite this acknowledgement that the EECMY pointed out a weakness in the LWF’s structure, the author is sympathetic to the CoS and the ELCA. He writes, “Yet this is as far I can go with the claims of the EECMY’s leadership ... I am very supportive of the position taken by the CoS as well as the ELCA both in what pertains to bylaws regarding ministerial functions and their sensitive reading of a cultural and social context that has mutated our hermeneutical coordinates in relation to sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular.”²²

The author continues by noting that the so-called “ethical” issue of homosexuality is not the core issue but rather

The divide over homosexuality is a symptom of a far greater problem.

only a symptom of another problem.²³ The author sees the problem as two issues: “On the one hand, the nature of sexuality that is engraved at the center of our theological symbolic order, which leads us to an exploration into the powers of the body. On the other, that divisions are inscribed in the way in which previously existing themes are mediated by theological language and hermeneutics.”²⁴ In regard to the nature of sexuality, the author deconstructs sexuality using a structuralist framework. The author asserts that the traditional view of sexuality has been replaced. He writes, “An initial approach must consider the place that sexuality had ... it mediates the basic condition for life, procreation.” Using higher criticism to repeat the tired JEPD theory of the Pentateuch’s authorship, the author asserts the Priestly version of the text links, “sexual differentiation and biological reproduction with the image of God.”²⁵ The author argues that viewing sexuality from the perspective of reproduction would be to leave sexuality at the level of animality.²⁶ The author argues that once reproduction could be separated from sexual desire, “a new (sexual) embodiment of identity became possible.”²⁷ He argues that the women’s movement of the 1960s led to the gay and lesbian movements. His identification with the women’s movement as the beginning of a “radical change of mind”²⁸ which opened the door to the gay and lesbian movements, parallels the developments within the church, where the acceptance of women’s ordination led to the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

According to the author, the woman’s movement is the beginning of the end for patriarchy and colonialism. The acceptance of homosexuality is the complete destruction of patriarchy. He writes, “Therefore the struggle

²³ Ibid. “The issue of same gender relationships comes to the fore, however not as a cause of division but as its symptom... the problematization of the ordination of persons of same gender orientation in committed relationships and the liturgical blessing of same-sex marriage is the symptom of a division that already existed and transcends the issue of homosexuality.”

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid. “But approaching sexuality only from the angle of its reproductive power would be tantamount to remaining merely at the level of ‘animality.’ Human sexuality has a meaning that transcends its biological attributes, for it is the zero level from which the whole apparatus of symbolic thinking and thus culture arises.”

²⁷ Ibid., 91.

²⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 88.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 89.

²² Ibid.

initially concentrated on women's rights unleashed a powerful shockwave: the calling into question of patriarchy also challenged heterosexuality as the exclusive norm for sexual desire. Soon other emancipatory movements emerged around the vindication of gay orientation and lifestyles that had a radical critique of patriarchal constellations in common with the women's movement.²⁹ The author argues that sexuality is not just about reproduction or pleasure, but it also serves as "a symbol that communicates which and what type of relationships are considered to be desirable, expected, or required."³⁰ By viewing sexuality through the lens of power, the author can equate traditional male and female sex roles with colonialism. Same sex relationships shatter this "colonialism." Rather than seeing the church accommodating the culture by accepting homosexuality, the author sees the "full recognition and inclusion of persons of same-sex orientation in the ministry and practices of the church" as creatively applying "the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of new configurations of love and justice."³¹ The author equates the acceptance and inclusion of practicing lesbians and homosexuals in the ministry of the church as similar to the voices of post-colonialism and liberationist "demands voiced by many churches in the global South since the 70s."³² Notice the shift. If the global South demanded the end to colonialism by the West, then in the same spirit, the global South should accept and include homosexuals in the ministry of the church, as the rejection of homosexuality is one of the last forms of patriarchalism and colonialism.

To overcome the impasse that divides churches like the EECMY and the CoS or ELCA, the Gospel must be properly understood. The author writes, "Suffice it to say that differences are insurmountable when the gospel is confused with a particular sociological instantiation."³³ By this, he means the Gospel cannot be tied to a particular social arrangement such as marriage between a man and a woman. The author equates the position expressed by the EECMY (although he does not mention the EECMY by name) as "virtually fundamentalist" and delivered by "reactive leaderships." He regards the "virtually fundamentalist" position of rejecting homosexual ordination

²⁹ Ibid., 93.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 96.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 97.

and same-sex marriage as "a blatant case of profanation of the sacred," even impinging on the gospel as promise.³⁴ Leaving behind "colonial unilateral normativity," which would allow the acceptance of homosexual clergy and of same-sex marriage, allows inter- and trans-contextuality to form the "main trace of a communion."³⁵

In summary, according to this essay, the break in communion between the EECMY and the CoS and ELCA was not caused by the "ethical" issue of homosexuality but due to a breakdown of the structure of the communion, which operates more like a federation. He writes, "As a federation of churches the Lutheran communion leaned upon an identity cemented by a diachronic trajectory provided by Scriptures, confessions and, above all, the memory of the Reformation and its missionary expressions."³⁶ This forms a symbolic tradition. For the author, the danger today is to regard this symbolic tradition as if it did not emerge from synchronic moments. This is to say, the Scriptures, the Confessions and Reformation emerged from synchronic moments, and if placed in a context and time such as the present, these items would have developed differently. "Yet (late) modernity and the post-colonial situation have offered new perspectival approaches that need to be assimilated if churches are to be in a communion that is expressed through the constant negotiation of relationships mediated by (theological) language."³⁷ The author argues that the "federation" mindset needs to pass as a "communion" mindset develops. Although the author does not explicitly name the EECMY, CoS or ELCA, they are implied. The statement is as much of an indictment against the EECMY as it is against the CoS and ELCA. The CoS and ELCA acted autonomously and as a "federation" by adopting same-sex marriage and homosexual ordination. Likewise, the EECMY acted autonomously and as a "federation" by breaking fellowship or communion with the CoS and the ELCA.

³⁴ Ibid., 97. "Virtually fundamentalist postures as the ones expressed by the positions or reactive leaderships seem to be a blatant case of profanation of the sacred. They impinge not just upon the particular regard, opinion or even doctrine that one may have of the 'orders of creation,' but on what constitutes the *promissio*, the gospel as such."

³⁵ Ibid., 98. "It is as if the very reality of a globalized world demanded the emergence of a new mind which leaves behind both the colonial unilateral normativity and the contextualist necessary reactions, in order to advance into a normed and normative inter- and trans-contextuality as the main trace of communion."

³⁶ Ibid., 99.

³⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

Martin Junge, the general secretary of the LWF, in his introductory essay, writes, “I believe that the LWF communion needs to resist the current tendency in our world to align ecclesial relationships along the criterion of like-mindedness, particularly around specific issues of ethics.”³⁸ Junge’s statement removes ethics from the realm of scriptural truth and places them into the realm of mores and social conventions. In the document, “ethics” serves as a euphemism for homosexuality and lesbianism. Certainly, Schleiermacher’s conception that a church is made up of like-minded individuals is not correct. Yet the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, recognizes that the Church is found where the Gospel in all its articles, that is, both the Law and the Gospel, is taught and where the Sacraments are rightly administered. The so-called “ethical” issues are a part of the Gospel in all its articles. The acceptance of the Gospel in all its articles, including the Bible’s teaching about homosexuality, is something the LWF relegates to a hermeneutical difference.

The portrayal of opposition to homosexuality as a new form of paternalism and colonialism recasts the discussion. The global South has experienced paternalism and colonialism first hand from Western churches. Meanwhile, Western churches have attempted to avoid being paternalistic and colonialistic. Everyone wants to avoid paternalism and colonialism, much as the smoking of cigarettes in the 21st century is avoided or at least hidden from public view. The argument that opposition to homosexuality is colonialism turns the tables on the global South, making the historic recipients of colonialism into the colonialist because of their position on homosexuality. The Western churches become the victim while the churches of the global South become the perpetrator of colonialism. These articles from the LWF portray opposition to homosexuality as the new colonialism.

Yet the reality is somewhat different. As an African pastor stated, “Homosexuality is equivalent to colonialism and slavery.”³⁹ The acceptance of homosexuality is being imposed and forced upon both African nations and churches by the West. Governmental aid and financial loans are connected to promoting a greater acceptance of homosexuals in Africa. Such actions fit the

very definition of colonialism, “the exercise of dominion”⁴⁰ or the “enforced economic dependence of one country over another.”⁴¹ “In a 2007 Pew Research Center poll, 97 percent of surveyed Nigerians and Ethiopians, 96 percent of Ugandans and Kenyans, and 95 percent of Tanzanians believed their respective societies should reject homosexuality.”⁴² Even the most progressive Western nations do not have as much support in favor of homosexuality as the African countries do against it. The new colonialism is trying to force the African nations and churches to adopt a Western, liberal sexual agenda that accepts homosexuality. “A call for greater acceptance of gays and lesbians has put African and Western churches on a collision course, with some African clerics likening criticism from the United States and Europe to a new wave of colonization by the West.”⁴³

In *Understanding the Gift of Communion*, the EECMY, which took a stand against the practices of the CoS and the ELCA regarding the ordination of homosexuals, becomes the unnamed colonialist, the aggressor against the poor Western churches. The irony of the former colonialists identifying the EECMY as colonialistic for taking a biblical stand is rich. Such a move is the ultimate in colonialism, as it imposes both a position and a title. The *Gift of Communion* does express some things correctly. For instance, the divide over homosexuality is a symptom of a far greater problem, as it demonstrates that some LWF member churches hold to the Scriptures as the source and norm of their teaching, while other LWF member churches do not hold to the Scriptures in the same way. The EECMY should be commended for its bold stand and witness to the Scriptures. Perhaps, the EECMY will serve as an example for others. The EECMY is an example of a church that stood up to the new colonialism and resisted being colonized by a position foreign to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

The Rev. Dr. Albert B. Collver III is LCMS director of Church Relations and assistant to President Matthew C. Harrison.

³⁸ Martin Junge, “Claiming the Gift of Communion in a Fragmented World,” in *Understanding the Gift of Communion: The Quest for a Shared Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion*, 9–15 (Geneva, Switzerland: The Lutheran World Federation, 2014), 15.

³⁹ Fredrick Nzwili, “African Clerics: Gay Rights Equal Colonialism,” *The Christian Century* 131:7 (April 2014): 15.

⁴⁰ Kohn, “Colonialism.”

⁴¹ Gilkes, “Colonialism and the Biblical Revolution in Africa,” 59.

⁴² Sarah Dreier, “Disagreements over Homosexuality Divide African Churches and the ELCA,” *Word & World* 34:2 (2014):191.

⁴³ Nzwili, “African Clerics: Gay Rights Equal Colonialism,” 15.