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An Evaluation of the Australian Lutheran "Statement on Homosexuality"

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In its 1973 Convention in New Orleans, The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod stated its conviction that homosexual behavior was "intrinsically sinful," and it urged a ministry of Law and Gospel to homosexuals. Subsequently the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations has made available for study a document emanating from the Lutheran Church in Australia called "Statement on Homosexuality." Since cultural and sociological changes in our country have made the question of homosexuality one of public concern, it is necessary for the Lutheran pastor to be equipped to counsel the homosexual. This paper seeks to provide equipment for a pastoral ministry to homosexuals by means of a critical evaluation of the Australian "Statement."

I. The Moral Nature of Homosexuality

The "Statement of Homosexuality" raises the question of the moral evaluation that is to be made concerning homosexuality. However, in answering the question a dangerous confusion arises. The "Statement" offers a distinction between homosexual "propensity" and homosexual "behavior." What is the nature of this distinction? And what moral conclusions are forthcoming once the distinction is made? The Lutheran pastor needs to give close attention to these questions.

A.

The "Statement" begins with the following understanding as to the nature of this propensity-behavior distinction:

In this statement a distinction will be drawn between *propensity*, an inclination or leaning towards, over which the individual has no control, and *behavior*, acts over which the individual is regarded as having control.

But, more precisely, what is propensity? Is this a reference to a potentiality? Or is it a reference to inward desires of the heart? If it is the former, a potentiality, then it is not an *actuality* and therefore is not properly called homosexuality. But if it is the latter, a reference to inward desires of the heart, then it must be called homosexuality in the very sense in which it is con-

demned as sinful by the Scriptures. For Jesus clearly teaches that the desires of the heart are included under the condemning and accusing finger of the Law.

Perhaps an analogy would make the point more clearly. Physicians tell us that some persons have an internal chemical balance such that, were they to consume alcohol in any significant quantity whatsoever, they would develop a physiological-chemical dependency on alcohol. We would call such a condition a potentiality for alcohol dependency or alcoholism. Yet, that condition, in and of itself, is not alcoholism, nor is the possessor of such a condition an alcoholic. Further, he does not experience an inclination or leaning toward alcohol, nor can his relationship to the consumption of alcohol be described as a "striving" or "battle" against it.

If the concept of "potentiality" is what is meant by "homosexual propensity," then the "Statement" would be correct in its conclusion that "the Church may not condemn or judge homosexual propensity." But the "Statement" would be misleading and incorrect when it asserts:

As in the case of pain and disease, the Christian homosexual should accept his homosexual propensity in obedience to God, bear his cross bravely, seek all possible professional help and pastoral aid, and in faith resist the strong temptation of rebelling and murmuring against God or of dismissing his life as pointless or senseless.

Here, clear signs point not to a potentiality, but to an actuality, complete with stress, temptation, agony, and despair. Such a homosexuality certainly falls under the same judgement which Jesus declares when he speaks on the nature of adultery (Matt. 5: 27-28). So it appears that the "Statement" understands propensity to include more than a potentiality toward homosexuality; and, thus, its conclusion is incorrect that "the Church may not condemn or judge homosexual propensity."

B.

The reason for this mistake may well be found in an inadequate understanding of "behavior." If behavior is identified, in a legalistic manner, with the "bare act itself," then the sins of the heart, will, and mind must be lumped under "propensity," and thus the concept of "propensity" includes that which is culpable before the Law. On the other hand, another reason for this mistake on the part of the "Statement" may be found in the contemporary tendency toward limiting the concept of moral responsibility for evil to those situations where the ability is present to do the good or resist the evil.

The "Statement" suggests that "having control" over homosexuality is a measure of whether one is speaking of propensity or behavior. When viewed in connection with the conclusions of the "Statement" that the Church cannot speak against homosexual propensity, one is forced to conclude that one ought not to view homosexuality as sinful in any context where a person does not "have control" over that particular dimension of homosexuality.

But does not the Law speak to us in the totality of our sinful nature (sub-conscious as well as conscious, thoughts as well as deeds, intentions as well as actions)? And if the Law does speak in this universal sense, where is the room for the concept of "having control," as a device of removing moral responsibility or culpability? Since the "Statement" appears to incorporate into the concept of "propensity" the sub-conscious and conscious thoughts and desires of the homosexual, the homosexual propensity of which it speaks falls under the Scriptural condemnation of sins of the heart. In this case, to affirm the "Statement" would be to deny the Synod's position that homosexual behavior (which we understand to include the behavior of the heart) is "intrinsically sinful."

C.

At this point, one might be tempted to observe that perhaps the Australian statement intends by "propensity" only the *occurrence* of homosexual thoughts, and that any entertaining of these thoughts (being a matter of our "control," in some sense) passes over into the area of "behavior." This suggestion would fit well with the observation by the "Statement" that "the varying degrees of propensity can be rated from exclusive heterosexuality through bisexuality and on to exclusive homosexuality." However, one still finds it problematic to speak of homosexual propensity as the occurrence of thoughts or "stimulation" and to affirm at the same time that "there are cases of complete unawareness of the propensity." Thus, even placing this "best construction" on the Australian statement does not yield a consistent and satisfactory tool for dealing pastorally with the homosexual.

II. The Pastoral Approach to Homosexuality

Granting that by "propensity" one means the potential for and the varying occurrence of homosexually-oriented thoughts, and by "behavior" one means any "acts" of thought, word, or deed, the "Statement on Homosexuality" makes some, but not the best, Scriptural sense. But how does it help for pastoral practice? Can its guidelines, particularly for the counseling in

cases of "homosexual propensity" be helpful for the Lutheran pastor?

A.

Certainly one must applaud the spirit and forthrightness of the concluding paragraph in the Australian statement:

The Church, while rejecting on the one hand the movement which claims tolerance of homosexual behavior in the name of freedom of the individual and of moral progress, must also resist the popular reaction of persecution and ostracism. The Church must exhibit understanding and sympathy for the homosexual, show love and pastoral concern, being ready to give help and encouragement in whatever way possible. It must proclaim to homosexuals, as it does to all men, the judgement of God against sin, above all the forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake, and the possibility of a new life through the power of the Holy Spirit, and must assure them of complete acceptance into the people of God.

With only one exception, the Lutheran pastor can endorse this as the cornerstone of his own ministry to homosexuals. That one exception, of course, is the concern which must be expressed over the final clause, "and must assure them of complete acceptance into the people of God." According to the Scriptures, those who insist on a life of manifest and unrepentant sin must be excluded from the people of God (I Cor. 5:1-13). If we are speaking of homosexuals (whether in propensity or in behavior), only repentant homosexuals may be assured of complete acceptance into the people of God. The obdurate impenitence, for whatever reason, of a homosexual requires the separation of that person from the Church. However, that impenitence does not excuse the Church or the Lutheran pastor from the responsibility to "exhibit understanding and sympathy for the homosexual, show love and pastoral concern, being ready to give help and encouragement in whatever way possible."

B.

Perhaps the most constructive proposal of the Australian "Statement" is the injunction for the Church to offer "the possibility of a new life through the power of the Holy Spirit." However, the effect of this laudable and necessary proposal is dulled by the contents of the "Statement" itself. For it would lead the homosexual to believe three assertions which stifle Christian *hope*.

First, in a disastrous and unbiblical manner, the "Statement" claims that "there is little effective treatment for those who

would be designated as exclusive homosexuals." Such a position flatly contradicts St. Paul who says, concerning homosexuality and other "wickedness," "And such were some of you! But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (I Cor. 6:11). The New Testament gives ample testimony to the power of God to effect *change* in the sinful life-patterns of people. This includes not only a change in relationship to God and a change in future destiny, but also a change in one's own daily life. The Church must bravely and lovingly assert that there *is* effective treatment for change in all people, including "exclusive homosexuals." There *is* the possibility of new life through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, several statements from the Australian document suggest that homosexuality needs to be seen in the context of disease. For example, we are told that "the available medical and psychological evidence must guide the Church." Again, we are encouraged to see homosexuality as part of the results of the Fall, in the same sense as we understand disease to be a result of the Fall. Finally, the "Statement" concludes: "As in the case of pain and disease, the Christian homosexual should accept his homosexual propensity in obedience to God." But is it true that homosexuality and disease can be seen in the same light? If so, then there is no sin in homosexuality, for there is no sin in being a victim of disease, such as cancer or diabetes. These diseases, while a corruption of life resulting from the Fall, are not sinful *per se*, nor does one become "wicked" when one becomes ill. Yet, St. Paul tells us that one does become wicked when one becomes a homosexual (I Cor. 6:9). On the other hand, if it is not true that homosexuality and disease can be seen in the same light, then there is absolutely no justification for suggesting that homosexuality is a "cross" or "thorn" that God asks some Christians to bear. In retrospect, such a suggestion is spiritually devastating, for it robs the homosexual of Christian *hope*, and offers in its stead only a humanistic encouragement to keep a stiff upper lip!

Finally, in the precise place where the Lutheran pastor can be at his best, namely, in the application of the Means of Grace to the needs of a sinner, the Australian "Statement" urges him to suggest to the homosexual that he go and pray about it! Indeed, it is true that *all* Christians should "not cease to pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit who alone can empower us to do what is right and to refuse the wrong." However, the homosexual in the midst of his predicament does not need instructions about prayer; he needs the Holy Spirit in the present moment, that he might have hope and power to pray. In short, he needs what the Lutheran pastor has been called to

give, a specific and personal application of the Means of Grace, addressed to the homosexual's life-situation. Such a ministry alone will offer "the possibility of a new life through the power of the Holy Spirit."

Consistent with the conclusion of the "Statement," the Lutheran pastor can and should offer the new life of the Spirit to the homosexual. However, this cannot be done where the possibility of change is denied. Nor can it be done where the condition of sin is confused with the condition of disease. Nor can it be done where the Means of Grace are not at the heart of pastoral ministry, encompassed in the specific application of Law and Gospel. Rather, let the pastor call for change and offer the power for it; let him clearly set forth the nature of homosexuality from the Scriptural perspective; and let him administer the Means of Grace to the needs of the sinner! In such a ministry the hope of new life in Christ is surely offered.

C.

Many Lutherans have come to lament the current publicity, exposure, and apparent blessing which is being given to the "gay movement" in recent times. Insofar as we are being called upon to bless sin, the Church should object. The Australian "Statement" is to be commended when it calls the Church to reject "the movement which claims tolerance of homosexual behavior in the name of freedom of the individual and of moral progress." Indeed, neither popular opinion nor existential convenience but God's revealed will alone determines that which is good and that which is evil. Nevertheless, the Church also must resist the temptation to be drawn into blind discrimination and hatred against those who are homosexuals. Again, the Australian "Statement" rightly calls us "to resist the popular reaction of persecution and ostracism." The individual Christian, as well as the Church, ought to examine his own motives and perceptions as he responds to the issue of homosexuality, lest he forget that ". . . there is no distinction; since *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

God is presenting to the Church a great challenge and opportunity. We can proclaim the Word of God in a clear and fresh manner. We can offer new hope to sinners whom God loves. We can apply the Means of Grace to another area of human need, so that sins can be forgiven and the Spirit's power employed to create new life in Christ. The situation which we face is one which was accurately described by a student at Concordia Teacher's College, River Forest, when she said: "Isn't it great! While the devil is gleefully rubbing his hands

and saying, 'Ha ha! I've got more sin out into the world!,' God is rubbing His hands and saying, 'Ha ha! And now I can deal with that sin as never before!'