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THE GOSPEL UNHINDERED

by Mary Albing

Peter is called on the carpet by his Jerusalem colleagues for baptizing an uncircumcised god-fearer named Cornelius along with his household. Peter explains that he had a vision including Gentiles. Then the Spirit came upon them in such a way that he had no choice. "Who was I to hinder God?" he asks (Acts 11:17).

The word "hinder" figures large in Luke and Acts. Jesus levels a devastating criticism at lawyers for hindering people (Luke 11). The Ethiopian eunuch wonders what would hinder him from being baptized (Acts 8:36) and the gospel preached

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REGARDING AND DISREGARDING ROMANS 1:18-27

by David E. Fredrickson

Roughly seven passages from the Bible supply ammunition for critics of love outside of heterosexuality. This essay is an exploration of just one, Romans 1:18-27. My aim is to respect Paul's words by interpreting them in their cultural context. This cross-cultural approach will encourage us to remove Romans 1:18-27 from our deliberations about sexuality, because Paul is talking about one thing and we quite another. Along the way I will criticize claims some writers make about the meaning of Paul's words.

Let's begin with an idea that all scholars—conservative and liberal—agree on. God is angry. That much seems clear from 1:18: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven . . ." What exactly has provoked God to anger? Until re-

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unhindered literally is the last word (Acts 28:31).

In Mason City, Iowa, a new PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) has been planted. They heard about my congregation and invited me to tell my story. Seventy-five people hummed with energy. An elderly woman told me that of all the things her congregation has done over many years she is most proud of sponsoring PFLAG. Lutherans asked how congregations become RIC. The Spirit is moving.

Perhaps those of us who are LGBT could act as though we belong in the ELCA because we do, and perhaps straight allies could be unapologetic in their support. Who are any of us to hinder God? Doing important work is challenging, disturbing, and painful. Rarely have prophets' messages been, well, unhindered.

As I walked to get coffee, flowers filled yards along shady streets and a five-year-old was plying her sidewalk art with chalk. Blue swirls meandered from her house down several steps to the sidewalk. She was bending down to create soft billows of blue streaming away in every direction, unhindered. So the Spirit filled my congregation, spilled down the steps and out the doors so deep and wide that it flowed all the way to Iowa. Unhindered. In this season of Pentecost, who are we to hold it back?

Mary Albing is the pastor of Lutheran Church of Christ the Redeemer, in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

TREASURER NEEDED FOR THE NETWORK

Arnold Keller has served as the treasurer of The Network for many years. He has received and recorded our contributions, paid our bills, and kept us financially responsible. That has been essential to our stability and development. But now he has asked to be relieved of this task. We want to thank him for his faithful support of the Network through many changes and developments.

We also want to ask whether any of our readers would like to step into this role for the Network. The treasurer's task is to receive contributions, pay bills, and report to the Network board on our financial status. The treasurer is asked to attend Network board meetings, usually held twice a year. Board members pay their own airfares, but the Network pays their hotel and meal costs.

The Network has decided to place its emphasis on "biblical renewal" in the ELCA to nurture the spiritual and theological mindset needed for a truly inclusive church. We are looking for a treasurer who will be challenged and excited by our vision.

If you are interested, email our co-chair, Barbara Lundblad, lundblad@uts.columbia.edu.

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cently, the answer in some circles was to say that God is angry at the homosexual couplings Paul supposedly mentions in 1:26-27. Below I will dispute the claim that 1:26 has lesbians in mind, and I will argue that "homosexual" has no business in the dis-

cussion or translation of an ancient text. For now, however, it is enough to point out the obvious. What provoked God to anger was idolatry. Sex is off Paul's radar screen in 1:18-23.

In a moment I will explain what made idolatry an anger provoking activity, but first the position of those who see this passage as a condemnation of homosexual behavior needs to be heard and criticized. A more sophisticated view, that of Richard Hays for example, now concedes that homosexual behavior is not explicitly mentioned in 1:18-23. Idolatry is acknowledged as the problem. But a way has been found still to condemn gay and lesbian people through an unusual definition of idolatry. Homosexuality, it is asserted, is an instance of narcissism. Being gay or lesbian is the ultimate expression of self-seeking, egocentricity, and sin. Since, in this view, idolatry is likewise self-seeking, when Paul says idolatry he might just as well have said homosexuality. Or, put another way, homosexuality is the most potent form of idolatry.

In a related twist, some writers misappropriate a key concept in the philosophy of cultural diversity, "otherness." The sin of being gay or lesbian is the refusal to live intimately with an "other." One partner is the "same as me" to the other. This violates God's intention. God created us to be paired with an "other" and took pains to arrange creation so that the otherness we need might be found in male/female relationships. From this they conclude that even though Paul does not mention homosexuality explicitly in 1:18-23, it is implied.

Certainly these interpretations are not grounded in the thought forms of the first century. They rely on anachronism, the telltale sign of minds incurious about the foreignness of ancient cultures. Refutation of these strange ideas about narcissism and the fear of "otherness" I leave to others with appropriate expertise. I will, however, say something about idolatry in its first century context.

The notion that idolatry is Paul's covert way of speaking about homosexuality smells of desperation, and for good reason. Idolatry, as these writers have construed it, substitutes for a broadly discredited reason to support exclusively heterosexual love: gender complementarity, which, along with generativity, is a pillar of official Roman Catholic teaching about marriage and has been appropriated by the evangelical right. According to this view, there are essential qualities of being male and of being female. Male and female fit together like hand in glove. This fit is obvious, so it is claimed, at the anatomical level, but it is also true of personality. Males guide; females need and yearn to be guided. Men are public doers of deeds; women provide a haven for males who grow weary in a competitive world. Given the growing unpopularity of these stereotypes in contemporary society, it is no wonder that the cultured despisers of gay love rarely own up to their own ideas. So they let a doctored up version of idolatry do the fighting for them.

For Paul and his audiences idolatry was simply injustice committed against God. It had nothing to do with an individual's

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A LETTER FROM MICHAEL PRYSE, BISHOP OF THE EASTERN SYNOD OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

Text of Bishop Michael Pryse's pastoral letter to the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, after its 2006 Assembly, regarding local option for blessing same-gender unions

July 9, 2006

Dear Synod Family,

Grace and peace be unto you!

I am writing to you having just concluded the closing worship service of our Eleventh Biennial Convention – Synod Assembly 2006. The service was wonderfully inspiring and uplifting and now our delegates are returning to their homes having participated in a full and challenging five days of inspired work on behalf of our church.

In the coming weeks, your delegates will provide you with their individual reports on our total convention experience. Several, however, have requested that I communicate with you regarding our synod's significant action concerning the blessing of same gender unions.

On Thursday July 6, 2006, 72.4% of our registered delegates voted in support of the following resolution:

That the Eastern Synod of the ELCIC recognizes that the blessing of same-gender couples who want to make a life-long commitment to one another in the presence of God and their community of faith is a matter of pastoral and congregational discretion. Authorization to perform such blessings shall require the consent of the pastor and the consent of the congregation or calling agency, as expressed by a 2/3 majority vote at a duly called meeting of the congregation or calling agency, and in consultation with the bishop.

By virtue of this action, same gender couples may now have their unions blessed within the context of those Eastern Synod ministries which are willing and able to meet the conditions specified within this motion.

This action is, of course, quite controversial and will be received with both happiness and distress by individual members of our synodical family. While I am mindful of this reality, I am very supportive of the action taken by our synod. In my view, it represents a reasonable accommodation that allows for a diversity of pastoral practice.

Those congregations who wish to offer prayerful support to persons in committed same-gender partnerships now have a responsible means of doing so. At the same time, this resolution protects the rights of pastors and congregations who do not

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A LETTER FROM BRADLEY SCHMELING, PASTOR OF ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Friends,

Yesterday morning, Bishop Ron Warren signed and sent the formal charges to the secretary of the ELCA. The short meeting he had with me just before he did this, had a surreal quality as he spoke of his grief at filing charges against me. After he told me that he had deep respect for me, he gave me a copy of the charges that are on their way to Lowell Almen, Secretary of the ELCA. The bishop prayed; we talked briefly about press interest; and we shared with one another our commitment to act as brothers in the faith throughout this process.

The filing of charges begins the formal process toward a "disciplinary hearing," the constitutional language for an ecclesiastical trial. The first steps involve choosing the jury. Six members come from a national pool in the ELCA and six come from a pool in the Southeastern Synod. I have the right to choose two from the national pool, and I have the right to reject one. Otherwise, the ELCA chooses all the members of the jury. The bishop of the ELCA, Mark Hanson, will appoint a judge for the trial. When the jury is chosen, the church has sixty days to hold the trial and then fifteen days to render a verdict. The bishop said that someone from the ELCA will contact me soon to articulate all the details of this process and to begin the process of scheduling the hearing. It will probably held in Atlanta in a neutral location.

The five-page document details how my relationship with Darin demonstrates "behavior incompatible with the character of the ministerial office." In an effort to prove my relationship with Darin, the charges even cite as evidence a party St. John's had for Darin and me after we announced our relationship. The supporting documents contain an email that describes St. John's welcome to Darin as a participant in our community of faith. It's stunning that the congregation's genuine love and celebration is used in this document to prove that I should be removed from the clergy roster of the ELCA. Further, the charges refer to Darin by his title "pastor," even though he has already been removed from the clergy roster because of our relationship.

Within a few hours of our meeting, the bishop sent a "pastoral letter of disclosure" to the entire Southeastern synod, saying that "Pastor Bradley Schmeling disclosed that he is in a sexual relationship with an adult male." I'm still trying to understand how our commitment to maintaining respectful dialogue is consistent with this choice of language. I was surprised by the choice of such "legal language" in a pastoral letter to the synod. It doesn't communicate the fullness, the grace, or the gift of my committed and loving relationship with Pastor Darin Easler. As the church has done so often, it reduces a gay relationship to sex.

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wish to be partnered in actions that they cannot, in good conscience, support. While this action does not answer the broader questions before us, it does provide a responsible process that allows pastoral decisions to be made by those who will be most affected by them.

In my report to the convention, I made the following observation. "In some ways, the witness we provide while engaging our differences is more compelling than that of the decisions we will make." In this regard, I am pleased to tell you how proud I am of the way in which our delegates – regardless of position – prayerfully and respectfully engaged one another around this challenging issue. It was, I think, a compelling witness; a witness which I trust to be similarly evident as our conversations continue throughout the synod in the months ahead.

Remember, those who would claim the greatest truth must always seek to demonstrate the greatest love!

May God grant each of you a blessed and restorative summer season!

With all best wishes,
+Bishop Michael J. Pryse

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Despite the challenge of these first few communications, I am absolutely committed to being part of this process in a way that points to the love of Christ. I left the synod office yesterday absolutely clear about my decision not to resign. But, even more so, I feel great clarity in the goodness of God. One of the members of the congregation said to me before I went to the meeting. "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." What a gift of the gospel that Psalm phrase is! I believe that this disciplinary process will provide a means to move the church forward in its understanding of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. While it will no doubt take a lot of work, energy, and money (a frustration in and of itself, especially while our synod is experiencing an almost \$100,000 financial shortfall!), I believe that the trial will provide a means to witness to the gifts of gay clergy and to demonstrate the destructive consequences of the church's current policy. Although it's probably an uphill battle, I'm determined to win the case, praying that the jury will understand that this is a time for understanding and restraint. This is not a time in the church's history when a contested policy that is inconsistent with the Lutheran confessions should be enforced.

As you can see, I have a lot to say. And I'm filled with energy that I'm going to have a chance to say it now to the wider church. Actually I'm filled with all kinds of emotion: hope, anger, disappointment, joy, resolve, as well as anxiety that is mixed with a larger portion of peacefulness.

St. John's is planning to meet after church this Sunday to talk about the recent developments, to share feelings, and to recommit itself to continuing our regular ministry, which is a gift to all of us. I have no doubt the gathering will be filled with the usual

joy that comes when this congregation gets together, even though I suspect many members will be very angry. I'm including below a letter from the council president if anyone is interested, as well as the disclosure letter the bishop sent to the synod. I'm also adding a prayer that a member of the congregation wrote to our online discussion group last night. It brought tears to my eyes last night as I prayed it.

In the next few days, I may not get a chance to respond to every email or phone call, but know that I so deeply appreciate your support and your prayers. I feel like a pilgrim, journeying forward with a great cloud of witnesses.

Peace,
+Bradley

A Prayer from Ann Gerondelis, member of St. John's Lutheran Church, Atlanta, GA

Some days are hard God,
Like today.
When cherished hopes seem to fade
And sacred doors seem to close.
Doors that were once open—
Open at least to discussion
To words of grace
Spoken by compassionate hearts.
And those fading hopes -
Well, they were only hopes for longings to be heard,
For your words of love to be fulfilled,
For justice to win the day,
This one special time,
That your loving kingdom may come here,
Right here.
Right now.
I'm sure you heard our cries.
I'm sure you saw words of love in emails written with grace.
I'm sure you felt our passionate emotions
As we heard others speak of you, God,
In ways that we don't know you.
How could they not know you?
Yes that's why it's a hard day in my book.
And that's why I'm filled with emotions of
Sadness—great sadness,
Of loss
Of anger
Of loneliness.
But the tears streaming down my cheeks
Are probably not the only ones tonight.
Surely you can hear your people cry.
You must cry for your children too.
And I know these are not our last tears.
And I know these emotions will continue to mix and churn -
Not always with words that I am proud to speak.
And yet,

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There's always a "yet"—
(Thanks heavens for "yet"s)
I know that today's not the last day in my calendar.
And I know that the days ahead
Will bring the gathering of your wet-cheeked people.
Yes, we who welcome,
We who love,
We who live by the grace of your mysterious spirit.
And you'll teach us how to love even when it's hard,
To love in spite of,
To love in the midst of,
And to love through the pain—
Even pain that feels so crippling.
So, can you lend a hand God?
'Cause during the weeks to come,
We might lose sight of the simple power of the spirit,
We might lose sight of the importance of tender love,
And we might not be able to see clearly
That brilliant light that we know *will* overcome the darkness.
So be with us now.
Be with me
As I light this candle during these days.
May it fill my heart with the reminder
Even tonight
And through all the tomorrows to come,
That the light, your light, will indeed overcome the darkness.
Inch by inch, corner by corner, and room by room.
With this simple practice,
I pray that your light fill us with hope again.
Fill us with compassion,
And fill us with Your spirit that speaks the truth in love.
Love for all your people.
Now help us rest,
And wake with the light of day,
Reminding us that the light shall indeed overcome the darkness
Justice will reign,
And all shall be well.
All shall indeed be well.
Amen

From the Bishop

A PASTORAL LETTER OF DISCLOSURE sent to Rostered
Colleagues of the Southeastern Synod

August 8, 2006

After a lengthy process of prayerful discernment, today I filed charges against The Rev. Bradley E. Schmeling, presently serving as pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church, Atlanta, GA. Pastor Schmeling has admitted to me that he is in violation of ELCA "Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline..." for ordained ministers. Specifically, Pastor Schmeling disclosed to me that he is in a sexual relationship with an adult male. He has declined my requests for his resignations from his call to St. John's Lutheran

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high regard of self, and certainly not with sexual attraction. It had instead everything to do with the public demonstration of disrespect and ingratitude toward God. For the ancients justice was a social reality, a matter of fair distribution. Conversely, injustice was to deprive persons of what was owed to them. Of what has God been deprived? The answer is in 1:21: glory and thanksgiving. Idolatry, the ancients thought, put God to shame. To prefer the statue of a four-footed animal to God was to demean God.

Now we can see where the divine anger is coming from—disrespect for God. I use the word anger cautiously because I would not want human outbursts of anger justified by the claim that anger is God's way. Clearly, I have some explaining to do, but a satisfying response would involve our investigation of all of Romans 1-8, and that is beyond the scope of this essay. Investigating the ancient construction of anger, however, is necessary for our immediate concerns. We cannot explore Romans 1:18-27 before coming to grips with the theoretical construct behind the whole passage, the ancient classification of the passions.

Passion (*pathos*) was thought to be a disease of the mind, an irrational movement of the soul, and a severe defect in the self that could be cured by the application of reason. The Greek word behind the kind of *pathos* in the case of anger is *orgē*, Paul's word in 1:18. This word does not refer to slow burning irritation but to an outburst at the impression that one has been wronged and publicly put to shame. "Anger" in English is an acceptable choice for either slow burn or fit of temper, but the Greeks were not content with such sloppiness. They were famous for their detailed map of what it feels like to be an elite male. A society of men who prided themselves on self-control required a list of possible symptoms so that the passions might be detected and cured.

So visualize a chart with one word at the top, *pathos* (passion). Now imagine four short lines descending from *pathos* to the following four words: pleasure (*ēdonē*), grief (*lupē*), fear (*phobos*), and desire (*epithumia*). We are not done yet. Under each of these four words, think of fifteen to twenty more refinements. So where does *orgē* fit into this taxonomy of human irrationality? It was listed under desire (*epithumia*). Anger is the desire to have the person who wronged and shamed you feel equivalent shame. In short, anger is the desire to get even.

We are now in a good position to pick our way through 1:18-23. Let me first remind readers why we are correlating Paul's terminology with Greek philosophical definitions of the passions. We have to wipe out any idea that these verses concern themselves with sex or sexuality. It has often been claimed that the "they" of 1:18-23, the ungodly, wicked suppressors of truth, are gay people and that God's anger is directed at them because of their sexuality. The intellectual dishonesty of this claim must be exposed. The best way to do that is to express in first century terms the dynamics of idolatry, the real culprit in Romans 1:18-

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Church and the ELCA clergy roster.

When a synod bishop files charges against a pastor, the action begins the church's formal process which leads to a hearing by a Discipline Hearing Committee (DHC). The DHC receives evidence, listens to witnesses and eventually determines what actions should be taken. For example, if a DHC finds that a pastor is not in compliance with ELCA "Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline..." the committee has the authority to remove a pastor from the ELCA roster for ordained ministers. For more detailed information, see Chapter 20 of the ELCA Constitution (<http://www.elca.org/secretary/constitutions/index.html>).

An ELCA bishop does not have the authority to unilaterally remove any ELCA pastor from the ELCA roster. For this reason, it is necessary to submit this matter to the ELCA disciplinary process. This is an internal church proceeding and does not involve the civil courts.

With the filing of charges, I do not intend to make any further comments about the case until the DHC renders its verdict and course of action. Please remember in intercessory prayer Pastor Bradley Schmeling, his loved ones, St. John's Lutheran Church, and those of us who will be involved in the discipline hearing process.

Sincerely in Christ,

Ronald B. Warren
Bishop

From the Council President

Dear friends in Christ,

I was disappointed to learn today that Bishop Warren has formally filed charges against Pastor Brad. We had hoped that the bishop might make another decision, of course. But the disciplinary hearing process gives us one more chance to tell the story of the ministry we share with Pastor Brad at St. John's, and to make the case that we should continue in ministry as we have since Pastor Brad arrived in 2000.

Now that Bishop Warren has taken this step, I'd like to repeat a piece of the letter I sent to you back in April, after his meeting with our congregation: "So what do we do now? What we've done for the last 135 years: live the community of faith at St. John's."

Now, as in April, there's no cause for us to change anything at St. John's. Pastor Brad continues to serve as our pastor. St. John's relationship with the Southeastern Synod and the ELCA does not change. The Bishop's decision to file charges only means that Pastor Brad now has the chance to make his defense—to tell his story—to the hearing committee. And we continue to pray that he wins his case.

And, in the meantime, we also continue to be the great church we've always been. We gather together for worship each week

around Word and Sacrament. We continue to feed the hungry and do justice with our ministries. We continue as a faithful member congregation of the synod, and we continue to pray for the synod staff, especially our bishop. Our church council and our congregational leaders continue to refuse to allow this process to distract St. John's from our ministry tasks. And when we do have to deal with these issues as a church, we do it with prayer and careful discernment.

I, perhaps like you, feel a range of emotions right now—hope, worry, anger, trust, sadness, fear, optimism, and even relief. And I expect to cycle through these and many other emotions in the days and weeks to come! In the midst of it all, however, I have great confidence and faith in St. John's. Even if I can't see every step in the path before us, I feel Jesus' presence in our midst, walking with us on our journey together. Above all, I feel blessed to be a member with you of our church home, and I feel honored and graced by Pastor Brad's presence at our altar.

Please continue to pray for Pastor Brad and Darin, for Bishop Warren, and for the synod staff. And please join us for our summer Sunday school this coming Sunday. We had originally planned to have a discussion about theology and current events, but it seems like the most pressing current event for St. John's now is the filing of these charges. We would like to give the congregation a chance to express feelings, ask questions, and talk about what the disciplinary process may mean for us.

Plan to bring a dish for the potluck and stay after church for our conversation. It will be a joy to gather together! And thank you for making St. John's what it is today.

With love and prayers,

Laura Crawley

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27. Here is the translation of the New Revised Standard Version, with some important modifications in brackets:

For the wrath [anger: *orgē*] of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness [irreverence: *asebeia*] and wickedness [injustice: *adikia*] of those who by their wickedness [injustice: *adikia*] suppress the truth.¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse;²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools;²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

God's anger is kindled by irreverence—not "ungodliness," a misleading translation that implies immoral activity. What we

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are dealing with is an attitude, disrespect for the God-ness of God, made evident in worshipping the forms of creatures. The God-disregarding attitude comes out again in 1:20: "they" (the idolaters) have ignored the "eternal power and divine nature."

Interpreters have often distorted Paul's words again at the end of verse 18. The plain sense of the text is that "truth" equals "the God-ness of God" or God's "eternal power and divine nature." Contrast this with the frequent claim that "truth" equals "the heterosexual construction of the universe" or "God's design for heterosexual couplings." This is quite a stretch. So is the further claim that since the word, creation, is mentioned in verse 20, Paul is referring to Genesis 1-2 and the story of Adam and Eve, which is (in their minds) a biblical foundation of heterosexuality. But a connection between this Romans text and Genesis is very doubtful. There is no linguistic commonality between the two, and even if it were the case that Paul had Genesis in mind, recent scholarship suggests that the story of the origin of humanity is not as heterosexually biased as some have thought.

This brings us back to the basic story line of Romans 1:18-27. God has been angered by some humans who have engaged in idolatry. They have ruined God's reputation as one worthy of honor and thanksgiving. We move next to the narration of God's response to idolatry. God responds by handing over the idolaters to "desires" (1:24) and "passions" (1:25). There is still no mention of homosexuality, but this does not prevent some scholars from saying so. They assert "God handed them over" really meant "God allowed them to continue in their homosexual ways." Notice their need to substitute "allow" for "hand over." Yet the Greek word *paradidōmai* means nothing other than "hand over" either in the sense of passing on tradition or turning an accused criminal in to the authorities for punishment. The pieces of the puzzle are starting to fall into place. By placing Romans 1:18-27 in the context of the ancient philosophic classification of the passions, we see the direction of Paul's story. God responded to the idolaters by handing them over to *pathos*.

Our next task is to figure out the connection between *pathos* and shame. This connection is difficult to grasp, since we frequently use the word "passion" in a positive way. "She has passion for her work" we might say. But the Greek term *pathos* carries no positive connotation whatsoever. Think instead of such phrases as "the pathologist's report" or "the spread of pathogens." The Stoic philosopher, Chrysippus, drew attention to a helpful analogy. Walking is controlled falling. When walking occurs on a flat surface, the mind controls the body's movements and produces a pleasing, even graceful effect. But, if a walker starts at the top of a hill and proceeds downwards faster and faster, the legs take on a life of their own. Then the body is out of control and the mind cannot call it back. Chrysippus said this is what happens with *pathos*. The body, contorted and indecorous, is out of control. Just look at your face in a mirror when you are in a fit of anger. Not pretty.

And that loss of control over the body was shameful. Passion was female and slavish, bestial and barbarian. Invulnerability and freedom to act upon the world according to the dictates of reason—these were the marks of a real man. To have a passion such as fear, grief, pleasure, or desire was a grave disappointment, not unlike the feeling of self-hatred and embarrassment we moderns feel when we go off a diet. Our bodies are out of control, and this produces shame. In 1:24 we read that the desires into which God has deposited the idolaters end up dishonoring (*atimazw*) the body. Similarly, in 1:26 the passions are *pathē atimias*, dishonoring passions.

We will now take what we have learned about the ancient understanding of the emotions and apply it to the two verses some are certain condemn gay and lesbian people today. In fact something quite different is going on in 1:26-27. Paul is giving here two examples of how God sometime in the past handed idolaters over to passion so that they might experience the shame they had caused God.

Interpreters of all stripes have assumed that Paul first talks about lesbians. This is not an unreasonable interpretation of 1:26. Nevertheless, there is a different view advocated by a number of patristic writers from the early centuries of the Christian church, and a growing number of modern interpreters echo this ancient view: Paul had in his sights not lesbians but women in (what we would call) heterosexual marriages. Apparently, these women were enjoying sex too much. The philosophical groups of Paul's day, preeminently the Stoics, taught that self-control and eradication of passion ought to be extended to every part of life, especially to marriage. Parts of the Christian church even today teach that sex in marriage is not for pleasure but for procreation. If pleasure happens, well, fine, but the real purposes of sex is to procreate and to symbolize the gender complementarity that holds together the family, the church, and even God with the world. Anyone who doubts that this passionless marriage ethic had its origins in Greek moral thought ought to read Clement of Alexandria, one of the widest conduits through which the Greek philosophical ideal of self-control flowed into Christian moral theology. My point is this. Very few male writers in the ancient world thought about lesbians. Their minds were pre-occupied with the rational control of their own bodies.

Yet modern translations of 1:26 sound as if a multitude of straight women had just become lesbians, as, for example, in the New Revised Standard Version: "...their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural." The problem here is the phrase "natural intercourse." It is a misleading translation and explains why lesbians are read into 1:26. The King James Version gets it right: ". . . for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature." Notice that the KJV has the rather strange but accurate "natural use" whereas the NRSV has the familiar but dead wrong "natural intercourse." What is going on here? The NRSV has committed the error of anachronism. The term "intercourse" implies that sex is some-

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thing that happens between persons, but the Greek word in 1:26 is *chrēsis*, a very common term which means exactly what the KJV said that it meant, use. Think of the use of clothing or the use of food. Nothing mysterious here. In fact, it is the everyday, practical meaning of *chrēsis* that tempts modern writers to project their own understanding of sex as relationship—as intercourse—back into Paul's text, which for whatever else it may be, is still an ancient text containing ancient forms of thought.

What did "natural use" mean? Actually, this phrase played a key role in Greek ethical thinking in Paul's day. It designated a person's use of objects without passion. The natural use of food was to eat enough to satisfy hunger and to stay well. To use food unnaturally was to gourmandize. The natural use of clothing was to wear something to stay warm and to fulfill the requirements of modesty. To use clothing unnaturally was to dress luxuriously to display social status. The natural use of sex was to do it occasionally, without enthusiasm, and only for the purpose of procreation. The unnatural use of sex was to allow pleasure to creep in and take over.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the correct understanding of the phrase "natural use."

Many writers, like Robert Gagnon, are convinced that "natural" means conformity with the heterosexual construction of the universe as revealed in Genesis 1-2. What they don't seem to appreciate is that neither "nature" nor "natural" occur in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. "Nature" was a Greek philosophical idea, and when "natural" was paired with "use" it meant the use of an object without passion. Some commentators compound their lack of knowledge of the Bible with the anachronistic "intercourse" and then insist that Paul's words are crystal clear. But clarity about Paul's argument in Romans 1 only comes after the hard work of respecting him enough to learn first century ways of thinking. The long and short of it is that 1:26 is not about women loving women. It is about married women taking too much pleasure in marital relations. If this sounds strange, welcome to the philosophical ethics designed by and for elite males of the first century.

If lesbianism is not the issue in 1:26, then this verse has no relevance to the church's current sexuality debate. We should respect Paul's words enough to disregard them. 1:27 is not so easy to deal with, however, since males with males are plainly named. Is there a way to respect Paul's words and still disregard them?

Historians and New Testament scholars have made important contributions to the understanding of this verse in its own cultural terms. The most important approach, I believe, has been to raise doubts about the "homosexuality" of the males. That is, we have learned from such scholars as Sir Kenneth Dover, Michael Foucault, and David Halperin that the ancients did not classify persons as homosexual or heterosexual. These designations had to wait until the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Just to be clear, I am not claiming that women started loving women and men loving men only a little over a century ago. But to have one's identity defined by the gender of the person to whom one is attracted, and to have a clinical designation for these desires, that is a modern cultural novelty.

The ancients had their own, quite different way to classify sex lives: there were those who penetrate and those who were penetrated. Elite males feverishly preserved their role as those who penetrate. Those penetrated, whether men or women, were categorized as female and blamed for their passive role. There is more to the story of first century sex, but these brief remarks show how historical and cross-cultural approaches to Paul's text impose a strict discipline upon the words we choose. When writers say that Paul in 1:27 is speaking about homosexuals, homosexuality, or homosexual behavior, they are projecting their own culture's method of classification into a century where it does not belong.

So what would a culturally sensitive interpretation of 1:27 be like? First recall what I said about "natural use" in 1:26. The phrase occurs again in 1:27 with an addition, "natural use of the female," that only widens the gap between ancient and modern understandings of sex. Let's continue with my translation of the verse. It incorporates the interpretive claims I will make to conclude this essay.

Likewise, the males left off the natural use of the female and were inflamed for one another in their appetite, males among males producing indecorousness and receiving back in themselves the punishment which was necessary from their error.

There would be little disagreement that the form of Paul's speech is a narrative. Many interpreters do not appreciate, however, that Paul is plugging into the very end a story line that was well known in his day, the tale of the profligate. When ancient moralists wanted to illustrate the vice of *akrateia* (lack of self-control) they told a story. Dio Chrysostom (Oration 7.148-152) reports that the man whose "appetite is insatiable" will begin by seducing women, first slave, then the freeborn and virgins, and then, leaving them, will corrupt young males, first slave then free. In other renditions of this story, the profligate starts the downward spiral with gluttony but soon moves to sexual conquests, first female and then male. Paul has zeroed in on the end state of male *akrateia*, the seduction of males.

Notice how this story line defies the modern binary classifications of homosexual/heterosexual. The ancients would not have understood the modern penchant for distinguishing two kinds of desire. For them, sexual desire was uniform. The difference from our modern ways of organizing sexual experience, once it has been seen and recognized, should persuade us to disregard Romans 1:27 as a source of moral knowledge. As Dale Martin has pointed out, the problem with the ancient profligate was not that he had the wrong kind of desire. Rather, he had too much desire. If we want to understand Romans 1:27 on its own terms, then we must realize that pathos, not orientation,

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drives the story.

The profligate's story fits perfectly with the plot of 1:18-32. Idolaters shamed God so God shamed idolaters. God handed them over to *pathos*, which, in the eyes of elite males, brought shame in its wake. Observing the limits of a letter, Paul made a rhetorical decision. To make a long story short, Paul went to the end of a well read script. Skipping gluttony and womanizing, he has God turning the idolaters over to an activity immediately recognizable to his audience as a sign of unnatural (i. e., too much) passion, males corrupting freeborn youth. Such lack of self-control produces *aschēmosynē* ("indecorousness"), a word usually associated with the "look" a person has when his or her body has acted independently of reason. Think, for example, of burping (or worse).

I need not dwell on the obvious connection to shame. In the case of the idolaters, the punishment they received in their bodies, which was necessary from their "error" (which I take to be erotic passion itself, although it might refer to idolatry) is the shame elite males felt when invaded and taken over by *pathos*. Paul even borrows a technical phrase from Stoic psychology, which would also have been appreciated by the non-specialists in his audience. The idolaters have been turned over to passion and suffer from an inflamed *orexis* (appetite). To be inflamed in one's *orexis* was to be insatiable. This was unseemly.

I admit that I have made an unusual argument, but it was inspired by my recent re-reading of Martin Luther's *How Christians Should Regard Moses*. There I learned of the paradox of regard and disregard. If we regard Paul's words in his cultural context, we might need to disregard them in our own deliberations. Unfortunately, many Christians have a tin ear for paradox. They have brought Paul's words to bear on our contemporary struggle to define what is ethical in erotic relationships, but in the process they have distorted the apostle's argument beyond recognition. They have redefined idolatry and anachronistically projected homosexuality/heterosexuality back into the first century.

When Romans 1:18-27 is liberated from their errors, we have an argument that is, first of all, quite foreign to us and, frankly, disappointing. Apparently, Paul like other elite males in ancient culture thought of sex as "the use of the female." I would imagine that none of us today would approve this heartless objectification of the "other." The other result of stripping the text of the heterosexist anachronisms and projections is the happy discovery that Paul's words are completely neutral when it comes to GLBT persons. God's problem was with idolaters. They were the ones who angered God. Brothers and sisters who love outside of heterosexuality are simply not in this text, unless of course they are busily worshipping statues of lizards, birds, four-footed animals, and the like. Then they had better look out.

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EMBRACING ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE: THE INCLUSIVENESS OF THE CHURCH

by William Schilling

{From a message given to Grace United Church of Christ,

Frederick, Maryland, June 18, 2006}

Scripture Setting: John 8:2-11

Early in the morning, [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say." They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

I am here largely because of work I have done in the Lutheran church on behalf of gays, but the question before this congregation and before all of who profess to be Christians is larger than that. It is who is welcome, who is included in the family of Christ? It is the issue of inclusiveness.

Let me be clear that the issue is not one of tolerance. I dislike that word.

Tolerance means forbearing or lenient treatment. It is synonymous with words like charity, indulgence, forbearance, and leniency. When we tolerate, it means that we brook, bear, suffer, swallow, abide, or endure something distasteful.

No, what I am here to discuss is our Christian welcome to others. I mean that in the sense of a true embracing and acceptance of people even if we don't agree with them, like them, or embrace all of their actions or lifestyles. It is an issue of Christian love and family—the family of Christ.

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Who am I to talk to you about this? I am a Christian who, as a gay man, has experienced exclusion in the Christian church. I was born and raised in East Central Illinois and was baptized, raised, and confirmed in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod.

Was I gay from birth? Well, that's another issue that we can talk about on another day. Let's just say I knew I was different from an early age. For today, what is important is that I was deemed an abomination in the eyes of my church. That was the term used in my confirmation lessons. I was taught that the church condemned homosexuals and homosexual behavior. We were outcasts in the eyes of the church. Eventually, I left the church especially as it moved to the right and became even more intolerant.

But there was an emptiness in my life and need for community. Fortunately for me, despite the fact that I left the church, Christ never left me. It was an act of Christian inclusiveness that brought me back. A Christian hand reached out to me-- "Come to Georgetown Lutheran; try my church; we're different; you'd be welcome."

I did and it was a welcoming place. But I sat in the back pew. I was hesitant. I didn't take communion. I remembered that in the eyes of God (at least according to my earlier church) I was unclean. Then one day, the pastor during a bike ride asked me why I didn't join, why I sat in the back, and why I didn't take communion. I told her and she asked me to do her a favor. She asked me to read the Gospels about the Last Supper and then come back and talk. I agreed.

I want to put the lesson I learned into the form of a parable, I wrote a long time ago. I call it the Parable of the Water.

In a distant land, a couple of shepherds stumbled upon a new spring of water flowing from a cleft in a rock. The water was pure, cold, clear, and delicious, and it filled these poor shepherds with energy. The shepherds told others of this new spring and others came to see and to taste the water. Everyone agreed it was the best water they had ever tasted. Some claimed that it was miraculous and cured ills.

The word spread and more people came to this miraculous spring. Crowds formed and the land around the spring became trampled, the path became worn, rutted, and muddy.

The local leaders and those living around the spring decided that a road must be built to guide people to and from the spring and a structure erected to protect and honor the spring. But the water was so wonderful and miraculous that a simple structure wouldn't do. A grand monument was required. It was built and then it was expanded. Special chambers and rooms were built for those traveling to the spring so they could rest, clean up, reflect, and offer thanks. Other rooms were added for teaching about the spring, its history and its power. Teachers were appointed, and others to guide the visitors. Others were appointed to govern the spring and to protect it. Some were chosen, trained, and appointed to carry the water to distant places.

Rules were developed as to when and how people could have the water and who could receive it and who couldn't. There were disputes. Some were denied access. There were struggles over the water; people fought, and some were killed. Schisms occurred and even stricter rules and rituals were imposed.

Through all of this development and controversy, only one thing remained constant, the water. It continued to flow freely--pure and miraculous. The water was the gift. It was a gift from God to all who wanted it. It was man, not God, who created the rules, structures, ceremonies, and limitations. It was man who denied access. The water itself was a gift of God

That is what I learned about Communion. The pastor on the bicycle, who had asked me to read the Gospels and to come back, then asked me about all of the rituals, requirements, limitations, and restrictions that had been imposed by Christ. There was only one, "Do this in remembrance of me."

That's it. That's the only one. Do this in remembrance of me. The gift--the bread and the wine, the new covenant, the forgiveness of sins--is a gift of God. The Church does not own the gift. It was given to all people by God as one of us through Christ. This gift, the Eucharist, which He instituted was for all and was to be received by us in remembrance of the greatest gift of all time, Jesus Christ. Like the water of the parable, the Eucharist is a gift of God. The rituals and rules of the church were created by man.

That brings me back to the Scripture for today about the adulteress brought before Jesus. Let me start by saying that we all pick and choose Scripture that suits us and we apply it to our needs. Each church does it. I confess no skill or theological training and my choices and interpretations are as imperfect as anyone else's. But I have found many passages of the Bible to bear particularly to the issue of Christian inclusiveness. The Scripture setting I chose for this message is one of them.

We know two facts in this verse: First, the woman was guilty. She was caught in the very act of adultery. So there was no question of guilt. Second, the law was very clear. She was to be stoned to death. Given those facts, there are three key lessons in this Scripture that bear on inclusiveness:

First, Christ says that we are not to judge others. He does this several places in the Gospels. But here he looks at these "holy men" and asks "Who are you to judge other people? Who are you to exclude, to shun, to deny people? Are you pure? Are you without sin?"

Second, Christ forgives. "Neither do I condemn you." She was guilty and yet Jesus chose not to condemn her. He chose not to impose the death sentence required by the law. Instead He embraced her in His love despite her sin.

Third, forgiven, we are to try to lead better lives. "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

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Let me say it again. Christ says it isn't up to us to decide whom to condemn or exclude. Jesus knows our frailties and he accepts and loves us anyway. He is prepared to forgive. So should we.

Finally, Christ asks us, as individuals, to try to lead better lives.

A second Scripture reading, Matthew 22:34-40, gives us a good foundation from which to do that:

When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. All else is built on this! So where does all of this lead us as individuals and as a family of Christ on the issue of inclusion and acceptance?

First, let us go back to the parable of the water. God's love, His grace and his mercy are a gift. They are not owned by the church and we have no right to limit anyone's access. As Jesus cried out in Jerusalem, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and let the one who believes in me drink" (John 7:37).

Second, we are to embrace all people as brothers and sisters—all of them, Christian and non-Christian, rich and poor, straight and gay, black and white, strong and weak. It is not up to us to judge and we are to do our very, very best to love and truly embrace everyone. As Jesus said, "Let anyone among you who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This means that doors of our churches must be open and more than open. There needs not only to be a ramp for the disabled but a desire that the disabled join us. There should not only be Braille on the fixtures but a genuine interest in helping to lead the way, a helping hand for the blind. There should not be a mere tolerance of differences but a real hunger to understand, to listen, and to embrace.

There must always be a hand reaching out—like the one to me inviting me to come to Georgetown Lutheran. There must be a willingness in each of us to offer Christ in our daily lives to others. We are the arms of the Church—of Christ—that are to reach out and embrace others.

We can say no, but only to protect. Inclusiveness, as a church, does not mean we can never say no? But I think we can only do so to protect those who are unable to protect themselves. In fact, it is our duty as Christians to protect the poor, the exploited, the infirm, the young, and others who cannot protect

themselves. But, we must be very, very careful about going beyond that. We have to take great care not to create barriers just because we don't like, don't agree, or are not comfortable with something.

I do not mean that we should be libertine and do whatever we want. Remember the injunction of Jesus to the adulteress, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." If you look at most of the instruction by Jesus, it was on how we as individuals are to behave, to lead our lives.

Some would say that as a homosexual, I am a sinner. Well, I will put you at ease. I confess that I am a sinner. We are all sinners. But I am not a sinner just because I happen to be gay. I am a sinner because I am human just like everyone else.

There are others who profess that they will love me—or at least tolerate me—despite the fact that I am gay, but they cannot condone gay actions. If therefore I act on my gayness, if I live a gay life, then they can not condone that. I must be condemned and shunned. It's the old "love the sinner, hate the sin" position. But can they toss those stones? Are they to make that judgment? If I act upon my nature only in love, compassion, and in truth, is that wrong? Is that for them to judge, or is it a matter between God and me?

Let me put it another way. In the forest of God's creation, there are many trees, tall oaks and redwoods, and smaller junipers and willows, thousands of varieties. Even within one species, there are trees that are tall and straight, and tower towards the heavens and others that are small, twisted, or bent.

Who knows why certain trees are different from the others? Maybe they grew in the shade. Maybe their seeds were slightly different. Maybe the soil they fell on was less nourishing. We may never know why. Nonetheless, they are trees and they are a part of God's great design.

I am one of those different trees in God's forest—perhaps one of the twisted ones. Should I be shunned or excluded by the majestic towering redwoods just because I am smaller, or twisted, or different?

Our Lord was crucified on a tree. It was probably a tall and straight one. Let the tree without blemish or defect make the decision to exclude me or anyone from the forest of our Lord's creation. Let us instead seek to embrace all of God's people in a true inclusiveness, in a true desire to join together as one family in Christ.

William Schilling is a member of Georgetown Lutheran Church in Washington DC. He serves on the Task Force for Gay and Lesbian Ministry of the Metropolitan Washington DC Synod. His email address is william.schilling@napeo.org

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