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TAKING OUR ETHICS FROM THE BIBLE:

A discussion with Ralph W. Klein

What role should/does the Bible play when Christians make ethical decisions?

Christians look to the Bible to see how our forebears in the faith made decisions, under God's guidance, in ethical matters. They realize at the same time that those decisions have often been revised or expanded as the centuries have rolled past and that our experience, the growth in human knowledge, and our particular cultural contexts must be taken into consideration as we attempt to apply the Bi-

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SURPRISED BY GRACE IN A PAINFUL TASK:

Reflections of a Member of the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality

by Kevin Maly

Costly. It's the only word I can find to describe the experience of serving on the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. Though costly, I count my participation on the Task Force perhaps the most profound experience of my life.

From the first meeting of the Task Force, it was apparent to all of us—in spite of what people on every side have opined—that there was nothing resembling consensus among us with regard to our first two tasks. We were to make recommendations to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly, first, regarding the blessing of committed same-sex relationships and, secondly, regarding the rostering of people in committed same-sex relationships. It was also apparent to me that I was more

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ble to our time. The authority of the Bible, in the Lutheran Confessions, lies in its unfailing ability to enunciate for us the graciousness of God, known finally for us in Jesus Christ. The Gospel gives the Scriptures their authority.

But cannot tradition, church councils, human knowledge, and especially our experience err?

Indeed. We learn from both the insights and mistakes of our predecessors in the faith, and we need to be conscious of our own limitations and blind spots. Krister Stendahl has also reminded us for many years now that there is a distinction between “what the Bible meant” in its original context and “what it might mean” in today’s world and in today’s church.

Where can we look in the Bible for guidance on ethical questions?

In a wide variety of texts: the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount and other words of Jesus, the writings of the prophets, the exhortations of Paul, and the stories of how Israel and the early church lived out the faith in daily life, individually and communally. We should not neglect the ethical implications of the fact that the God of the Bible is known as one who freed slaves from Egypt, brings down the powerful from their thrones and raises up the lowly, and announces good news to the poor. Few have challenged our complacency as effectively as Amos who demanded that justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

What about the Ten Commandments? How do they help?

Christians, and especially Lutheran Christians, have relied heavily on these commandments to instruct young and old alike. These commandments are given by the one who established Israel as a community through the Exodus and whose work was continued in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is these saving acts that give the commandments their authority. The fact that the commandments deal with specific issues and are stated negatively should also not be overlooked. The Sixth Commandment forbids adultery, which in the Bible refers to a man sleeping with another man’s wife. A holistic sexual ethic involves much more than avoiding adultery!

You have referred to the Ten Commandments as staking out a “playpen”? What do you mean by that?

At certain crucial points the commandments indicate the clear limits to the freedom enjoyed by the children of God. If someone serves other gods, commits murder, sleeps with another person’s spouse, or tells a lie in court (the original meaning of the eighth commandment), that person has stepped outside the boundaries of the community, outside the “playpen.” Inside the playpen, believers are expected to live righteously, with maximum love for God and the neighbor.

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filled with fear than I had been in most of my adult life.

For LGBT people, it’s a truism that coming-out is a process that never ends. Within the first moments of the Task Force’s work, I had to come out once again, and, as is most often the case, to a group of strangers. I had certainly done that before, but this felt different. There I was among a group of people who were my sisters and brothers in Christ—and ones from my own Lutheran “tribe” to boot. I wanted to feel safe there, at home, with family. Yet nothing could have been further from the truth. I felt odd, singled out, on trial. I had no way of knowing who was a friend and who came to that meeting thinking of LGBT people as abominations. Here, writ large for me, was the tragedy of being a loyal son of the Church who, it just so happens, is gifted with being gay. The very place that I hoped would be among the safest of places under heaven was in reality the most frightening.

As the only rostered and “out” gay person on the Task Force, I felt alone, alone beyond words, even as I tried to find words to express who I am as a baptized child of God. I also felt alone because I came to the work of the Task Force clear within myself that I could in no way speak for all LGBT people. I neither did nor could represent in any official way a constituency whose predetermined position I was bound to articulate. I could only speak truth as I had come to know it as a baptized child of God, who is openly gay and who has been called to the office of Word and Sacrament by the Holy Spirit as She works through external means in the church. (I responded to that call with a great deal of kicking and screaming, but that’s another story.)

Even though I would continue to feel alone in many ways—and still do, our tasks not yet being finished—my feelings of desolation were quickly tempered, and I began to find consolation. Perhaps more accurately, consolation found me. The chair and chaplain of the Task Force was Bishop Margaret Payne of the New England Synod, and it was quickly made manifest that Bishop Payne was a compassionate, down-to-earth woman of deep faith, who was determined that we would do our work always in the context of Word and Sacrament. Talk about amazing grace! The Spirit worked through Bishop Payne’s ministry in such a way that my own arrogance was being put to death, that all of our spirits were being revived, and that we were coming to trust that we were surrounded by the love of God in Christ Jesus.

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There were people on the Task Force who were quickly becoming Christ bearers for me. Miracle of miracles, they were not always the people with whom I was in agreement.

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How about life inside the playpen, to use your metaphor? Doesn't the Bible supply additional guidance to believers?

Yes, often; no, also often. Jesus talked of those who lust after another person as already adulterers, and those who hate as already murderers. That is, he moved beyond actions to thoughts and desires. But there are many ethical decisions we make daily for which there is only general, not specific, guidance in the Bible. Consider the following ethical issues: how I use my talents in my life's work, whom I marry, how I spend my money, how I vote, what I do with my leisure time. All of these are issues that we face every day and they are issues on which the Bible's advice is often quite indirect, but that hardly lessens the imperative that we live righteously in these realms.

You spoke of a holistic sexual ethic. How might the Bible guide us here?

We need to recognize some of the great differences between the present and the past when it comes to marriage and sex. People in the Bible got married when they were fourteen or fifteen, and almost all marriages were arranged by the parents. Only recently have we understood how much the biblical world was affected by patriarchy. The laws on rape in Deuteronomy 22:23-27, for example, suggest that the court should doubt a woman's word if she claims that she was raped in the city, but believe her claim if the rape took place in the country. These laws presume that the city woman should have cried out and that someone would have heard her in a small biblical city. Since no one heard her cry, she must have been a willing participant. But if the man through superior strength or threat of violence kept her from shouting out, should we conclude she was a willing participant? The woman's point of view is undervalued and given grossly inadequate attention in these laws dealing with rape. Their patriarchal bias shows them to be flawed in a full understanding of women's place among the saints.

That does sound bad. But are there not more positive helps the Bible offers when it comes to sex?

Indeed. The Bible often shows a profound understanding of sex. In marriage the man and woman become "one flesh." Has one ever described the majesty and mystery of marriage and sex better? What we describe clinically as coitus or what is colloquially known as "making love" is described this way in the Bible: "Now the man knew his wife Eve" (Genesis 4:1). That is a beautiful description. Ephesians exhorts: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25). I wish Ephesians spoke a bit more clearly about the role of wives in marriage, but we men are surely challenged to a very high standard by this admonition.

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When the Task Force gathered for its second meeting, the fruits of the Spirit planted in our first session began to ripen. There were people on the Task Force who were quickly becoming Christ bearers—*Theotokos*, Mother of God—for me. Miracle of miracles, they weren't always the people with whom I was in agreement. I was being surprised by grace and was finding myself falling in love with those whom I would naturally have labeled enemies. Nor was I alone in this experience. With little exception, members of the Task Force have continued to bear witness to our being formed into a community of the baptized, constituted by Word and Sacrament, truly sisters and brothers in Christ—not by our own reason or strength, but always by the workings of the Holy Spirit.

I also came to know in a new and very real way that Christian community is messy. Far from disappearing, our differences in many ways became more acutely obvious. We found freedom to speak our truths with passion, but we discovered that our passions were experienced by others in ways that were very often painful, in ways that wounded anew and peeled the protective layers off wounds we thought had long been healed. But under the gospel we were also free to ask forgiveness of one another and to offer one another absolution. I would be less than honest if I said absolution came easily; numerous were the times when, with every fiber of my being, the very last thing I wanted to do was forgive a brother or a sister. I found, however, that my will was, in a mysterious way, bound—not by sin, but marvelously by the gospel. In absolving those whom I did not want to absolve, part of me was put to death, and a new self, one that I could never have given birth to, arose.

For me, one of the most difficult sessions of the Task Force was one during which a panel of ELCA teaching theologians presented their considered positions on the questions before us. As each spoke, I came more and more to feel less and less a human being, let alone a beloved and baptized child of God. Gay and lesbian people (transgender and bisexual people weren't even on their radar) were a problem to be dealt with, a malignant and stubborn tumor to be excised, so that the Church could "get on with things that truly matter." The teaching theologians were people of privilege, tenured faculty at ELCA institutions, heterosexuals all, who seemed to stand upon the heights, far above the cross, hurling pronouncements down upon those

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The ELCA has addressed the issue of homosexuality. What guidance does the Bible give on this question?

The answer is complicated. First of all, few biblical passages speak about this question. Jesus never mentions the subject, one way or another. Where the Bible does discuss it, there are always issues of interpretation or other extenuating circumstances. We are faced with many challenges in deciding what these passages meant and what they might mean today.

But does not the Bible condemn Sodom precisely because of homosexuality? That's why certain homosexual actions are called Sodomy.

God told Abraham that the sin of Sodom was very grave, without going into details (Genesis 18:20), and much later the prophet Ezekiel accused Sodom of "pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease," and failure to "aid the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49). When the two angels visited Lot in Sodom, all the men of the city threatened them with homosexual rape. That's why God struck them with blindness. Clearly, homosexual and heterosexual rape are wrong and sinful, expressing violence in addition to lust. No one ever claimed that heterosexual rape made heterosexual sex wrong. The Sodom story doesn't address homosexual relationships between committed adults.

I know Leviticus deals with details of the sacrificial system and a kosher diet that don't apply to Gentile Christians, but doesn't it discuss homosexuality and aren't its ethical words normative even for us?

Leviticus 18 deals with forbidden sexual relations, such as with one's father's wife, one's sister, daughter-in-law, or with both a woman and her daughter. Then, within a paragraph consisting of vv. 19-23, it exhorts: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman."

Isn't that clear enough?

The difficulty is, that paragraph mentions two other issues. First, it says that a husband and wife should not sleep together during a woman's menstrual period. While that is understandable in antiquity, when both semen and blood made a person ritually unclean, few modern couples consider this an ethical question. We recognize it as a culturally conditioned, time-bound prohibition. Couples today decide on esthetic or other considerations whether to make love during a woman's period. Secondly, the paragraph also rules out sexual relations between a human being and an animal. Here the believing community and the wider society are in absolute agreement. We recognize such sex as ultimately selfish and exploitative. People who do such actions are wrong—we would probably either arrest them or require extensive counseling.

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who dwelt in the gutter. (The Rev. Dr. Ralph Klein was the one exception.) All too apparent to me—and to some others—was that LGBT people were, in the eyes of these people of power, intractably naughty children of a lesser god—a much, much lesser god. What, I wondered, had happened to the theology of the cross? I was hearing not about the God of the Cross whose perfect will it is to be found with the outcast; rather, I was hearing of some disembodied, un-incarnated god, an unfeeling, un-suffering deity, who was little more than a set of moral pronouncements, the enforcement of which had been delegated to white heterosexuals, who, at least from their presentations, seemed unable to see gays and lesbians from any viewpoint other than their positions of secure and extreme privilege.

My remarks to this effect were reported in an issue of *The Lutheran* (David Miller, "Sexuality Task Force Struggles with Diverse Science, Theology," June, 2003) with the writer observing that I was visibly shaken (or words to that effect). The reporter observed only the prelude to my real meltdown. I was able to keep myself reasonably together until a break, at which point I fled the room. I was not

about to let these people see me sobbing, to let them know that they had any power over me. But here, in the midst of a terrifying grief, a heterosexual male of privilege, one serving on the Task Force, came after me, took me in his arms and said, "Kevin, I love you." Truly, grace happens.

Grace would continue to happen in all the meetings that followed, not cheap grace, but that paradoxical, costly grace that shows itself in, with, and under its opposite. In deepest night, the light did shine, that light "the darkness comprehended...not" (John 1:5). The darkness, however, does not disappear; the light shines in the darkness.

To me, at least, both the light and the darkness are apparent in the report of the Task Force (a report that differed from what the Church Council put forward for the consideration of the Church-wide Assembly). Because what is light for me may not be light for others, I'll make no claims regarding what I think shines out in our work. There is, however, for me a darkness I need to name. In our report, we were unable to ask or to attempt to describe how it is that we might give Christ, all Christ's benefits, and all Christ's blessings, to one another as embodied, down-to-earth beings, bearing the complex gifts of human sexuality. For me, our final statements were by and large centered in the law, with little more than a passing glance at the gospel. I cannot lay blame for this at anyone else's feet. We are all in bond-

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In our report, we were unable to ask or to attempt to describe how it is that we might give Christ, all Christ's benefits, and all Christ's blessings, to one another as embodied, down-to-earth beings, bearing the complex gifts of human sexuality.

But what does this have to do with homosexuality?

I mentioned that two other actions were discussed in this paragraph from Leviticus. The prohibition about a couple sleeping together during a woman's period is now considered by us as time-bound, almost irrelevant; the prohibition about sleeping with an animal is totally endorsed by us. Is the prohibition against homosexuality more like the first case (sex during menstruation), or more like the second case (sex with an animal)? If a person is free to disregard the first prohibition, could not a person in principle consider the prohibition against homosexual actions similarly outdated.

But doesn't Paul forbid both male and female homosexual actions in Romans 1?

Yes, but... Once again, it's a complicated issue and deserves more space than I have here. In Romans 1-3 Paul argues that both the Gentiles and the Jews have rejected God and need the salvation offered by Christ. He finds the sin of the Gentiles to lie in their idolatry, for which God has consigned them to the lusts of their hearts, to the degrading of their bodies...

...That is, to homosexual actions?

Yes, but... There are at least three extenuating circumstances that call the direct applicability of this passage into some question. First, Paul speaks of people's "passions." Some scholars have proposed that Paul and many ancients thought that everything, sex included, should be done within limits, without excessive passion. Paul infers that homosexual persons surrender to their excessive passions. We might call them sexual addicts today. Did not Luther himself say that whatever we fear, love, and trust is our god? All of us, gay and straight, could turn sex into our god.

OK, that's one point. But doesn't Paul consider homosexual actions "unnatural"?

Yes, but... What does he mean by unnatural? Does he mean that male and female genital organs just naturally fit together? Does he mean that natural sex is about reproduction? Paul's understanding of what is natural and our understanding of what is natural are not necessarily the same thing. In 1 Corinthians 11:14-15, Paul argues that nature itself teaches that if a man wears long hair it is degrading and if a woman wears long hair it is her glory. Look around your congregation. There are many long-haired men and short-haired women. We don't consider that unnatural at all; "nature" teaches modern Christians something different. Could Paul's observations about nature and homosexuality also be time-bound?

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age to sin and cannot free ourselves—and I take my own failure to trust God's promise to be the essence of that which we call sin.

Most of the work of the Task Force was transparent and open for all to see. There were exceptions. The very few sessions that were closed had to do with personnel matters, and the deliberations and the resulting decisions were made public. One meeting, however, was closed at the request of the person testifying before the Task Force. Speculation and accusations regarding the nature of that session have come from various quarters. For the record, all of these surmisals have been inaccurate. What took place there occurred under the seal of the confessional and must forever remain sealed. I ask people who profess to be of good will never again to speak of it or speculate concerning it.

In spite of what I see as my own failures in the work of the Task Force, I find several positives to have come out of the actions of the Churchwide Assembly, one of which had to do with a substitute resolution that called for the strict enforcement of "Vision and Expectations" (V & E). Though the strict enforcement being called for was purported to be one that would apply to all the requirements of V & E, occurring as it did within the context of the discussion regarding the rostering of candidates in same-sex committed relationships, the proposal was clearly about singling out one sentence of V & E for strict enforcement, namely, "Ordained ministers who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships." The vote to substitute this motion overwhelmingly failed, signaling to many that though the ELCA is not at all clear about the role of ordained or otherwise rostered LGBT people in our church, there was no stomach within the Assembly for discovering and routing out those LGBT people who are living in a faithful, committed, life-long relationship with a same-sex partner.

These remarks concerning the work of the Task Force would be inadequate without a final observation. I must bear witness to the power of prayer. I did not take a breath but that I was buoyed up by the knowledge that there were people praying for me. Some of those people I know, most will forever be known only to God. Chief among the known are the saints I have been called to serve at St. Paul Church in Denver. Their ministry of the gospel is profound and profoundly faithful. What's more, they continue to teach me that I am called to preach, teach, and administer the sacraments—and then get out of the way! I also must pay my deepest respects to those LGBT sisters and brothers—you know who you are—who so faithfully came to the meetings of the Task Force to let me and others know that we were not alone. Though we did not agree with one another in every area, their love was palpable, their very presence a constant and powerful intercessory prayer. Finally, I give thanks to God for those dear ones for whom my work on the Task Force

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OK, again. But doesn't Paul condemn people for choosing to be homosexual? He says they "exchanged" one form of intercourse for another.

Yes, but... Since the late 19th century, Western science has observed that some people are primarily or even exclusively attracted sexually only to people of their same gender. We call this "sexual orientation." No one fully understands the reasons for this. Is orientation the result of "nature" (genetics) or "nurture" (upbringing) or a combination of both nature and nurture and "other things"? Whatever the reason for their orientation, people do not choose to be gay or lesbian; they simply are that.

OK, again. But shouldn't such people just be celibate?

Some of them will no doubt choose to be so, just as some heterosexual people never have sexual relations with another person. Long-term sexual abstinence for religious reasons is called celibacy. But Martin Luther observed that celibacy is a gift received only by a few and should not be required of clergy or of others. Is it not logical that the majority of homosexual people would not have the gift of celibacy?

Granted that we haven't looked at every passage, but you seem to be saying that with every passage in Scripture relating to homosexuality, there are extenuating circumstances or contextual reasons to question its applicability to the modern discussion?

Indeed. I'm still very much learning in this area. But that is my provisional judgment.

Let's assume for the sake of argument—and only for that!—that you're right. How would one construct an ethic of homosexuality?

Very carefully, with much prayer and discussion, and in dialogue with Christians who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. There are no hard and fast rules for hetero- or homo-sexuals. We're all struggling to establish workable and faithful guidelines for sexual practice. I assume we are all against casual or promiscuous sex. I would propose a one-sentence guideline for heterosexuals and for homosexuals: Couples who engage in intimate sexual behavior should do so only in deeply committed, long-term, monogamous relationships, that are neither abusive nor exploitative. I suspect that almost every word in that sentence needs a footnote or at least some discussion.

I need to think more about all this.

So do I.

Ralph W. Klein is Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor of Old Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He welcomes responses to or dialogue about this article at rklein@lstc.edu.

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has also been terribly costly, those who put up with me day after day, who mediate Christ to me even when I am irascible. As one member of the Task Force said to me, "One thing I have come to know: no one should ever be alone."

Kevin Maly was baptized on the Feast of the Epiphany, a cradle Lutheran, son of strong, loving, and wise parents, and nurtured in the faith by the saints of Gloria Dei Church, Duluth, Minnesota, the NE Minnesota Synod's only RIC congregation.

Academic degrees: BA cum laude, American Literature, University of Minnesota. MA, Rhetoric, Applied Linguistics, University of Minnesota. MDiv, Luther Seminary, St. Paul. PhD, Hermeneutics, University of Denver.

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REVERSED ALLEGIANCE

On Wednesday, March 1, 2006, in Annapolis, Maryland, at a hearing on the proposed Constitutional Amendment to prohibit gay marriage, Jamie Raskin, professor of law at American University, was requested to testify.

At the end of his testimony, Republican Senator Nancy Jacobs said, "Mr. Raskin, my Bible says marriage is only between a man and a woman. What do you have to say about that?"

Raskin replied, "Senator, when you took your oath of office, you placed your hand on the Bible and swore to uphold the Constitution. You did not place your hand on the Constitution and swear to uphold the Bible."

RESPONSE TO ROBERT BENNE'S ARTICLE:

"A House Divided Against Itself Will Not Stand"

by R. Don Wright

Benne's article may be found online at <http://www.holytrinitynewrochelle.org/BennetoELCACouncilAHouseDivided.html>

Robert Benne sides with those in the ELCA who firmly believe "in the traditional moral teachings of the church that proscribe homosexual behavior." He sees himself and his compatriots as traditional, classical, orthodox Christians. He labels those who disagree with him as revisionists.

I don't much care for being labeled, especially when the label implies that I am revising the scriptures, the traditions, and the doctrines of the Christian faith. But then again, the word revision means to look again or to take a second look. To revise something is to respect it. To revise and respect the scriptures, the traditions, and the doctrines of the Christian faith in this way is precluded when one is a mono-visionist who looks at something only once. So, call me a revisionist if you must, but recognize the respect that is inherent in those who revisit their thinking and the disrespect inherent among those who refuse to revise their thinking in the light of new information.

Before moving on, let's discuss the "traditional moral teachings of the church that proscribe homosexual behavior." I do not disagree that the Bible proscribes homosexual behavior. Yet I, for one among thousands in the ELCA (an acknowledged though not insignificant minority), do not regard homosexual behavior as inherently sinful. The Bible proscribes many different behaviors as immoral that the Church no longer views as inherently sinful. The Bible also affirms certain behaviors that the Church today refuses to endorse and, as in the case of slavery, condemns.

This development is distressing to some Christians who apparently are, in Benne's words, so "grounded in biblical and confessional authority" that they regard this freedom of the Church as clear evidence of apostasy, heresy, and "liberal protestant drift." What distresses me is what I perceive as the willingness to abandon that freedom which we have in Christ and to return to being obedient slaves, not to the righteousness of faith in Christ, but to our former disciplinarian, the law. The lament expressed by Benne is the same one that Moses heard in the wilderness: "At least under the law we could fill our bellies with clear cut absolutes. Now in the wilderness of the gospel everything is relative. We must go back to the Bible, back to the law, back to Egypt." *Sola scriptura* cannot be emphasized at the expense of *sola gratia, sola fidei, sola Christus*.

Benne complains that the ELCA "has moved toward a gospel reductionism in which the Father's commandments and the Spirit-inspired life of obedience are reduced to second-order importance." This complaint is the most telling symptom of the

BLASPHEMY OR JUST NEW?

by Craig Endicott

I like new things. New restaurant? I try it out. I have a stack (actually, several stacks) of new books that I'm reading. I hope to get a new laptop computer soon. New movie releases? As soon as the DVD comes out. I like new things.

But I love old things: Mark Twain, classic rock, or NPR. I still think *Saturday Night Live* was better with Gilda Radner and Chevy Chase.

What got Jesus killed wasn't that he was healing without a license. It was that he dared to teach something new! We're not talking "New and Improved" here: Jesus said things like, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer." "Love your enemies." He was changing Torah! You don't mess around with Moses' law. New words from God? Blasphemy!

Can you imagine what would have happened at the Judiciary Committee hearings if Judge Alito had said, "I can't wait to serve on the Supreme Court; I have some new ideas about constitutional law"?

The Church didn't cozy up to new ideas by Copernicus or Galileo or John Hus or Martin Luther or Martin Luther King, Jr.

We can't be surprised by reactions to the new ideas about sexuality that we speak and embody. We can't be shocked that the world resists new proposals for the church. So it was for Jesus and his disciples. But remember his other teaching, "Love one another," even those who cannot stand to hear you, even your enemies. Now *that* would be new!

Craig Endicott is the pastor of Peace Lutheran Church in Waldorf, Maryland.

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problem confronting the ELCA and much of so-called Evangelical Christianity these days.

Benne is correct that this has taken place. The Father's commandments and the Spirit-inspired life of obedience have, in fact, been reduced to second-order importance, but don't blame the ELCA or liberal protestant drifters. Blame God, if you dare. God is the one who did it. God has made of first importance what God has faithfully accomplished in Jesus Christ for the life of the world. The apostasy and heresy that currently threatens the church is the reduction to second-order importance of what God has done and the implementation of a regime change whereby the Old Adam desires to oust Christ and sit at God's right hand, even under the banner of the "Spirit-inspired life of obedience."

Benne asserts that "Orthodox Christianity is a trinitarian faith that holds law, gospel, and discipleship together." But the trinitarian faith is not law, gospel, and discipleship, but the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God the Father is not the law. God the Son is not the gospel. God the Holy Spirit is not discipleship. God the Father is the loving Creator who does not find

but creates that which is pleasing to God (Luther's "Heidelberg Disputation," Thesis #28). God the Son is the incarnate Word of God's steadfast love and mercy, upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rested and who was anointed by God "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). God the Holy Spirit is our Advocate who defends us from the Accuser's legalistic accusations, and our Comforter who strengthens and encourages us in our weakness and weariness.

Nothing is demanded of the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed. No heavy burdens—new commandments, obligations or obedience—are laid upon their backs. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1)—slavery either to sins commonly understood, or to the equally serious and damning sin of seeking righteousness under the law through pious posturing. God has not brought us out of the frying pan only to drop us into the fire. No transformation of self is demanded other than that which is accomplished by the Word.

Any other news is not good news. It can only be bad news: "God's grace is not sufficient for you. You must also keep the law. ... The year of the Lord's favor is not as favorable as you think it is. That would be too easy, too cheap."

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LEPERS IN THE CHURCH?

A Sermon on Mark 1:39-45

by Kevin Maly

Leper! A lethal label, so much more than a skin disease, a sentence of excommunication. Get called a leper and you get thrown out of town, separated from family, from friends, from your means of making a living. It means dwelling in the garbage heaps and scrounging there for food because a leper can't even get close enough to a non-leper to beg. A leper can't drink from the same well as nice folks—you have to find the one around back labeled "lepers only." Lepers must steer clear of any and every place where the so-called "clean" people go. A leper must not try to pass, but must call out "unclean, unclean," and dress a certain way so people can tell who they are and steer clear of them, because if a person gets too near a leper, that person might be labeled one too.

Doubtless, there were some people labeled "leper" who did bear some sort of skin disease. However, it seems all too likely that many of those who received this sentence of excommunication did not have any sort of communicable disease. Here's how it all worked: It was the religious authorities who had the prerogative of labeling someone a leper. Anger one of the religious leaders and you yourself could be an instant leper as well. The list of things that could get you in trouble was complex, but it was all a simple way by which the priests gained and kept control over those who did not quite fit within the religious rules of the day.

What's more, this leper business was, well, a real business. To be allowed back into the city, to be restored to community, to family, to friends, one had to petition the religious leaders and then, if and when a particular leader decided—on whatever grounds they decided such things—that you were fit to be let back into the community, you had to pay a price so that an animal could supposedly be sacrificed in thanks. Not a bad way to maintain power and control—keep people afraid and in line and make money while you do it. You didn't want yourself or any of your loved ones to do anything that might earn you or them the dreaded label, leper! Makes you wonder why the church hasn't thought of doing something like that these days—or maybe it has.

This morning's Gospel begins with a leper, just doing the wrong thing, coming near to Jesus. Jesus returns the favor and does not budge. (Oops, two laws already broken. Better watch out for the religious authorities, you two.) The leper, by what he says, seems aware that his approach to Jesus could be a problem: "If you dare, you can declare me clean."

It's interesting how Jesus' reply has been passed down through the ages. In the oldest manuscripts we hear that Jesus was "moved with anger." This got softened as time went by, to "moved with pity"—can't have Jesus getting angry at those

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The Israelites underwent transformation by the very act of liberation. Instead of Pharaoh's slaves they became again God's people and instead of Pharaoh being regarded as God, the Lord God Almighty was reestablished as their one true God. Even while they were slaves they remained indelibly God's people, but their minds had conformed to the world of being slaves and, because suffering filled their vision, they could not see what faith promised. But, by God's mighty deeds of power, they were given new life. They didn't earn it, win it, or accomplish it by their own strength, but were given it.

Any other news is not good news. It can only be bad news: "God's grace is not sufficient for you. You must also keep the law. You must also be obedient.

You must get a job. You must escape from your own captivity. You must heal yourself and accommodate yourself to being oppressed. The year of the Lord's favor is not as favorable as you think it is. That would be too easy, too cheap. You would only take advantage of God's loving nature and free grace and fail to appreciate how costly grace is. Therefore, you must do something, anything, so that you can feel good about yourself."

To such a message and to such a messenger I can only say, "Get behind me Satan." But to the one who preaches peace (Acts 10:36), I will wash his or her feet (gay or straight, or the hooves of Balaam's donkey) with my tears and dry them with my hair (Luke 7:38); for "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to [me], 'Your God reigns'" (Isaiah 52:7).

So, too, for gays and lesbians today. The liberation they require is not liberation from a sinful homosexual lifestyle, so that they might be transformed into happy heterosexuals through reparative therapy or to live quietly as contented (?) celibates. The liberation they require is the freedom from heterosexual norms and expectations, so that they might live as God's people, holy to the Lord, who have not conformed to the heterosexual world but have been redeemed by the renewing of their minds, so that with a sure and certain faith they believe they are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God's grace is sufficient for gay and lesbian Christians, even though they continue to live with the thorn of rejection from the world and even from within the Church.

Lastly, Benne argues that orthodox Christianity "doesn't offer a gospel of cheap grace without the necessity of repentance and amendment of life." What is "cheap grace"? Grace is grace. It

The necessity of repentance and amendment of life must be a regular part of the lives of gay and lesbian Christians, not because of who they are, but for failing to give thanks and praise to God for who they are.

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holding religious authority. The older reading is more authentic. Moved with anger, Jesus stretches out his hand and touches the man and, in effect, says to him, "I do dare. I proclaim you clean." Immediately, he was made clean, meaning, both medically and ritually. Snorting with indignation Jesus, apparently still angry, sent the man to the priests. "Don't say anything to anyone on the way, but go and pay the money—even though it's an unjust system—as a witness against them." (For an interpretation of this story as an attack on the purity code itself, see Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, [Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988] 152-154).

This is like those congregations in the ELCA that have been removed from the church for calling lesbian and gay pastors in committed relationships. In spite of being removed, they continue to contribute liberally and generously to the ELCA—as a witness against them.

The man Jesus declared clean decides not to risk any more trouble with the religious authorities. Instead of going back to the priests, the man runs around telling everyone what Jesus has done. In effect the one declared clean is letting people know that Jesus has committed a religious crime. Jesus has not only been too near a leper, he's also touched him.

Jesus, according to religious law, is now himself unclean. He is thereby unable to go openly into town. Anyone openly hanging around with him is also unclean—in trouble with the whole religious system. And of course there's the business of Jesus doing something reserved for the rostered priests. The upshot of all this is that now anyone wanting to be near Jesus must do it outside of town, away from the sight of the religious enforcers. Jesus and those who wish to be a part of him must do it on the sly (a forerunner of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"?)

No wonder the text has to be spayed and neutered. Jesus must be domesticated, shown to be a loyal, merely-pitying churchman. We can't have a Jesus who gets angry at organized religion. Can't have a Jesus who is filled with indignation at the way those with religious power control those beneath them. Or to put it in contemporary ELCA terms, we can't have someone unrostered proclaiming people clean—especially those whom the church has clearly declared unclean. Can't have a Jesus who instructs individuals and congregations who have been removed from the ELCA roster to continue giving generously to the church as a witness against the current order.

You must not have people thinking that it might just be OK to keep their disobedience of religious law a secret—to fly under the radar, as it were, in order that God's beloved children hear the gospel of Christ's unconditional love and mercy. You must not have people thinking that God has no patience with a religious establishment that thinks it can vote on who's clean and

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(**WRIGHT**, continued from page 9)

is that same grace which Jesus so freely bestows on unclean lepers nine-tenths of whom fail to give thanks and praise to God. Repentance and amendment of life is precisely that turning and returning of the one leper to give thanks and praise to God. Grace, preceded by whatever adjective, is epitomized by that sower who went out to sow and scattered seed rather haphazardly. It is epitomized by God who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45). Talk about cheap grace has its mind set on earthly things, human responses, good works, and lacks faith in the power of the Word to accomplish that which God intends.

Gays and lesbians, more than the righteous, know the true value of the gospel and long for it more than those who are comfortably ensconced in lifestyles whose sins are routinely unexamined or even admired by the Church. The necessity of repentance and amendment of life must be a regular part of the lives of gay and lesbian Christians, not because of who they are, but for failing to give thanks and praise to God for who they are. Gay and lesbian Christians must repent and amend their lives when they seek justification through conformity to heterosexual norms, rather than by grace through faith. Repentance and amendment of life are also necessary when they, however understandably, turn away from the Church and the message of reconciliation that has been entrusted to it, reject God altogether, and abandon themselves to hedonism and nihilism. But will not the Church itself be held accountable for driving these sheep away? (Jeremiah 23:1-4, 50:6-7, Ezekiel 34:2-16)

I pray that the Church will come to accept gay and lesbian Christians as gay and lesbian Christians, to accept gay and lesbian people as gay and lesbian people, not as dysfunctional heterosexuals. Trying to save gay and lesbian people from being who they are is like a monkey saving a fish by taking it out of a river and putting it on the branch of a tree. The monkey may feel good about itself for doing a good thing. But the monkey is confused that the fish is so unappreciative of his good intentions. God has given even to gays and lesbians the repentance that leads to new life (Acts 11:18), that is, repentance from dead works (which seek to merit righteousness as a reward for moral and pious living), leading to faith toward God (which is reckoned as righteousness) (Hebrews 6:1, Genesis 15:6).

The Rev. R. Don Wright graduated from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California, in 1992. He was ordained in 1992, and installed as the pastor of three congregations in rural Nebraska along with his wife, the Rev. Donna M. Wright. Since February, 1999, he and Donna have served Lord of Love Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Don and Donna have been long time supporters of The Network and the cause of gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people in the Church. His email address: prdon@lord-of-love.org

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who's unclean. You can't have people going around with the mind of a Messiah who indiscriminately forgives anybody and everybody. You shall fear, love, and trust constitutions and good order above all things.

At the core of Israel's understanding of who they are is the story of the Passover, the story in which the people remind themselves: Once we were slaves in Egypt, but now we are a people who treat all living things just as God has treated us, in setting us free from slavery. Now we are a people who treat all people mercifully and justly—especially the strangers in our land, legal or not. This conviction is also at the core of who we are. This is the witness of the holy gospel: Remember once we were unclean, cast off and cast out. But now in Holy Baptism, God in Christ has declared that we are clean. We didn't do anything to earn it and we can't do anything to invalidate it.

So, remember that, when you dunk your hand into the font and make the sign of the Holy Cross on your way out. Go out and walk the way of the Jesus who declares you and all people clean and acceptable in God's sight. Yes, there are some costs. Walking with Jesus you run the risk of being labeled trouble-makers, of incurring the wrath of the religious and secular authorities, of not being able to go about openly. Proclaiming the gospel sometimes means walking outside the edges of the city, almost always by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown—not knowing exactly where we go, only knowing that the hand of the One who defiles himself by touching the unclean is leading us, that One's love protecting us. A perilous and cross-strewn road to be sure, but a Holy Spirit once whispered that it is the one road that leads to resurrection.

MAILERS NEEDED

The Network Letter needs new people to prepare it for mailing. Kaz and Jean Oshiki have faithfully done this task since the Fall 2002 issue. They can no longer do it. Three issues are published a year, in Lent, Summer, and Advent.

This job includes:

1. selecting a local printer who can receive the electronic copy of the issue from the layout designer;
2. picking up the 1,100 printed, collated, and folded copies from the printer;
3. securing the copies with seals on the open folded edge;
4. mailing the prepared copies.

Kaz and Jean called together two other couples who worked with them and made the task a social event.

Anyone who is willing to pick up this task or interested in inquiring about it, please email the editor, Norm Theiss, at :

normtheiss@comcast.net.

For Bishop Margaret

The first thing
I notice –
her hands.
Hands that have
worked
in the earth,
I'm guessing, a
good sign.

Her hands light
a candle and lead us
gently into silence.

Ora et labora.

Without prayer
no hands
can work.

She has not come easily
to this place.

In silence
lit by a candle
she has held
breaking hearts in
her hands
I can tell, a
good sign.

Her hands
take bread and
break and
bless and
give.
In silence
lit by a candle
she holds the broken
body scandalous in
her hands.

She does not come easily
to this place
I can tell, a
good sign.

I notice
your hands.
I light a candle and
in the silence of
distance
hold my hands
around
your hands that have
worked in
the earth
I'm knowing
that have held

breaking hearts and bodies
broken.

Ora et labora.

Blest be the
hands that
cannot labor
without prayer.
I do not come easily
to this place
in silence
lit by a candle
where now
my
hand
must notice an
other sign,
a sign,
a good sign to
watch

forever

threefold

between

Kevin Maly, September, 2005

THE NETWORK FOR INCLUSIVE VISION

The Network for Inclusive Vision provides a public roster of church leaders committed to bear witness to the inclusive Gospel of Jesus Christ by fostering the full inclusion of sexual minorities, that is, persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT), in the congregational life and ordained ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Our Members Network members, about 1,300 of them, are members of the ELCA, lay persons, seminarians, diaconal ministers, deaconesses, associates in ministry, professors, bishops, pastors—fathers, mothers, spouses, siblings—who believe it is time to register their opposition publicly to the continual expulsions and forced resignations of ELCA pastors who are openly gay or lesbian. The names of Network members are listed on a public roster, which is shared with ELCA officials and can be found on our website: www.inclusivenet.com (click on roster).

We come together as ELCA church leaders who want to move from quiet questioning of our church's policies on sexuality to public advocacy for change.

Our Message

We publicly challenge the ELCA:

- to promote an environment open to honest and faithful discussion as we seek the Spirit's guidance concerning issues around sexuality;

- to provide pastoral care for GLBT people, as for all other members of the ELCA;
- to affirm committed and faithful same sex relationships with appropriate liturgies;
- to change the current guidelines for candidates for ministry, in "Vision and Expectations" and "Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline," which discriminate against gay and lesbian clergy, associates in ministry, and seminarians;
- to accept qualified women and men, regardless of sexual orientation, as pastors and professionals of this church and as candidates for ministry within it;
- to seek justice for victims of sexual orientation discrimination within the church and to support those who provide care for them and advocate on their behalf.

Our Mission

(revised by the Network Board, October, 2005)

The mission of The Network for Inclusive Vision is to foster full inclusion of GLBT people in the congregational life and rostered ministries of the ELCA by changing hearts and minds through biblical renewal. Carrying out this mission of biblical renewal will include publishing a journal, providing materials for congregations, and fostering regional conferences.

Your Support

- 1) We need your contributions. Please send your donations to:

Arnold Keller, Treasurer,
The Network, Beach Station,
PO Box 4464,
Vero Beach, FL 32964-4464. Make checks payable to: The Network.

- 2) We need you to go to local meetings of your congregation, clusters, and synod to advocate for the full inclusion of GLBT persons in the church .

- 3) We encourage our members to volunteer to their congregations to become members of their synod assemblies, in order to support resolutions for full acceptance of

GLBT persons in our church, such as those on www.goodsoil.org .

Join us!

You can become a member of The Network by filling out the form below and mailing it with an annual contribution of \$25 for an individual, \$35 for a household, or \$10 for a student, to the Treasurer, above. If you are already a member of The Network, but have not made a contribution this year, please renew your membership with a contribution. Members receive The Network publication, *The Network Letter*, three times a year.

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 name _____

The Lutheran Network for Inclusive Vision
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 Banning, CA 92220-5400

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