

Some Critical Observations on the Use of Scripture in the ELCA “Draft Social Statement on
Human Sexuality” (March, 2008)
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This document is offered as a resource for discussion of the Draft Social Statement on Human Sexuality. It may be cited, reproduced, and shared with others. Following are some critical observations on the use of Scripture in the statement.

- One might reasonably expect that in a *Lutheran* statement on human sexuality there would be copious references to what Scripture has to say specifically about various aspects of human sexuality, such as marriage, divorce, adultery, incest, prostitution, fornication, homosexuality, and so forth, followed by deep theological reflection. In fact, however, the statement makes no reference at all to Scriptural statements regarding any of these topics except marriage. Therefore one cannot agree when the statement claims that “it taps the deep roots of Scripture” (line 30). On the contrary, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that the statement was drafted in such a way as to exclude Scripture’s specific statements about human sexuality. It is as though what Scripture has to say on these matters is of no relevance.
- Astonishingly, when the statement does cite the biblical account of creation and marriage, it is not in support of biblical teaching on marriage, but, implicitly, against it. Genesis 1:27 is used to affirm the “basic equality of all people. In terms of sexual relations, this image of God...stands against all forms of discrimination...” (lines 358-61). The citation of Gal 3:28 (“there is no longer male and female”) in connection with Gen 1:27 (line 361) is presumably intended to militate against the biblical pattern of creation and marriage (Gen 1:27: “male and female he created them”). In the same way, in lines 341-347 1 Cor 15:49 is cited against Gen 1:26, which suggests that the biblical pattern of creation and marriage is no longer relevant to Christians. All of this (mis)leads the reader to the conclusion that the real point of Gen 1:27 is not that heterosexual marriage is God’s will but that humanity’s creation in the image of God prohibits discrimination, i.e., we must accept alternative forms of ordering human sexuality. That is an abuse of Scripture. Jesus and Paul both affirm the biblical teaching on marriage (Mark 10:2-9; 1 Cor 7:9). Their eschatological outlook led them to value highly celibacy in the single life (Matt 19:10-12; 1 Cor 7:8, 40) but not to call into question the biblical pattern of marriage. In lines 438-443 the creation accounts are not used to affirm a biblical understanding of marriage but for an undifferentiated celebration of human sexuality. That too is problematic, because it sacrifices Scripture’s clarity on the matter of marriage for the sake of an unclear, abstract celebration of human sexuality in general.
- The statement seeks to ground human sexuality in Christian freedom, with appeal to the apostle Paul (lines 175-185). But the statement ignores Scripture’s own admonitions that freedom that is not disciplined by obedience to divine authority leads to corruption and loss of true freedom (2 Pet 2:19-21; 3:15-16). 2 Peter 3:15-16 is a needed warning to the church that the attempt to establish a sexual ethic on Christian freedom is a misunderstanding of Paul and leads to “destruction.” A genuinely biblical and Christian sexual ethic cannot be grounded primarily in Christian freedom.

- Not surprisingly, therefore, the voice of the Old Testament Law is muted in the statement. Although there are brief mentions of the Law as a guide to Christian life (59-60, 142-44, 266-69, 402-03, footnote 8), that theme is allowed little or no expression when it comes to discussion of specific matters of human sexuality. Lines 411-412, along with footnote 19, theoretically reject antinomianism, and yet the Law's specific guidance in matters of human sexuality is not allowed a voice.
- There is also a failure properly to correlate the Old and the New Testaments, and properly to correlate Law and Gospel. The statement fails to recognize that the apostolic church reaffirmed the Old Testament's teachings on human sexuality, so that the Gospel does not negate the Law. This applies alike to marriage, homosexual activity, incest, and adultery (Matt 19:3-12; Acts 15:20, 29; 1 Cor 5:1-8; 6:9; Gal 5:19; among many other texts). It is an abuse of the Lutheran Law-Gospel dialectic to allow the Gospel to abolish the Law without regard for the way that Scripture itself correlates Law and Gospel.
- The statement runs the risk of confusing ecclesial discipline with discrimination. The church has explicit Scriptural authority to exercise internal moral discipline (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:1-8). That is neither discrimination nor unjust treatment. Therefore one would need further clarification about what constitutes "just treatment" before one could agree to the declaration that "[t]his church must also attend to the cry for...just treatment within...the ELCA by those with varied sexual identities" (lines 1265-67). Troubling also is the declaration that "the mission and ministry of congregations should be visibly open to all, including single adults, cohabiting adults, adults approaching marriage, families undergoing dissolution, blended families, and same-sex couples" (1394-97). Do these declarations entail acceptance of any kind of life-style without regard for the norms of Scripture? Do they commit the church to foregoing ecclesial discipline of any kind?
- Although the statement purports to work within a Trinitarian framework (lines 55, 438), the statement in fact disintegrates the integral work of the one Triune God in creation, redemption, and sanctification. Redemption is set against creation (see the second bullet point). Sanctification is neglected completely. So, for example, when the work of the Holy Spirit is discussed (lines 295-98, 305-08), there is no mention of God's sanctifying work. But Scripture clearly regards God's sanctifying work as relevant to human sexuality: "Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were brought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:18-20). Note the integrity of creation, redemption, and sanctification in Paul's statement: Your body is not your own, for you were redeemed by God at the price of Christ's death, so that you could be delivered from sin and restored to God your creator (cf. Rom 8:21-23). Therefore your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (sanctification). See also 1 Thess 4:3-5: "This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication, that each of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God."