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Leave it at the tomb



Christian holiness is not (as people often imagine) a matter of denying something good. It is about growing up and grasping something even better. Made for spirituality, we wallow in introspection. Made for joy, we settle for pleasure. Made for justice, we clamor for vengeance. Made for relationship, we insist on our own way. Made for beauty, we are satisfied with sentiment. But new creation has already begun. The sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind, in the tomb of Jesus Christ, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world. It is time, in the power of the Spirit, to take up our proper role, our fully human role, as agents, heralds, and stewards of the new day that is dawning. That, quite simply, is what it means to be Christian: to follow Jesus Christ into the new world, God's new world, which he has thrown open before us.

—N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

Humble and bold . . . not



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America released its much-ballyhooed sexuality statement draft, just before Palm Sunday as promised. "Rostered leaders" got a 24-hour advance notice; or they were supposed to. In the discussion over at Forum Online, it became apparent that not every rostered leader received the link to the "embargoed" copy, at least not by the time specified. The reason for the advance warning was apparently to give pastors (oh, OK, also Associates in Ministry) time to mull it over before it might hit the local newspapers.

If that was it, then it probably was unnecessary. The document itself doesn't present much that is new. There will be plenty of opportunity to parse this draft over the next six months; but a quick perusal elicited not much more than a yawn from most readers.

Variations on a theme

The theme of the document seems to be "humble and bold." This phrase pops up on the first page, where it is noted that in times of "change and uncertainty . . . our Lutheran heritage, grounded in Scripture, allows us to speak humbly yet boldly." That expression, or a variation of it, appears three more times in the document (the words "humble" and "bold" individually each appear another four times). It actually closes out the statement, asserting that we *simul justus et peccator* people "walk both humbly and boldly toward God's promised

future." Somebody must have used the term in task force discussion, and the drafters liked it.

No headlines here

Trouble is, at least in my experience, when you hear someone claiming to be humble and bold, chances are pretty good that they are neither. And that seems to hold true here.

Actually, that's probably good. The last thing we needed right now was a bold statement (unless, of course, it boldly upheld the admittedly countervailing viewpoint of historic Christianity – a prospect few would expect of such a document). So there's nothing here even remotely resembling the "bold" pronouncement of a draft of an earlier study which endorsed masturbation. For that we can all be grateful.

The statement also doesn't seem to address some items on the current agenda of the sexual revisionist folks. I found nothing, for instance, about transgenderism (is that a word?). The draft sticks pretty closely to more mainstream issues and concerns. Maybe by the time you read this I'll have been proven wrong, but I wouldn't really expect any dramatic headlines any time soon.

The document runs to some 45 pages of text, and it sets for itself a rather modest task. It begins with a section "designed to explain how Lutherans approach ethics" – humbly and boldly, of course. This isn't too bad for a committee-drafted statement, though there are occasionally theologically jarring comments. It asserts, for instance, that Christ "rescues us hostages . . . by paying a ransom with his own life." I thought Gustaf Aulén argued pretty convincingly a long time ago that Luther's view of the atonement is not one of ransom but of *Christus Victor*. But that's a minor point, not nearly as important as sexuality.

Complex and social

It then turns specifically to sexuality, stating rather forthrightly its complexity and arguing that sexuality always has dimensions that are not merely individual but social. It goes on to speak about the importance of trust, and how it is nurtured in the context of the family. The relationship of friendship to sexuality is explored. The proper expression of sexuality is said quite explicitly to lie in relationships of commitment; this is why "this church does

not support non-monogamous, promiscuous, and transient sexual relationships or casual sexual encounters." That's a relief.

The statement then takes up marriage. This is where I began to get a little worried. I was somewhat reassured, however, by a strong statement that defined marriage as "a structure of mutual promises between a man and a woman blessed by God . . . and authorized in a legal arrangement required by the state." I imagine you can look for that to be one statement the revisionists will want to soften. The document itself actually seems to soften it a bit later, as we shall see.

This leads into a discussion of cohabitation without marriage, a practice that the church neither favors nor approves. But the document does recognize that what we used to call "shacking up" is increasingly common in our society, and it lays out some issues of concern and urges pastors "to help the couple recognize a special obligation to be clear and candid with each other" about just what this all means. That's kind of along the lines of a parent saying to a teenager, "You should not be having sex, but just in case you are, be sure to use protection."

No consensus

Finally, three-fourths of the way through, the document takes up same-sex relationships. Here it says pretty much what many of us anticipated: "This church does not have consensus regarding loving and committed same-gender relationships." Then – as if in response to the good catechism question "What does this mean?" – the statement suggests that "some pastors and congregations will advocate repentance and celibacy" while others "will call our same-gender-oriented brothers and sisters in Christ to establish relationships that are chaste, mutual, monogamous, and life-long." Does the wording give you any clue as to which option the task force hopes will be more prevalent?

It is at this point that the statement backs off a bit from its earlier strong statement about marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman. "This church," it says, "recognizes the historic origin of the term 'marriage' as a life-long and committed relationship between a woman and man [*sic*; thankfully, we can be reasonably sure that the task force's sensitivity to feminist concerns means that they really meant to say "a man," and that they are not

implying that some poor woman is in a life-long relationship with humankind in general], and does not wish to alter this understanding.”

Now that’s an interesting statement. On the one hand it seems to relativize this understanding of marriage as of “historic origin” and to suggest that we’re going to preserve it sort of like a Victorian home. Well, I’m all for preservation; score one for the tradition.

But then it goes on to recognize that “some states have enacted or are in the process of enacting legislation in which the term ‘marriage’ is used.” I would have thought that virtually every state has legislation “in which the term ‘marriage’ is used,” but I suppose here they mean “used to refer to same-sex relationships.” (Well, it’s only a draft. Some of these things will get cleaned up along the way.) It notes that “this is the prerogative of the state, which is the realm in which civil marriage and the laws governing it exist.”

Leaving it to the state

Again, quite interesting. One would have thought they were about to give some advice about blessing same-sex unions, but at the last minute they backed off and simply left this up to the state. Or maybe the intent is to leave it open enough so that those who call for “chaste, mutual, monogamous, and life-long” same-sex relationships can feel free to call them “marriage” if they think it pastorally helpful—especially if the state agrees.

The last section meanders through a discussion of the church’s calling in this area. We are supposed to “establish the kind of social trust the world urgently needs.” Oh, and to “confront collective distrust.” Look for Augsburg Fortress to provide curriculum to help us do this. The church should also commit “to constructing trustworthy structures for the sexual lives of its members.” OK, I admit it: I don’t have a clue what that means. I’m sure it must be bold and humble, though. Maybe that will be the headline: “Lutherans to Construct Trustworthy Structures for Sexual Lives of Members.”

I must admit that I always read statements like this with a good bit of eye-rolling. So often they sound like something produced by the Communist Party Central Committee—not in content, please understand, but in writing style. Pedestrian prose, often more like a social science textbook than a theo-

logical treatise, yet enlivened every so often by the drafters’ attempt to wax poetic. My favorite sentence is this one at line 837: “Our endocrine systems bathe the inner world of our bodies in cascades of gendered hormones.” But that only narrowly beat out line 1370: “The work of healing is unending and the cry of the neighbor for sustaining love, justice, and protection from harm tears at the heart of the Church.” Sounds almost Biblical, doesn’t it? Pseudo-Isaiah, I think.

Missing words

It is interesting to note some omissions. While the statement occasionally quotes Luther’s catechisms, the only references to the sixth commandment—which one would think would be front and center in this discussion—are in the footnotes. Sexuality has also often been discussed in the context of lust, one of the seven deadly sins; but the word “lust” never appears in this statement, nor does the word “adultery.” Well, maybe they were deliberately stepping back from an understanding of sexuality that emphasizes sexual sin. I can understand that, though it seems to me any discussion of sexuality that doesn’t even mention lust or adultery is closing off an important part of traditional Christian moral instruction.

So “bold and humble”? I don’t think so. What the task force has done is to craft a statement offering a little bit to both sides. On the whole, it seems to come down on the more traditional side of things. That’s a good thing, seems to me; you can expect that to be confirmed by unhappy reactions from Lutherans Concerned, goodsoil, and other advocates for “full inclusion.”

But there are certainly things which play to those who seek a change in the church’s position, including a “confession” of the way Lutheran teachings “sometimes have been used to tear apart families with gay or lesbian members.” And while the statement has a welcome focus on the crucial role of families, it also makes clear that “families” come in all shapes and sizes, including households headed by same-sex partners.

Wide open

Most important, by admitting that on this key issue we have no consensus, the statement leaves wide open the possibility of offering some

kind of implementing resolution that allows for ordination of persons in same-sex relationships, at least on a “synod option” basis. We won’t know about that recommendation until next February. Unlike a social statement, which requires a 2/3 vote at the churchwide assembly, such a resolution would need only a simple majority – and might well get it.

In the meanwhile, congregations and individuals are asked by the task force to study the draft and make comments and suggestions. The deadline for response is November 1, 2008. Even if we are weary of discussions about human sexuality, it would be a good and salutary thing for all of us to accept that invitation.

– by *Richard O. Johnson, editor*

“Daddy, I want a white face”

by Paul Robert Sauer



Even living here in ethnically diverse New York City we had anticipated that this issue would eventually come up for our transracially adopted daughter. It didn’t make it any easier. We had done everything right – instilled in her a great pride in her Marshallese background and heritage, observed with her how beautiful her multiracial friends from church and school were. But perception is everything, and Katie had read a Disney book at school where all the princesses were white. I tried to explain to her that Mulan was Asian and Pocahontas was Native American, even if they were light skinned, but I don’t get to decide how she feels, and logical arguments don’t have any place when it comes to perceptions.

The Pew Forum on Religion (you can find it at www.religions.pewforum.org/) just released some statistical data on the ethnic makeup of America’s denominations and there was bad news for Lutherans: of all denominations in the study, we are the whitest. The Lutheran parts of the Body of Christ apparently are the pasty-white parts hidden away from the coloring rays of the sun.

Equally ineffective

The LCMS is more diverse than the ELCA (95% white versus 97% white) but claiming 5% diversity (the general population in the U.S. is 71% white) as some sort of victory is hardly worth celebrating. The numbers are even more depressing when you consider that the Mormon Church in America is only 86% white and their church officially discriminated against “people of African descent” until 1978.

Our respective Lutheran churches have

taken distinctive but equally ineffective approaches to dealing with racial issues. On the one hand there is a much discussed quota system that has as its ideal raising people of color to positions of leadership within the ELCA. This in turn will give greater ownership of the church by those respective ethnic groups, or so the argument goes. The problem with this approach is that it is rooted in a failed colonial-style mentality that assumes that if you can get the “tribal leaders” the people will follow. There is no correlation between numbers of leaders and followers on the basis of race.

I learned this lesson well when I volunteered at a historically black inner-city Lutheran parish in the years before my ordination. I thought that it would be a good idea to develop a program for youth at the senior-citizen-filled church, and so I went where the youth were – to the HUD housing project down the street. When the children arrived at church the following Sunday it was not to a warm welcome. They didn’t know how to behave – after all, they weren’t “our kind of blacks” (i.e. middle-class professional).

What difference does it make?

The other failed approach is a denial that racial differences make any difference at all. At a recent LCMS “Model Theological Symposium” one of the participants offered criticism that it was “the whitest church gathering he had ever been to,” and by all accounts he was right – statistically speaking it was an even whiter model of the church than our denomination itself. What was more disturbing is that when he raised the issue, the response by participants was by and large: “What difference does it

make? We are in fact, after all, Lutherans.”

The difference is that it is not *our* perception that matters; other people notice. While it may be understandable that a publishing house would cater to a church that is 95% white in terms of its depictions of people, it is nevertheless frustrating to have to color in faces by hand in the Vacation Bible School and Sunday School material. You may think that such an approach is over the top, but it is not your perception that matters. A fellow adoptive parent observed this past Christmas how easy it was, as they were decorating their apartment, to celebrate a “white Christmas” — that is, a Christmas with only white figurines, decorations, and cards. It takes intentionality to make it otherwise.

Differences in perception are real, which makes racial differences in the church real as well. It is as real as the differences between racial groups that are often classified together. A Caribbean black often has different ecclesial perceptions than a deep-south black who often has different perceptions than an African immigrant. In the same way Dominicans and Puerto Ricans share a language and oftentimes little else in their ecclesial piety.

Coloring rays of the Son

All of this is to say that if Lutherans are ever to expose themselves to the coloring rays of the Son, then they first have to recognize that there is a problem, and then stop trying to solve the problem with easy, program-driven solutions. Lutheranism’s racial problem will only be solved on a parish by parish, layperson by layperson basis, as people really

get to know the people in their communities and as churches begin to model their communities. It will not come about through some top down program, which by its very nature cannot deal with individual perceptions. Nor will it come about as a result of some sort of charitable or guilt-driven approach. The coloring of Lutheranism will come about as individual Lutherans actually build relationships with unique individuals and then move forward as equals — with equal vulnerability and responsibility.

In January, I attended the winter theological symposium at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, which was singular for its excellent presentations and worship. The one lowlight of the gathering was a terribly awkward closing banquet at the Hilton Grand Plaza. After being introduced to the various “ethnic partners” that were present for the banquet, the almost exclusively white attendees sat down for an extravagant dinner served by an almost exclusively black serving staff (except for the white woman who was in charge and giving orders to the wait staff). The evening became downright surreal as the LCMS World Relief video highlighting their work in Africa with the Themba girls began to play. Poor black children in Africa deserving of our help . . . poor black children here in Fort Wayne taking away my dirty dishes. Perception is everything.

Pr. Paul Robert Sauer is pastor of the Lutheran Church and School of Our Savior in the Bronx, New York. He is also the associate editor of our companion publication, Lutheran Forum. This is his first contribution to Forum Letter.

On vocation: God’s call and my will



When William F. Buckley died recently, I read countless remembrances of his amazing life. It reminded me of reading about G. K. Chesterton for the first time. I came rather late to Chesterton; I’d never read anything by him, and only knew of him at all because C. S. Lewis mentions him several times in various books. But when I read a review of Joseph Pearce’s biography of Chesterton, I bought it and was immediately hooked. Chesterton became an instant hero, someone who really was everything I dreamed about be-

ing. But I could never figure out what exactly he did. He seemed to be a freelancer from day one. Heroes should be people we try to emulate, but if you set out to be the next Chesterton, where would you even begin?

Buckley, too, was something of a late revelation to me. I had read his articles and seen him on TV, and heard of *God and Man at Yale*, but the accounts of his personal history and life astounded me. Here again was someone who seemed to do everything, know everyone, and have a tremendous

impact. Here was another impressive one-of-kind who made a profound difference on his generation and history. But again, if he was your hero, how exactly would you go about imitating him?

Knowing the route

If I wanted to be the next Lincoln, I'd go to law school and later run for local office. I would fall short of having the same impact as Lincoln by several orders of magnitude, but I'd be fulfilling a similar vocation on a smaller scale. If I wanted to be the next Patton, I'd try to get into West Point, or at least join the military. I'd never make it to the top, but again, I'd be following a defined vocation. The next Tolkien? The next Billy Graham? Most people won't get anywhere close, but they know the route, and they know that in following those routes, they're following genuine vocations. I might not be the greatest teacher ever, but I know what a teacher does and how to become one if I sense that is my vocation. Or a plumber, or a doctor, or whatever. Regardless of how good we are at them, they're at least real jobs.

At the age of 29 Buckley started *National Review* in a Manhattan office, and it spawned a conservative revolution despite being a money-loser. Big deal. When I was 29, I had a job. I knew what I was supposed to be doing on any given day. Did Buckley sense that his adventures were what he was supposed to be doing, obligated to do, fulfilling a duty by doing? What were the alternatives Buckley was weighing when he decided upon starting a magazine? Did a sense of duty or vocation enter into it? How did he discern that?

Duty and delight

Quite apart from my lack of sparkling wit, profundity of insight, or Ivy League education, renting an office in Manhattan and starting a magazine was never a real possibility for me when I was 29. And the same is true of so many of Buckley's famous exploits. He sailed around the world. Okay. If I made a list of all the obstacles preventing me from doing likewise, the fact that I don't own a boat or know how to sail wouldn't even crack the top ten. For one thing, how would I tell my wife? "Honey, you stay here with the kids. I've decided to sail around the world." Yeah. That'd work. The church council would probably have a similar reaction to

my request for a sabbatical.

Buckley and Chesterton both test the definition of vocation. The idea that you do what you do because God has called you to do it is hard to apply to people who seem simply to do whatever they want. And yet in these cases it seemed to work — God did more through Chesterton, and perhaps Buckley, than through many faithful Christian people fulfilling better defined vocations with more predictable routines.

When I was ordained, my uncle sent a card with the message, "May your duty be your delight," and several others expressed similar sentiments. How would they have expressed anything similar to Buckley? It would have to read something like, "May your delights add up to a duty," which somehow doesn't seem like the same thing. But it's good work if you can get it.

Vocation as obedience

As a pastor, I have a document declaring what it is that God has called me to do. Those who are not pastors may not have such a document, but whether they work as homemakers, doctors, or truck drivers, they still operate with well-defined duties, and at least potentially understand those duties as a divine vocation. But is it possible that our sense of vocation stems more from middle-class sensibilities about what constitutes a respectable job than from Scripture? Having thought about it, I'm still very unsure. I think the big key is whether vocation relates to obedience or not. And I'm not sure how to understand that, because dangers lurk with either answer.

For one thing, if we assume a role for obedience, we have to assume that money doesn't enter the picture. If the call document expresses God's will for me, and my duty, consequently, is to obey, then even if I won a million dollars I would have to keep doing what I'm doing. And I'd like to think I would, but hypothetical virtue is the cheapest kind. If I did something else once I had enough money, I could hardly claim that I had been serving in answer to a divine call up until that point. Collecting paychecks isn't really a calling per se.

And the issue is perhaps less hypothetical than it first appears. If we work for early retirement, what does that say about the nature and value of our work? Retirement because of physical, mental, or

emotional fatigue is one thing. Retirement because we no longer need the money and would prefer to have fun with our remaining energies is quite another.

A lot to think about

Relating obedience to vocation also presupposes the possibility of disobedience; if we are called to do this, then we are not to do that, as Jonah discovered. But since most vocations do not come with an official call document, no end of doubt and anxiety could come of thinking that we might have gotten our vocation wrong. And even worse, the very most pernicious kind of works-righteousness could result from thinking of vocation in terms of obedience. Oh, the martyr complex of those who know only too well how much their obedience has cost them, and secretly want you to know, too.

But the alternative makes a mockery of the whole idea of vocation. If obedience isn't part of the equation, then I can't distinguish my will from God's will. Then doing whatever I feel like doing becomes a divine vocation, and whether I sail around the

world or show up to work on Monday, I'm doing God's will either way. My wish is God's command to me.

No, for vocation to matter at all, there has to come a time when my vocation prevents me from doing what I prefer to do, when faithfulness in marriage trumps the desire for more variety, when doing what God calls me to do means putting aside something I'd like to do instead. To say otherwise is to say that my will could perfectly align with God's will, which would mean either denying original sin or else claiming perfect sanctification — two losing bets for Lutherans.

It's a lot to think about. But Chesterton and Buckley are a lot to think about. However we think of vocation, our definition has to pass the Buckley and Chesterton test, which says that vocation transcends normal job descriptions, doesn't have to be an obvious burden, and can include the sort of obedience that bears a suspicious resemblance to acting on a whim. God did great things through these men; does it matter whether they ever felt obedient?

—by Peter Speckhard, associate editor

Omnium gatherum



The dating game • I groused last time about the release of the first draft of the sexuality social statement on March 13, just before Holy Week. I had a very nice e-mail from a person on the staff of the task force, complete with a Q&A sheet about why the March 13 date was set (which, I guess, means I wasn't the only one who complained about it). I can't say that the reasoning actually makes much sense. In response to the question, "Why couldn't it be delayed two weeks?" the official answer was: "Several synod assemblies are held in April, as early as the first weekend, and several synods are holding hearings in late March . . . as well as in April. A late March release of the draft would not have given members of those synods adequate time to prepare for hearings or assemblies. In addition, many clergy schedule Sabbath days or vacation from their pulpit immediately after the 1st Sunday of Easter." Let's see now . . . When synod assemblies are held seems irrelevant, since it is unlikely that any synod assemblies in 2008 are going to be ready to make a reasoned response to the draft

report, whether it comes out in March or April or October; they'll have to wait for 2009. As for the hearings, the earliest one, March 27, is fourteen days after the release date, so presumably the task force thinks fourteen days is "adequate time to prepare." If the release date had been March 24, for instance, fourteen days later would take us to April 8. The "several synods" with hearings scheduled prior to April 8, according to the task force web site, come to precisely five, four of which are scheduled for just three days earlier, April 5. One would think just maybe those could be rescheduled for later if need be. As for pastors scheduling vacation (what's this "Sabbath days" thing?) after the "1st Sunday of Easter" . . . well, uh, that's a liturgical reference that's a new one on us. Here at my parish we call it "The Resurrection of Our Lord," or, for short, "Easter." If they don't know at the churchwide offices that there's no such thing as the "1st Sunday of Easter," it just provides evidence for my original comment about those folks having no clue what life in the parish is like.

And next April • We couldn't slow things down this year, but maybe now's the time to start agitating about next year. The aforementioned task force plans to release the final draft of the social statement in April, 2009 – no specific date noted yet on the time line. Easter next year is on April 12. Let's all contact that task force and ask them, pretty please, to hold off until after the Resurrection of Our Lord. No matter when synod assemblies are scheduled.

Kudos to Bp. Hanson • Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson's Lent "message" to, uh, "rostered leaders" was right on target. Reflecting on what it means that we in the ELCA call ourselves "evangelical," the bishop struck just the right note in supporting those who do ministry in a difficult cultural moment. It was a very worthwhile and encouraging piece. If you missed it, you can find it on the ELCA web site at www.elca.org/bishop/messages/m_080228.html.

On the other hand • We've read the "Easter message" to the Episcopal Church from Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, and it was really, really weird. After nodding briefly to the resurrection of Christ in the opening paragraph ("How can you be the sacrament, the outward and visible sign, of the grace that you know in the resurrected Christ?"), the bishop has written a statement that's all about "care of creation." Social gospel on steroids. And again, there's nothing at all wrong with being good stewards of creation; it's just that, well, it isn't really the message of Easter.

Kudos to Concordia • There have been rumors this was coming, and now here it is. Concordia Publishing House is offering a reprint of Charles Porterfield Krauth's *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*. Originally published in 1871 by the old General Council, the book is a landmark document of Lutheran identity in the United States – a very significant book historically, whatever one might think of Krauth's doctrinal perspective. Indeed, it is probably second in significance only to Walther's *Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* among American contributions to Lutheran confessional theology. Krauth freely admitted that "the positions taken in this book are largely counter, in some respects, to the prevailing theology of our time and our land." Not much has changed. The book has been out of print for quite a while now; a 1978 edition published by Augsburg indicates that the copyright was held by Fortress Press. It is quite a commentary on the state of Lutheranism that this new edition was not published by Augsburg Fortress but by CPH. But then it's not that surprising; after all, Augsburg Fortress isn't much interested, it seems, in anything which challenges "the prevailing theology of our time and our land." Still, it's a book that can be very profitably read today, and should be. CPH is to be congratulated for bringing it back into print.

What are you thinking? • Want to share your own reflections on the sexuality statement draft? Send them to me, 1000 words or so, and maybe I'll print them. Let's make this a real forum.

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