

## **On Heresy and Humility**

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When teaching about conflict, I advise folks to expect some rhetorical excesses when individuals or communities are anxious and engaged in a heavy duty struggle. So while it's no surprise that some things appearing in speeches and print following the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly are "over the top," I would feel remiss without challenging one of the most blatant—the accusation that by its decisions in adopting a social statement on human sexuality and changing ministry policies the Evangelical Lutheran Church has "fallen into heresy."

The English word heresy is derived from Greek roots and meant originally "able to choose." Those regarded as heretics made the wrong choice, departing from right belief or orthodoxy. "Heresy" is appropriately invoked only in matters of doctrine, therefore, with regard to what stands at the heart and center of the faith. In one way or another, the various heresies denounced in the Lutheran confessions and elsewhere all orbit around the two great doctrinal foci of creation and redemption. Heresies like Arianism or gnosticism fall short of a fulsome Christology, thereby shortchanging the cosmos-transforming redemptive impact of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The belief system of apartheid, racial separation and repression enforced in South Africa, was a 20th century heretical posture denounced by the Lutheran World Federation precisely because it denied the full humanity of persons of color and mocked the Creator who made all people of all races in the divine image.

For more than a quarter century, during which I have studied and discussed broadly the biblical, theological and pastoral dimensions of human sexuality, I simply have not found a convincing argument that sexuality is at the heart of the Gospel message. How can Lutherans, who cling fiercely to justification by grace through faith, say that one's convictions about matters of sexuality define correct belief? I do understand that some creation theologies, which point to divinely instituted "orders of creation," find any form of homosexual behavior "against nature." But the Bible also points to a number of other practices—like men wearing long hair!—as being against the natural order. For me, the most compelling biblical perspective on the proper "place" of sexuality is Jesus' response when asked by the Sadducees about the eternal status of the woman married sequentially to seven husbands: "In heaven there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage." (see Matthew 22:23-33) Sexual expression is a penultimate matter, which therefore falls into the realm of ethics and "right living," not doctrine or "true belief."

Calling another person's or group's convictions heresy should be done rarely if ever, and only with a great deal of fear and trembling. In 1 Corinthians 4, St. Paul says that faithfulness is finally judged only by the Lord. When it comes to whether or not one is a trustworthy steward of the mysteries of God, says Paul, "I do not even judge myself." To say one believes the church may have erred in its judgment regarding important ethical matters is one thing; but to escalate

conflict by branding those with whom one disagrees as having fallen into heresy is inflammatory, divisive and not in keeping with St. Paul's exhortation to a spirit of humility.

For all his blustery confrontations with a whole host of theological opponents over the course of his life and ministry, in the end Martin Luther seemed to grasp Paul's wisdom: "We are all beggars; this is true" were the last words inscribed by his prolific pen shortly before he died. Beggars we are—in search of the Bread of Life, which will not be grasped by getting it all right in all matters of ethics and right practice, but only by clinging to a blood-stained cross and straining to hear the promise whispered forth from a tomb, "He is Risen!"