

# Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality

ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Journey Together Faithfully, Part Three



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

*Living in God's amazing grace*

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### ***Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality***

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# FREE IN CHRIST TO SERVE THE NEIGHBOR: LUTHERANS TALK ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY

Journey Together Faithfully: ELCA Studies on Sexuality, Part Three



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

*Living in God's amazing grace*

# Letter from the Presiding Bishop

November 2006

Dear Partners in Mission and Ministry:

Since the 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly mandated that this church engage in a study on homosexuality and a study on sexuality, we have been on a six-year journey together. Two studies under the banner of “Journey Together Faithfully” have been developed to help us engage in conversations on these matters within the context of this church’s faith and life. Your faithful conversations and your feedback continue to help form the recommendations that will come to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

We have discussed and debated important matters together already, but as we draw closer to the development of a comprehensive social statement on human sexuality, more conversation is needed. To help us continue the conversation, this third study, *Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality*, has been developed under the guidance of the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality.

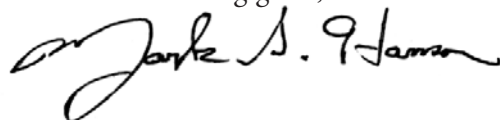
I believe you will find this study to be both comprehensive and engaging. I appreciate that it uses Paul’s letter to the Galatians and Luther’s “The Freedom of the Christian” to provide the biblical and theological grounding for our conversations. I encourage its use in a variety of settings—in congregations, rostered leaders’ conferences, campus ministries, homes, and classrooms. Discussing matters related to human sexuality can be challenging and even difficult, but this resource helps us approach these matters in a way that is respectful, honest, and faithful.

From the first session comes this statement:

“On complicated matters, Christians can and will in good conscience disagree about interpreting the will of God. ...We do not disagree that we are saved by grace through faith. We do not disagree that we are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. So then, as God’s own people called to freedom in the gospel, we ask, ‘How then shall we live?’ Discovering this ‘how’ is not a simple matter. It will likely produce some struggle, but because we are bound together in the gospel we can deliberate without fear and without threat of division.”

It is with this hope and with confidence in the leading of the Holy Spirit that we continue our journey together. May God strengthen and bless you as you participate in these studies.

In God’s amazing grace,



Mark S. Hanson

Presiding Bishop

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# Introduction to this Study Booklet

## BACKGROUND

*Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality* is the third study offered by the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality under the general theme, “Journey Together Faithfully.”

At the 2001 Churchwide Assembly, voting members from congregations across the ELCA adopted resolutions that called upon the church: (See Appendix II for official Assembly Actions)

1. to study homosexuality with reference to two issues: the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination, consecration, and commissioning of people in committed same-sex unions, and
2. to develop a social statement on sexuality.

Since that time, the church has produced two prior studies. *Journey Together Faithfully: Part One* (2002) studied “A Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” (ELCA, 1996). *Journey Together Faithfully: Part Two* (2003) focused on “The Church and Homosexuality” and asked members of the ELCA to consider how this church should respond to the requests to bless same-sex unions and to ordain, consecrate, or commission people in committed same-sex unions. (Information for downloading or ordering of either study may be found in Appendix I.)

The task force is providing this third study because prominent aspects of Christian social concerns relating to human sexuality have not yet been discussed in depth. The task force hopes the approach integrated into this third study will encourage a fresh look, a means to reframe the conversation, and a nurturing way to listen to the Holy Spirit and to one another in a quest for Christian wisdom about human sexuality for this time.

This study, like those before it, invites members of this church into conversation with the task force. To guide the conversation, the study offers eight study sessions on issues related to sexuality, as well as two foundational resources that support and bring depth to the primary study sessions. This study has been developed in a way that fulfills the ELCA’s commitment to developing social statements through probing its theological resources in a participatory process of study and reflection. Participants are strongly urged to share comments and responses with the task force by November 1, 2007. This will assist the task force in crafting the first draft of a social statement on sexuality. That draft is due in early 2008 and will be shared widely for review and comment. Such responses will aid the task force in concluding its assignment to deliver a proposed social statement to the ELCA Church Council in April of 2009. It is anticipated that the Church Council will bring a proposed social statement to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly for consideration. A detailed timeline of the above process can be found at [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney)

### **Some assumptions**

First, this study continues but does not duplicate the work of *Journey Together Faithfully, Parts 1 and 2*, mentioned above. Rather, it probes additional areas of concern related to sexuality in this society that have not received attention. Toward that end the conversation from all three studies will come into play as the task force attempts to articulate what this church believes and teaches about human sexuality—as grounded in Scripture and the confessional witness in an engagement with contemporary experience and the challenges evident in society.

In particular it is important to note that since Part 2 devoted extensive attention to questions around same-sex relations in light of scriptural interpretation, tradition, and Christian faith, matters specific to homosexuality will not be a prominent theme in this third study. However, the task force believes that the topics addressed in this study of human sexuality are relevant for all the baptized—women and men, heterosexuals and homosexuals, married and single. Further, it encourages discussions in congregations to be broadly inclusive of the concerns and perspectives of all members.

Second, the task force seeks broad participation in the conversation around issues related to sexuality, and so this study is consciously aimed at thoughtful groups of adults and young people who are willing to engage in Bible study, discernment, and deliberation. Whether used in church fellowship halls, at campus ministry sites, in homes, or elsewhere, the task force hopes the study will engage as many people as possible. It hopes that a variety of voices will contribute to mutual exploration and understanding in these matters. Moreover, the task force believes the Holy Spirit can be heard through the questions, insights, anxieties, and working solutions shared with it through this process.

Third, this study lifts up the theme of Christian freedom in responsibility as a prominent part of the framework for this discussion. It insists that in Christian freedom matters of sexuality are matters for debate but are not essential to salvation or the gospel message. This evangelical (gospel grounded) hermeneutic (a way of interpreting) is crucial to articulate as a guide for moral deliberation in our current context where many people hear discussions of social issues as if Christianity were primarily a religion of law. The emphasis on freedom in responsibility is drawn both from Galatians, where Paul declares, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (5:1), and from Luther’s audacious challenge to Christians in his essay “The Freedom of the Christian” to believe that the Christian is “a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none...[and] a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

As people freed for service by the power of God in Christ this question then is central: “How can we as sexual beings best understand what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves and thus fulfill God’s law (of love)?” (see Romans 13:9-10; Galatians 5:14; 6:14). This question obviously echoes the great love commandment, the central ethical pillar throughout Christian history: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). In this study, “neighbor” may refer to family, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances. But “neighbors” may also refer to groups, broad social networks, and even institutions. Such a comprehensive understanding of “neighbor” affirms that questions about human sexuality have complex social and cultural connections. It suggests therefore why this study attempts to explore such far-reaching territory.

Fourth, this study does not presume to be comprehensive. The task force believes that this study combined with the two earlier studies will have explored many of the consequential themes, questions, and issues related to sexuality today. Even so, some will still not be touched upon. This includes such issues as questions around transgendered persons, appropriate means to combat the sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS, male and female circumcision, and more. We recognize that these issues are of great importance and are intensely personal for many in our faith community. Our hope is that other studies or resources will take up these and other neglected topics.

In producing this study we have struggled with the tension between providing sufficient detail and complexity and maintaining reasonable boundaries of time for discussion of any set of topics. Where issues and concerns seem to be missing, the task force hopes the conversation of the faithful will help fill in those gaps. In this way the task force recognizes that the blessing of studies on sexuality has and will come primarily in the Holy Spirit’s presence working through the entire process.

## DISCERNMENT, DELIBERATION, AND DWELLING IN THE WORD

The first social statement adopted by the newly formed ELCA was titled *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. It describes the church as “a community of moral deliberation.” Such a community can be defined as a formative context for and contributor to personal morality and one that stresses the responsibility of members of the church to engage together in thoughtful, well-informed deliberation about questions and problems that are theological and moral in nature. This study is designed to put this understanding of church as community of moral deliberation into practice.

This model underlines the fact that Christians of good will can and do disagree about moral questions, even though they share many of the same values and convictions as well as a foundation in salvation by grace alone. The process may be difficult because the problems that confront us are often complex and involve institutions and structures, as well as personal desires and temptations. Moral deliberation specifies that the deliberation should not be carried out only by clergy, ethicists, advocates, and those with special knowledge and expertise. It is incomplete without the involvement of a broad array of “everyday folk”. Such deliberation, likewise, must not remain in abstraction but deal with the messy particulars and give special attention to the concerns of those who suffer most with any particular issue. A moral deliberation model calls us to bring our Lutheran imagination and conviction to the task of communal deliberation.

To help us in our deliberation, the task force acknowledges the importance of dwelling in the Word of God in order to discern how God may be speaking to us individually and in our various faith communities. A key feature of this study, therefore, will be a selected reading of the apostle Paul’s Letter to the Galatians at the beginning of each study session so that dwelling in the Word may initiate the process of *discernment* that will lead to moral or theological *deliberation*. For more about why Galatians has been chosen, and about how we will listen to God and to one another in this study, turn to Session One and to A Readers’ Guide to Galatians. (p. 83)

## WHAT IS IN THIS STUDY?

### Content Elements

This study contains a number of different elements designed to frame the discussion and provide multiple entry points and resources for use. In addition to this Introduction, the study includes:

**Foundational Resources**—Though printed at the back of the study (pp. 81-136), Timothy J. Wengert’s essay introducing Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian” and David L. Tiede’s A Readers’ Guide to Galatians support and provide a framework for the study sessions. Leaders, especially, but all participants are encouraged to read and become familiar with these two resources. Either could be used as study material in their own right.

**The Sessions**—Eight study sessions each raise contemporary challenges and provide reflection and insights on key topics related to sexuality. Each session identifies common resources and multiple points of view in order to invite deliberation around key questions related to the session themes and topics.

“Christians of good will can and do disagree about moral questions, even though they share many of the same values and convictions as well as a foundation in salvation by grace alone.”

### Resources for leaders

If you are leading the study, consult the Leader’s Guide on p. 77, the Foundational Resources on p. 81, and the Glossary on p. 141 for help.

**Response Form**—A crucial opportunity for individuals, groups, and congregations to provide the task force with their concerns and feedback. It is incorporated into the discussion intended for Session 8.

**Leader's Guide**—Instructions and suggestions on the “how tos” of setting up and guiding study sessions.

**Appendices**—Various resources and references for further explanation or study.

**Glossary**—A listing of key terms used in, or related to, the study.

### Regarding the sessions

The sessions and their format have been designed with intention. Please watch for the following:

**Liturgical format**—We gather as baptized saints and sinners, opening our ears and our hearts to the living God. Each session is shaped within a liturgical format, placing our moral deliberation within the context of prayer, and hearing and responding to God's Word. The format of each session follows a similar pattern:

<i>Gathering</i>	Hymn and Prayer
<i>Hearing the Word</i>	Using a reading from Galatians, we open our minds and hearts to the living Word of God.
<i>Considering the Word</i>	We engage in conversation about the reading, eager to discern God's will.
<i>Responding to Word and World</i>	We read, reflect, and discuss how we, as sexual beings, love God and serve our neighbor.
<i>Closing</i>	Prayer and Dismissal

**Session format**—Sessions 1 and 2 introduce the model for moral deliberation and provide background on key foundational resources that support the rest of the sessions. Session 8 is a summary session that brings together vital points and is designed to help individuals or groups to complete the Response Form, due by November 1, 2007.

Sessions 3-7 look at sexuality on a variety of topics and from a variety of perspectives. Each session will follow a specific pattern designed to ground and encourage reflection and moral deliberation. Within the liturgical framework listed above, these sessions will include the same format:

- Opening hymn and prayer
- Galatians reading and discernment
- Vignette(s) to put a “face” on the topic
- Contemporary Context to describe the current situation in life
- Reflections on key biblical and theological resources to provide insights
- Common Ground to review commonly held convictions and ELCA statements
- Differing Views that describe various perspective people hold regarding issues raised in the session
- An Invitation to Moral Deliberation provides questions for discussion
- Closing prayer and benediction

## **A FINAL WORD**

In Galatians, the apostle Paul declares, “In Christ Jesus...the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (5:6). May this bold statement guide your reading and reflecting, your discernment and your deliberation, your listening to and speaking with one another.

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# STUDY SESSIONS



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# Christian Foundations for Deliberation

## Session

# 1

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## GATHERING

### Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

### Prayer

Holy Wisdom, giver of all life and source of all creating, we give you thanks that your Spirit moves through our world, transforming us and calling us to you. In faith and trust we bring to you our uncertainties, our fears, and our questions. Free us in Christ for service to our neighbor as we dwell in your Word and listen for your Spirit. Guide us, we pray. Amen.

## HEARING THE WORD

### Galatians 1:1–10 • Seeking God’s Approval!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 89.

## CONSIDERING THE WORD

### *Silence*

### *Reflection and Discernment*

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

## RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

### As We Begin

As we begin an eight-session study of sexuality, it is especially important to recognize that this first session lays the foundation for the sessions to follow. Just as managers and umpires discuss ground rules before baseball games, here we will discuss faith’s “ground rules” that will guide our listening and talking in the sessions to come. In an era when many questions of sexual identity and practice are divisive in society, in our families, and in our Christian communities, this chapter explores these “ground rules” to guide and ground our moral and ethical deliberation. These are drawn from Scripture and our common Lutheran confession of faith which we necessarily use according to the most careful thinking that we can muster as we attend to the Spirit’s work in our human lives. Certainly such ground rules call for us to listen and speak with humility and openness, recognizing that we come to this study as sinful but redeemed mortals created by God and receiving God’s saving grace by faith alone.

Talking about the ground rules and foundations is not usually as exciting as playing the game, but playing the game without understanding the rules can be chaotic, if not impossible. The same can be said for the kind of theological and moral deliberation this study is asking you to do. So, read and listen now with care, and be prepared to ask questions of clarification.

## We Listen to God in the Scriptures

The wisdom we receive from God through Scripture provides some but not all knowledge about human sexuality. Much of what we know about sex comes from many other places—perhaps from our parents or from our teachers, doctors, or pastors. Often we figure things out as best we can with help from a spouse, friends, the media, and our own experiences. Some of the lessons about sexuality that we have learned in life are healthy and joyful. Some are bitter and destructive. We seek to understand how God would have us live as sexual creatures<sup>1</sup> in such a way that our neighbors, communities, and the world will be blessed. Where will we turn to gain this understanding?

1. We begin with our relationship with God revealed in the Bible. In Proverbs 1:7 we read that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” This is not simply head knowledge, as in “the facts of life,” but rather the wisdom of the heart that comes from fearing, loving, and trusting God. Proverbs 2:6, 9-10 continues: “For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; ...you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; prudence will watch over you; and understanding will guard you.” As we listen to each other and use our experience to test our understandings of what God’s mercy and righteousness mean for our lives together as sexual creatures, we begin in the fear, love, and trust of the Lord. As we hear and study the Scriptures together, we will ask about the promises and commands God has for us as sexual creatures that strengthen faith and love.
2. We recognize that there are vastly different ways to read Scripture; some are destructive and some are faith giving. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus provided a clue for Bible readers. We must not only ask, “What is written in the law?” but also “What do you read there?” or to translate more literally, “How do you read?” (Luke 10:26). Jesus sensed that the interpreter of the law was trying to justify himself, even as he read the Scriptures with great care. It is possible for us to find scripture verses to prove our point in almost every argument. But something else is needed.

The apostle Paul often argued with people who had an abundance of proof texts, but he testified that God “has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). In his *Prefaces to the New Testament*, Martin Luther said it this way:

The gospel, then, is nothing but the preaching of Christ. ...See to it, therefore, that you do not make a Moses out of Christ, or a book of laws and doctrines out of the gospel...[for] the gospel is not a book of law, but really a preaching of the benefits of Christ, shown to us and given to us for our own possession, if we believe. But Moses, in his books, drives, compels, threatens, strikes, and rebukes terribly, for he is a lawgiver and a driver.”<sup>2</sup>

In the ELCA constitution, we define the Word of God in three ways. First and foremost, we confess that Jesus Christ in the flesh and raised from the dead is the Word of God. Secondly, we also believe and confess the gospel of Christ is a living Word, announced, prayed, and sung, from faith to faith. Faith comes by hearing this Word (Romans 10:17). Martin Luther reminded his congregation that the church is primarily a “Mouth House.” Here the gospel is spoken, proclaimed, and heard. Luther also saw the sacraments—the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper—as “visible words” bearing the Holy Spirit and the body and blood of Christ to us. Christ’s word of promise connected to physical elements

makes this true. But the God who created us still comes to us in, with, and under these earthly elements. Thirdly, because the written Scriptures bear witness to this living Word, they are also the Word of God or, as Luther said, it is the manger bearing Christ to us. Thus, although the church appeals to this sacred book for moral guidance, the gospel's saving power must not be turned into a legal code, as if God's righteousness could be controlled by only citing the "letter of the law." Such activity risks twisting God's saving Word into one or another view of what is righteous, turning the living Christ's promise into a dead letter.

Lutherans read the Bible in the light of Christ for the sake of the world God loves. Some theologians have called this way of interpreting the Bible through the good news of God in Christ an *evangelical hermeneutic* (that is, a gospel way of interpreting). As we consider the quotation cited above from Martin Luther, who was trained as an Old Testament scholar, we realize that he knew that Israel's Scriptures are full of God's promises.

At the same time, Luther knew that God's law is God's will. For him and for Lutherans who followed after him, God's law functions in two primary ways. First, God's law orders human activities in ways that protect against harm and evil and promote the civil good for all. Second, God's law reveals the broken realities of our lives in the light of God's holiness. Luther's protests against "Moses," (in the quote above) therefore, are not rejections of the law but an appeal not to confuse God's law with the gracious news of forgiveness in Christ.

3. We also read the Bible carefully, paying attention to every detail. According to Matthew 5:18, our Lord Jesus made the point explicitly: "Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." But while the letter of the law breaks through our pretenses, even "kills" us, the Spirit of the risen Christ gives us life with the promise of life for the world.

## Dwelling in Galatians

This study is proposing that throughout the ELCA we will begin our deliberations by dwelling together in Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. Galatians may seem like an odd choice. Apart from a few fierce words in Galatians 5, Paul says almost nothing directly about sex in this letter. But Galatians is a strong choice. The six chapters of this little book have been called "The Magna Carta of Christian Freedom." Galatians is the apostle Paul's wisdom about how to view God's law in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was writing against fierce opponents, people who had on their side clear scriptural texts demanding obedience to the law. At the same time, Paul is a strong advocate of God's law, against "fornication, impurity, licentiousness," ... "those who do such things (among others) will not inherit the kingdom of God" (5:19, 21). Christian freedom is not the same as the sinfulness that passes for sexual freedom.

There will be those who will be frustrated with the decision to listen to Paul's testimony. Dwelling in the Scriptures, however, significantly challenges our views of what is most important, because God is not done with any of us. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8). Our faithful dwelling together in the Scriptures will bless us, and the world will be blessed as well because we will be called beyond ourselves to our neighbor's need.

We suggest that every session begin with hearing a portion of Galatians in the context of worship. This reading of the text will be followed by silence and a question to encourage the sharing of insights we have just "heard." We may expect that the Triune God will be present in the assembly of the faithful. These Bible readings will not be directly linked to the sessions, as if the Scriptures could simply

**"Lutherans read the Bible in the light of Christ for the sake of the world God loves."**

**"Galatians is the apostle Paul's wisdom about how to view God's law in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ."**

**"Dwelling in the Scriptures, however, significantly challenges our views of what is most important, because God is not done with any of us."**

**“In the eyes of faith the human body in its capacity to make love, to conceive, and to give birth is a wonder of God’s creation, bestowing the blessings of human life.”**

be “applied” like case law. Instead, the larger questions addressed in Galatians will serve our quest for Christian wisdom and understanding about how to love God and our neighbor in our lives as sexual beings. As we hear God’s law, our lives and our world will be called to account. But we will also hear the promises of Christ’s mercy, and we will hear God calling us to freedom from sin for the sake of the neighbor and the world. The goal will be to listen together for the Holy Spirit’s testimony as we hear Paul proclaim Christ and Christian freedom.

If Christian freedom is Paul’s theme—and ours! — then our discussion will be less focused on rights or privileges, because the purpose of this freedom is the blessing of the world and the neighbor. A profound question lies within each of the topics we are deliberating: How shall we as sexual beings live for the benefit of others?

### **We Listen for the Spirit as God’s Creatures**

When Lutheran Christians seek wisdom about a complex reality like sexuality, we already have a positive view of human life. Believing the God of the Bible, we love and trust God’s creation. God created a good world, and God is still creating good. “I believe that God has created me together with all that exists,” says the *Small Catechism*. “God has given me and still preserves my body and soul; eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties.” This means that we may also use human reason and mental faculties to address issues that pertain to this world. Far from rejecting human wisdom, our confession of God as creator means that we are created to think about this world and act in a reasonable manner. For example, we view the knowledge gained from natural and social sciences to be gifts of God. Furthermore, when we confess that God so loved the world that God gave Christ Jesus so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life and that the world might be saved through him, we must admit that “eternal life” begins within this earthly life, as sexual and as mortal as God created it to be. Because Christians also confess the resurrection of the body, we can look for that day when God will complete and perfect the creation.

The Bible is filled with wonder at the creation. However, it is true that negative attitudes about the earth and human sexuality may be found as far back as second-century “Gnostic” sects, and even some Christians have thought it was more spiritual to support such disdain for the body. To be sure, the New Testament knows the hazards of living “according to the flesh” as if “gratifying the desires of the flesh” is all there is (see Galatians 4:29; 5:16), but human creatures live “in the flesh by faith” (Galatians 2:20). In the eyes of faith the human body in its capacity to make love, to conceive, and to give birth, is a wonder of God’s creation, bestowing the blessings of human life as Psalm 139:13-16 states.

### **We Listen to God as Forgiven Sinners**

In the meanwhile, the world and our lives, including our sexual lives, are far from perfect or even perfectible by our powers. Lutherans are traditionally skeptical of schemes of human perfection because these schemes underestimate our participation in evil. Something is deeply wrong in the world that God created good. Sin—being turned away from God—marks the whole creation. The world and its peoples are lost from God without the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Every Sunday, Lutherans confess that “we are in bondage to sin” and we “cannot free ourselves.” This confession also points to a still deeper conviction that includes both a dire diagnosis and a profound promise. This is simply and powerfully expressed in Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed, “On Being Made Holy.”

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the truth faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.

The dire diagnosis is what Luther called “the bondage of the will.” In the Reformation, Luther retrieved the gospel that God loves and forgives the ungodly. This insight, far from merely leading to a correction of abuses in the church, released once again God’s call to faith, understood as trust. As the Apostle Paul taught, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5.8).

For this reason, Luther stated in the first sentence of his explanation to the Third Article: “*I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.*” Lutherans confess (for example, in Article 20 of the Augsburg Confession) that our human plight cannot simply be fixed by better information. Yes, human reason is powerful, and our faith is served by sound teaching. Our strengths of body and soul are also considerable, aiding us in all kinds of deciding. But believing in Jesus as Lord is not about correct knowledge or human decision. It is instead brought about by that creative Word of forgiveness and new life that causes us to rely upon God.

God’s commands are clear: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). Far from being easy to fulfill, these very commandments reveal our inabilities and sin, our failure to trust God or love our neighbors. As Paul wrote (Romans 3:20), by “the law comes knowledge of sin.”

God’s love for us, the ungodly, is a gift. In Christ, God loves us even when we are turned in on ourselves with hearts of stone, and God turns us around and gives us trusting hearts. Christ’s faithfulness to God alone is our holiness, never to be displaced by some claim to personal holiness that would “nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law,” Paul insists in Galatians 2:21, “then Christ died for nothing.”

Following Paul, Luther’s insight resulted in the liberation of the gospel. He attacked pious-sounding doctrines of “free will” and denied that clergy and others in religious “vocations” were doing more for God than common folk. Luther also attacked the idea that those who adopted the celibate life were somehow holier because their disciplined denial of sexual urges displayed a superior spirituality. Striving to be asexual was not a holier state for creatures God had created as sexual beings. The saving gospel, God’s work in Christ Jesus, dismisses every effort to put ourselves in God’s place.

## **We Listen to God in Freedom**

Lutheran diagnosis of the bondage of the will in matters of salvation (see Article 18 of the Augsburg Confession) was sharply focused on our inability as sinful creatures to decide to love God. The dire sickness of bondage to sin, however, is followed by the promise of Christian freedom—the freedom to which God calls and empowers Christians in their callings in the world: We are free from the guilt of sin and free to serve. Christian freedom is not just doing whatever you want. Instead, Lutherans confess that if our Christian proclamation does not announce salvation by grace through faith on account of Christ, it is just religious talk, not the gospel. At the same time, if this freedom does not bless the neighbor, it is only self-interest, not true Christian freedom.

**“Christian freedom is not just doing whatever you want. Instead, Lutherans confess that if our Christian proclamation does not announce salvation by grace through faith on account of Christ, it is just religious talk, not the gospel. At the same time, if this freedom does not bless the neighbor, it is only self-interest, not true Christian freedom.”**

**“Lutherans are persuaded that Christian faith liberates us for responsibility to the neighbor in the world.”**

As the apostle Paul testified:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ...For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5:1, 13-14)

God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbor does. Because of what Christ Jesus has done for us without our deserving it, we are set free to do good to our neighbor in need (Luke 10:25-37). As Luther says in “The Freedom of a Christian,” in Christ we are perfectly free lords of all, subject to none, and we are also perfectly dutiful servants of all, subject to all. Because Luther meditates on this paradox throughout that booklet and helps us understand the relation between our freedom in Christ and our responsibility toward our neighbor, this study provides a separate guide to this work for further reflection on our common theme (see page 121 of this study).

In speaking of freedom, Luther and later Lutherans were using a term employed not only by Paul in a Christian sense but also, in a very different sense, by philosophers long before Paul. Moreover, after the Reformation, others used the term to construct a vision of human, political freedom, at least for landowning, free *men*, who, according to the Declaration of Independence of the United States were “endowed by their creator with inalienable rights.” This “self-evident” view of political freedom has slowly extended to include all people, and public talk about freedom, including sexual freedom, has thus often focused on the political issues of “rights.”

Lutheran Christians are also deeply interested in questions of rights for protecting their neighbor's interests and for the well being of the society. But we are careful not to equate these rights that make up our civic freedom with our freedom in Christ. In addition to civic freedom, social scientists, economists, geneticists, and others are also engaged in rich conversations about the role of natural and social factors in shaping human sexual identity and behavior. In modern understandings of the limits of human freedom, human beings are shaped by and stuck with practical realities. Because Lutherans affirm that God gives human beings gifts to explore and understand this world, we understand that we are responsible agents, even in our “limited” state, in relation to one another and the world. Lutherans have been eager to learn from the natural and social sciences about our standing in this world, but they also view humans most profoundly in terms of their standing before God. Once we understand that without Christ Jesus, no one is righteous by God's standards, we trust that God's saving mercy for us extends to others too.

Lutherans are persuaded that Christian faith liberates us for responsibility to the neighbor in the world. There are no guarantees that Christians will think more clearly than others about God's creation. Therefore, rather than defining special “Christian” boundaries for the wisdom of this world, we affirm all such wisdom that encourages love of neighbor and does not make false claims about God. We move into unknown matters of this world from this center in Christ. And we are eager to make common cause with all people of good will who have wisdom about what is truly good for the world and the neighbor, especially the vulnerable and the children. Our deliberation about sexuality can be a significant example of our exercise of Christian freedom.

In this light, sexuality is a matter of human understanding, healthy practice, and medical knowledge. It is not a hidden spiritual secret or an inherent knowledge, but rather must be formed and nurtured. Martin Luther, in his down-to-earth

comments on God's commandment against adultery, for example, praised the sexuality of marriage as holier and more pleasing to God than the denial of one's sexual life (asceticism). In the *Large Catechism*, he wrote that God established marriage "before all others as the first of all institutions, and he created man and woman differently (as is evident) not for indecency but to be true to each other, to be fruitful, to beget children, and to nurture and bring them up to the glory of God." He was also aware that marriage is not appropriate for everyone.

People who do not believe in God or who disagree with Luther's understanding of marriage are welcome in the discussion because this public or political view of God's law (the "civil use") opens the space for Christians and non-Christians to matters of morality and ethics. Christians bring convictions about what it means to be human, and the discussion of sexuality provides significant opportunities to bear witness to the faith. But disagreements in these matters will not by themselves separate Christians from one another or from their non-Christian neighbors. Even when we hold deeply contrary views on moral issues, questions of church and civil law are not necessarily church dividing. The church and its unity are grounded in the gospel. Our identity in Christ Jesus as forgiven sinners provides us with the basis from which to pursue what will truly benefit the earthly welfare of human beings and the world itself.

We first ground ourselves in the gospel. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Then in respectful conversation with others of good will, we who are Christian seek healthy wisdom on how to love our neighbors through our sexual lives and in the arenas of our vocations in home and family, work, public life, and communities of worship.

## We Look Ahead

In the sessions that follow you are invited to listen to God's Word and to the witness of God's Spirit. You will also be encouraged to listen to one another, even as you worship together and discuss the session topics and questions. Session 2 will elaborate on Christian themes about sexuality and an evangelical ethic. Session 3 will show how we are all participants in various kinds of "cultures," each of which provide different lenses for discerning the good of our neighbor or drawing us away from freedom in Christ. Sessions 4-7 introduce specific issues related to sexuality. Here you will explore and deliberate about the impact of social institutions, power, money, and economic status on sexuality and sexual practice, always considering how the freedom of the gospel and Jesus' call to love the neighbor may influence our attitudes and practices. The final session will help you draw your experience and your thoughts together, so that you and your group can communicate with the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. The task force is providing this study as part of its work toward developing a social statement and wants to know what you have learned and what may need to be said on these matters.

## Listening to Our Questions

1. Reflecting on what you have read in this session and anticipating the study sessions that lie ahead, in what spirit do you hope your discussions and deliberation will unfold? Why is this important?
2. According to what you have read, how are gospel and law to be understood? How can being clear about what these mean guide your discussion?
3. What wisdom does our Lutheran theology provide regarding free will and making choices? How does this wisdom influence the way we deliberate together and the way we view our neighbors?

### A participatory process

This study, like those before it, invites members of this church into conversation with the task force...[it] has been developed in a way that fulfills the ELCA's commitment to developing social statements through probing its theological resources in a participatory process of study and reflection. Participants are strongly urged to share comments and responses with the task force by November 1, 2007. This will assist the task force in crafting the first draft of a social statement on sexuality... (from the Introduction)

4. How do civic freedoms differ from freedom in the gospel? In what ways may these understandings of freedom intersect?
5. How is it possible to hold deeply contrary views and still remain together as one church?
6. What new insight or understanding have you gained from reading this session? How has this been important to you?
7. What, if any, questions or concerns were raised by the reading? What more would you like to know or understand?

## **CLOSING**

### **Prayer**

Good and gracious God, giver of all good gifts, we give you thanks for the gift of each other and for your church. As we seek to understand ourselves and our world, give us wisdom and patience. Help us to listen thoughtfully with profound respect for one another. Instill us with vision and imagination, forgiveness and humility. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **Dismissal**

**Leader:** Go in peace.

**All:** Thanks be to God

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> The terms sexual “creatures” and sexual “beings” are used interchangeably throughout this study. Each carries important connotations that either alone misses.

<sup>2</sup> From *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, (Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1960, E. Theodore Bachmann, editor), p 360.

# Created As Sexual Beings

## Session

# 2

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## GATHERING

### Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

### Prayer

Behold, Lord, an empty vessel that needs to be filled. My Lord, fill it. I am weak in the faith; strengthen me. I am cold in love; warm me and make me fervent, that my love may go out to my neighbor. I do not have a strong and firm faith; at times I doubt and am unable to trust you altogether. O Lord, help me. Strengthen my faith and trust in you. In you I have sealed the treasure of all I have. I am poor; you are rich and came to be merciful to the poor. I am a sinner; you are upright. With me, there is an abundance of sin; in you is the fullness of righteousness. Therefore I will remain with you, of whom I can receive, but to whom I may not give. Amen. (A prayer of Martin Luther, *ELW*, page 87)

## HEARING THE WORD

### Galatians 1:11—2:10 • The Freedom We Have in Christ Jesus!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 93.

## CONSIDERING THE WORD

### *Silence*

### *Discernment*

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

## RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

### Vignette

Questions at the end of the session (p. 25) are provided for your reflection on this vignette.

### *Abbey and Billy*

Abbey is a confident and expressive sophomore at Central High School who is very involved with school theater and her church youth group. While many of her peers struggle with self-image issues, Abbey appears to “have it all figured out.” But this is not the whole story. Ever since she started junior high, she has struggled to deal with her own developing body and sexual identity, and she has questions because she feels that she is given conflicting messages about sexuality from her church, parents, friends, and the media. Abbey loves listening to her mom’s “vintage” Madonna albums from the 1980s and admires Madonna’s strong, self-confident female sexuality. A lot of her favorite female singers seem to share this

### A growing phenomena

Reliable national statistics about the incidence of oral sex among teenagers has not yet been established, but anecdotal evidence and the increase in some sexually related diseases suggests that the practice is a rapidly growing phenomena in high school and even in middle school.

sense that sexuality is powerful and something to be proud of or even flaunt. Abbey would be the first to admit, however, that not all her music has positive images of women's sexuality. She loves the beat and rhythms of rap music, too, even though she knows that a lot of her favorite songs have really negative, even abusive, images of women.

Even the church seems to have conflicting views of sexuality. Sometimes it seems that the church and her parents are simply "against" sexuality. Her parents have brought up concerns about her dating and sexual activity. In church, she hears Bible verses that say the "flesh" is bad, and that seems to imply that our bodies and sex are bad. The adults at church seem so upright about sex. They either avoid talking about sex or simply see her sexuality as a "problem." Once in confirmation, however, Pastor Debbie talked about how God created human bodies and sexuality, and that they were "good" in God's eyes. Frankly, it reminded her of her mother's five minute "birds and the bees" talk after she got her period for the first time. That was awkward and slightly embarrassing. Nonetheless, she remembered what her pastor said, and, while Abbey didn't want moral lectures, she did want more information on how Christian faith looks at human sexuality and sexual actions.

Beyond Abbey's feelings and questions about her own sexuality, she is interested in being more sexually active with her boyfriend, Billy. But she has some faith questions here as well. Billy is a junior soccer player at her high school. His family, like Abbey's, goes to a Lutheran church. With a little encouragement from friends who told them they made a great couple, they started "going out" four months ago. They really care for each other, and even their parents seem to approve of their dating. Last Saturday, after a movie, Billy and Abbey were alone in his car when Billy suggested that they should take their physical relationship a step further and have oral sex. Abbey thought this question would come up eventually, but told Billy that she didn't know if she was ready to go that far. Billy said that was fine. He wanted her to be comfortable with it, but he also said that a lot of his friends have received oral sex, and it is supposed to be safe. Abbey knows that some of her friends have had oral sex and she would like to please him. Still, she has some questions.

One of those is whether there is anything right or wrong about this. There is a new female youth director at her church, Nicole, who is a young, recent college graduate, and very popular with the high school group. Abbey decides to approach her for some guidance. Abbey wants to know what her faith, or even the Bible says about such actions. She knows intercourse is wrong, but oral sex doesn't seem the same because she and Billy would both still be virgins. And Abbey feels relieved because she definitely can't get pregnant this way. What's more, a lot of her friends say oral sex isn't really sex. The more she thinks about it, she can't really see any downside to "doing it." With some hesitation, she stops by church after school one day and knocks on Nicole's door... .

### Setting the Context

Abbey's story introduces the key topics to be covered in this session. She has heard that sexuality is part of God's good creation. Yet, she has also heard and likely observed that matters of sexuality and practicing sex are not all viewed in a positive way. She wonders what the church has to say about these issues. What might, or should, the youth director tell Abbey? In a broader context, what insights do we, as Lutherans, offer to questions about human sexuality or sexual actions in an increasingly complex world? That, of course, is fundamental to what prompted this church to commission the task force to develop a social statement regarding human sexuality. This entire study will aid that process. In this session we will explore some of the fundamental commitments of the Christian heritage about sexuality and consider a way of proceeding that can guide our thinking on these matters.

Why is this work so important at this time? Our society today is clearly seeing changes in sexual practice and in attitudes toward sexuality. This social upheaval appears to be fueled by multiple social, technological, and economic forces. These include advances in medical knowledge and practice, communication technology, social mobility, social fragmentation, marketing and media forces, and many more. The evidence of the change in sexual practice and attitude is abundant. To cite only one example, The National Survey of Youth and Religion in 2003 reported that about 1/5 of Protestant teenagers reported engaging in sexual intercourse in the previous year.

These studies about sexual activity among teens, on the other hand, also do indicate that worship attendance and church involvement seem to have an impact on young people's sexual behavior. The troubling news is that few congregations seem to be able to offer much in-depth attention to helping youth think about sexuality. Further, while church teachings do matter to these young people, the answers are not easy and it is no longer persuasive, if it ever was, to say: "Well, that's the way it has always been" or "The Bible just says don't do it." Teens, like most adults today, desire explanations and want good reasons.

Conversation in the church about human sexuality and sexual ethics, however, is important for other reasons as well. Within the general culture, and even within many congregations, some believe that the church is simply embarrassed by or *against* anything that has to do with bodies or sexuality. Others assume, or have experienced, reluctance within the church to talk about sexuality. Moreover, the Christian message can be heard as a conflicted one—bodies are wonderfully made, but, at the same time, full of sin and lust, and shouldn't be trusted.

The powerful influence of contemporary culture, especially in the media, offers yet other obstacles to a healthy understanding of sexuality that the church must face. Marketing and media beat a constant drum of sexual images designed to sell products, to hype sexual prowess, and treat sex as though it were value free. Moreover, the primary value in this culture is individualistic "freedom," an idea that when connected with bodies and sexuality often means something like: "Any pleasure that I choose is OK as long as it doesn't overtly hurt someone else." Contemporary society is radically pluralistic, in the sense that most people are aware of many, many alternative views on sexuality and how it is played out in terms of personal identity and morals. Considering multiple perspectives has its beneficial side, but conflicting interpretations can also lead to a sense of turmoil.

Finally, even without all these contemporary challenges, our human experience as sexual beings has always been full of ambiguities. It is powerful, mysterious, scary, delightful, and destructive, sometimes all at the same time. While being wonderful, sexuality brings conflicting impulses and often contradictory feelings regarding one's own body, its relation to others around us, and the social order. The discussion of sexuality with other people, even in general terms, is just plain hard. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let's first go back to the statement that Abbey's Pastor Debbie made about God creating sexuality "good."

### **Sexuality Is Part of God's Good Creation**

The first word Scripture uses to describe humans, including their bodies, is "very good" (Genesis 1:27, 31), and so the first theological statement affirms the goodness of the body and sexuality as part of God's good creation. Yet, even from the beginning of Christianity, this affirmation of the goodness of human bodies, including our sexuality, was hard won. In Jesus' time and, especially, in the centuries after, much of the culture took a very negative view of the body. One prevalent and vigorous tendency saw the mind (or soul) as *separate* from the body, which opened the door for the claim that the mind (or soul) was good and the body was bad.

#### **Protestant youth and sex**

*In the National Study of Youth and Religion, Protestant teens, aged 13-17, were polled on the subjects of sexual abstinence before marriage and engagement in sexual intercourse. In brief, the response to these questions is as follows:*

**Question: Do you think that people should wait to have sex until they are married, or not necessarily?**

"Sixty-three percent of all Protestant teens [aged 13-17] say they think that people should wait to have sex until they are married while only 38 percent of unaffiliated teens believe in sexual abstinence before marriage."

"For mainline and conservative Protestant teens, regular church attendance appears to increase support for sexual abstinence before marriage."

Among ELCA youth polled, 52 percent said people should wait to have sex until they are married. That number went up to 57 percent among youth who regularly attended worship.

**Question: When was the last time you had sexual intercourse? (Asked only of those teenagers who said they had engaged in sexual intercourse.)**

"Almost one-fifth (19%) of Protestant teenagers [aged 13-17] report engaging in sexual intercourse in the last year."

"Factors such as race, social status, age, and gender normally play a role in affecting teen sexual activity."

"Regularly attending Protestant teens are generally less likely to have sex than are all Protestant teens."

Among ELCA youth polled, five percent indicated that they had engaged in sexual intercourse in the last year, and among those who regularly attended church, the percentage dropped to nearly zero.

For a full statistical breakdown and analysis of these and more questions, see *Portraits of Protestant Teens: A Report on Teenagers in Major U.S. Denominations* by P. Schwadel and C. Smith. Chapel Hill: National Study of Youth and Religion, 2005.

**“God intends for sexuality to be what it is, a wonderful dimension of who we are, not a lowly afterthought.”**

This cultural tendency had its impact on Christian thinking across the centuries, especially regarding bodily urges. For instance, certain early church theologians suggested that Christians should not have sexual desires, even toward a spouse, because such desires detracted from attention to the religious or spiritual character of life. This was one of the arguments used by the medieval church for the belief that celibacy was a high and pure religious good. The church insisted that priests and certain others involved in direct service to the church must not marry.

The belief that sexual intercourse was somehow a “lower” or defiling human action was challenged dramatically in the Reformation, as is evident in the documents of our Lutheran Confessions. For instance, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession XXIII critiques monastic life severely and commends marriage. It affirms natural affections as created good, including sexual appetites or desires (within bounds). Martin Luther’s writings go a step further when he sings high praises for the vocation of marriage and child-rearing as some of the most holy and honorable roles a Christian can hold. In his writing, “The Estate of Marriage,” he even holds that diapering a baby is the holy calling of both men and women.<sup>1</sup> Lutheran Confessions affirm sexuality as a part of responsible vocation in a faithful life.

While there are conflicting impulses within Christianity, the body-affirming aspects are evident in its Creeds, Sacraments and practices. That is, God is making bodies and sexuality good even now as God continuously and creatively sustains and brings forth a new creation moment by moment. Moreover, the Creeds affirm that the *body* will be resurrected as part of the resurrection of all the dead when God, who is the God of the future, brings the whole creation to reflect God’s purposes and goodness. Human sexuality, then, participates in this ongoing creation and its ultimate fulfillment. God intends for sexuality to be what it is, a wonderful dimension of who we are, not an embarrassing or lowly afterthought.

### **Distorted Sexuality**

In addition to its affirmation of human sexuality, the Lutheran tradition recognizes that human life in all its dimensions has “been marred by sin, which alienates us from God and others. This results in expressions of sexuality that harm persons and communities” (ELCA “Message on Sexuality, Some Common Convictions,” p.1). Previous church statements and messages on human sexuality have spelled out opposition to such harms by opposing adultery, sexual abuse (“whether heterosexual, homosexual, whether by a spouse, family member, person in authority, date, acquaintance, or stranger”), promiscuity, prostitution, practices that spread sexually transmitted diseases, pornography, and images of sexuality in media and advertising that do not “honor marriage and promote mutual respect, responsibility, and commitment to one another.” (Common Convictions, p.7) It is important to take such stances in a world where abuses involving sexuality are so pervasive.

In the Lutheran tradition, however, we are urged to go deeper and consider sin in even broader terms than any list of wrong actions. *The Book of Concord* builds on Scripture’s insistence that human sinfulness is not essentially about a list of wrong behaviors, but rather about mistrust in God. Sin is, essentially, defined in two ways in the Lutheran tradition: First, sin is being “curved in on one’s self” or self-obsessed. Secondly, sin is misdirected trust and desire (called “concupiscence” in classic texts). The *Large Catechism’s* discussion of the First Commandment, for instance, claims that placing oneself above God or God’s intentions for the restoration of all creation amounts to a sin of idolatry. Sin is, essentially, mistrust or misdirection of one’s desires toward self-gratification or self-assertion at the expense of others. It is ignoring God’s calling to service and love. As Lutheran theologian Walter Bouman wrote, “The question in the Lutheran tradition with regard to

sinfulness is first the individual's trust orientation, not conformity to one or another norm. ...Our sinfulness is disclosed in the struggle between the freedom conferred by the gospel to offer ourselves into the service of the Reign of God and the bondage of being driven by our fears and anxiety to justify and protect ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

This Lutheran insight about *the reality of sin within both one's action and personal identity* takes the discussion of sexuality deeper, for it means that "sexual sin" can occur even within marriage. Sexual activity within marriage is sinful if it is self-centered and does not express genuine love and respect of the spouse. Such an understanding of sin removes sexuality from a simple list of "sinful lusts" and should challenge us into a deeper understanding of sin's pervasiveness and complexity.

## Laying Groundwork for Deliberation

The Christian faith, then, is not surprised by the mixed delight and confusion around issues of human sexuality. It understands human sexuality as part of the ongoing goodness of creation and the work of God's Spirit. At the same time, Lutheran Christianity recognizes that sin permeates every human society and every human endeavor, and some of the most harmful sins against our neighbors involve matters of sexuality. It is for this reason that Christian sexual ethics is necessary—ethics being understood here as the activity of thoughtful reflection and community deliberation on what is right, good, or fitting for humans to do and to be.

An *evangelical ethic or approach* takes up this task, first and foremost, with a keen awareness that is rooted in and fundamentally shaped by the good news of God's love in Christ. It claims that this good news is the ground of freedom for responsibility. In this freedom it turns to insights from Scripture, prior theology, and church teaching, but also employs reason and the best contemporary knowledge available in discussing complex sexual issues. Illustrated in this study by attention to Galatians and Luther's "The Freedom of the Christian," this evangelical approach holds in tension both contemporary knowledge and contemporary questions with what has been thought and believed in the past. Third, it acknowledges previous Lutheran church teachings about sexuality as prime sources even while recognizing that the Spirit is ever active in creative and sometimes startling ways. In this light it recognizes that Lutheran church teachings have sometimes been limited or even damaging and so asks about the need for reform. In all of this, the point is to construct for today a vision of healthy sexuality where "health" is understood as cultivating a growing love and concern for God, neighbor, and self.

Throughout this Study, it is important to note, we make a distinction between *human sexuality* and *sexual actions and behaviors*. *Human sexuality* is about our identity, *who we are as sexual creatures*, while ethical deliberations regarding sexual actions or behaviors discuss *what we do* with that sexuality. Whether we are children, adults, single, married, divorced, straight or gay, we are all sexual beings. One's sexual identity and one's sexual behaviors or actions are, of course, deeply connected. Thus, a critique of a person's choices or sexual behavior can be felt as a personal attack, because sexuality is also about identity. Likewise, when a person is sexually abused or violated, his or her sense of self-identity can, and often is, deeply scarred.

Lutheran theology offers a crucial perspective on this self-identity. It illuminates the dual nature of human sexuality as both blessed and corrupted. We are blessed, freed by God's love, and wonderfully created. Yet, simultaneously we are also in disarray because of the effects of sin in our lives. Human sexuality and sexual behaviors offer ready examples of both this beauty and corruption. Our Lutheran *evangelical approach* helps us see that we don't need to pretend that we can be perfectly moral or that getting sexuality "right" is fully possible. At the same time,

**"Lutheran theology...illuminates the dual nature of human sexuality as both blessed and corrupted. We are blessed, freed by God's love, and wonderfully created. Yet, simultaneously we are also in disarray because of the effects of sin in our lives."**

it provides theological and practical insights that we can call upon as we deliberate with one another and seek to discern the leading of God's Spirit for what will lead to healthy sexual mores.

We begin by examining one incident of Luther's own struggles with sexual ethics regarding marriage in order to illustrate an evangelical approach to issues pertaining to human sexuality. The example will acknowledge both the importance of church teachings and the complications involved in faithful ethical decisions.

### *A Case Study of Sexual Ethics from Luther*

Luther wrote:

Consider the following case: A woman, wed to an impotent man, is unable to prove her husband's impotence in court, or perhaps she is unwilling to do so with the mass of evidence and all the notoriety which the law demands; yet she is desirous of having children or is unable to remain continent. Now suppose I had counseled her to procure a divorce from her husband in order to marry another, satisfied that her own and her husband's conscience and their experience were ample testimony of his impotence; but the husband refused his consent to this. Then I would further counsel her, with the consent of the man (who is not really her husband, but only a dweller under the same roof with her), to have intercourse with another, say her husband's brother, but to keep this marriage secret and to ascribe the children to the so-called putative father. The question is: Is such a woman saved and in a saved state? I answer: Certainly, because in this case an error, ignorance of the man's impotence, impedes the marriage; and the tyranny of the laws permits no divorce. But the woman is free through the divine law, and cannot be compelled to remain continent. Therefore the man ought to concede her right, and give up to somebody else the wife who is his only in outward appearance.

Moreover, if the man will not give his consent, or agree to this separation—rather than allow the woman to burn [I Cor. 7:9] or to commit adultery—I would counsel her to contract a marriage with another and flee to a distant unknown place. What other counsel can be given to one constantly struggling with the dangers of natural emotions? Now I know that some are troubled by the fact that the children of this secret marriage are not the rightful heirs of their putative father. But if it was done with the consent of the husband, then the children will be the rightful heirs. If, however, it was done without his knowledge or against his will, then let unbiased Christian reason, or better, charity, decide which one of the two has done the greater injury to the other. The wife alienates the inheritance, but the husband has deceived his wife and is defrauding her completely of her body and her life. Is not the sin of a man who wastes his wife's body and life a greater sin than that of the woman who merely alienates the temporal goods of her husband? Let him, therefore, agree to a divorce, or else be satisfied with heirs not his own, for by his own fault he deceived an innocent girl and defrauded her both of life and of the full use of her body, besides giving her an almost irresistible cause for committing adultery.<sup>3</sup>

### **An Evangelical Approach to Discussing Sexuality**

In this surprising example, Luther appeals to the “sources” mentioned earlier: *Scripture*, *prior theology*, “*natural law*” *reason*, and to some degree, *human experience*. He thinks about the moral issue at hand in light of scriptural norms and reason, concrete realities, the women's needs and his strong, theological affirmation about the important vocation of parenthood.

At first glance it might seem that Luther can be faulted, or praised—depending on one’s viewpoint—because his ethical recommendations seem determined by the particular situation and a vague norm of “love,” rather than relying, for instance, on scriptural commandments against adultery. It might seem that he is operating with a moral method in which the end justifies the means. It is important to remember, however, that for Luther and those around him, *marriage was defined by intercourse and having children*. Thus, while public rites and the law indicated that this woman was married, Luther viewed this woman as unmarried, since the husband did not fulfill conjugal responsibilities. The husband rejected his marriage commitment and thus deprived the woman of any possibility of fulfilling her responsibility in marriage. When we read with this in mind, Luther’s creativity here is not a disregard for biblical and Christian precedent, but a use of moral reasoning that preserves Christian principles, attends to the concrete realities of this “neighbor,” and is creative in moral guidance. Luther uses this anchored yet flexible approach to address this situation of human brokenness with frankness and creativity, rather than appealing only to Scripture’s commands, or applying some list of moral prescriptions.

This approach can suggest for us the importance of being deeply formed in the common convictions of the church while being creative in the face of the immense complexity of situations in our contemporary context. This evangelical approach asks: What serves the law of love? (Galatians 5:14) Or to put it in terms of this study: How can we as sexual beings best understand what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves and thus fulfill God’s law (of love)?

### Common Christian Convictions about Sexuality

Central to the Christian view on sexuality is the recognition that this good dimension of who we are—being sexual—must be ordered so that human individuals and human society can flourish. This ordering of sexuality has always involved looking to scriptural injunctions, such as those against adultery in the Ten Commandments and elsewhere. However, the Christian tradition has been selective about applying other biblical laws, such as those found in Leviticus 20:10-21, to help order sexual activity. Nonetheless, the main lines of Christian theology suggest certain convictions that have helped evaluate sexual behavior and guide the formation of sexuality identity within the community of believers. These convictions set a standard by which practices are “normally” measured or evaluated. The importance of such “norms” vary in emphasis and weight, as well as in application, within the community of faith.

Lisa Cahill, a Christian scholar in sexual ethics, has claimed that Christian traditions suggest five general guidelines in its history that address both the purpose and the appropriate relationships or context for sexual behavior. The *purpose* of sexual behavior has been seen mainly as: 1) procreation, 2) the satisfaction of sexual desire, and 3) the expression of a positive emotional relationship of love between the partners. Most often, Christian traditions have affirmed that the *context* of these behaviors should include 4) a marital commitment, usually permanent and exclusive, and that these relationships are 5) heterosexual as an implicit precondition of procreative marriage.<sup>4</sup> These convictions regarding appropriate purposes and contexts of sexual behaviors are evident in the Lutheran Confessions and in statements by the ELCA’s predecessor church bodies as well as a majority of other Christian denominations today. As testimony to the variations of convictions, however, Cahill notes that “contemporary Christian sexual ethics gives much more emphasis to love (item 3) as a norm, and less to procreation (item 1).” She points out that the Christian teaching about sexuality is now weighted more heavily toward “positive good and an avenue of love and commitment...[while] procreation is widely seen as

“Central to the Christian view on sexuality is the recognition that this good dimension of who we are—being sexual—must be ordered so that human individuals and human society can flourish.”

valuable but not essential. Marriage continues to be affirmed as the normative or ideal context for sex and procreation by most Christian bodies and authors, while some justify pre- or extramarital sex that expresses love.”<sup>5</sup>

The 1996 ELCA social message, “Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” illustrates Cahill’s point about these general Christian convictions regarding the *purposes* and *contexts* for sexual activity. It also is an example of the different emphasis and weight that have been granted to the five. It states, “Human sexuality was created good for the purposes of expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship and pleasure.” The message emphasizes the emotional and unifying dimension of sexual relations. While it points to procreation as a purpose of marriage, it does not hold procreation as essential to it. There is, further, little attention to item “2” (“satisfaction of sexual desire”) or scripture’s view of marriage as necessary to control sexual passion (1 Corinthians 7:9). “Common Convictions” maintains the commitment to marriage as the exclusive framework for the fullness of sexual expression (item 4). This indicates the heterosexual precondition, even as lifelong same-sex sexual relationships are not extensively addressed. Marriage is defined in “Common Convictions” as “a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and woman. In marriage, two persons become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6) and create a personal sexual union that embodies God’s loving purpose to create and enrich life. Because of the affirmation of “abstinence outside of marriage,” it does not “justify pre- or extramarital sex that expresses love” (Cahill’s depiction of some current Christian ethical stances on sexual behavior), whether it is heterosexual or homosexual.

“Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” states that, “mindful of the sin to which all succumb, Christians are called to:

- *respect* the integrity and dignity of all persons, whatever their age, gender, sexual orientation, or marital status;
- *discern* and provide guidance for what it means to live responsibly as sexual beings;
- *support* through prayer and counsel those facing questions about their sexuality;
- *heal* those who have been abused or violated, or whose relationships are broken.” (Page 2)

Overall, the ELCA message, like this study, provides a basis for Lutherans to discuss sexuality rooted in both the gospel and “the law of love” whereby “through words and actions Christians seek to build up one another and the whole Christian community” (Ibid.).

It is important to remember that the 1996 message “Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” was not adopted as a social statement of the ELCA. Rather, it brought together points of consensus on sexuality that were gathered from predecessor church bodies. *It reveals what the Lutheran church has thought, and we are being asked to think together again* in order to create a social statement on human sexuality for the ELCA. This thinking together is needed because Christians of good conscience have differing opinions on what forms of love and relationship strengthen and serve individual “neighbors,” the social community, and the church. Some within the church wonder if alternative arrangements such as committed cohabitation for a heterosexual couple under certain circumstances, might support human flourishing. Other Christians believe, given some individuals’ sexual orientation to same-sex relations, that human sexuality could be lived out faithfully in same-gender relations. Others call for “thinking again” about certain matters because Lutheran writings—from the Reformation down to today—have not addressed adequately, if

**“Christians of good conscience have differing opinions on what forms of love and relationship strengthen and serve individual ‘neighbors,’ the social community, and the church.”**

at all, sexuality in childhood and adolescence, or sexual expression for those who are single or denied legal and ecclesiastical access to marriage. There has been minimal discussion of sexuality as “socially constructed,” of sexual abuse, or of sexuality in relation to economic situation. In these ways, references to the Lutheran heritage fall short of settling debates today even while elements of that heritage is affirmed as critical to contemporary deliberation in finding the Spirit’s guidance.

Our Lutheran heritage clearly does hold up three visions: First, it can offer a vision for sexuality within Christian marriage that challenges today’s negative or trivialized understandings of sexuality in marriage. This vision calls us to consider our sexuality in terms of vulnerable, mutual, committed love that seeks the good of the other person. Within this bond, the potential is great for deep, intimate, delight-filled sexual experience as well as the potential for damage or abuse.

Second, it can offer a more generalized vision of healthy human sexuality based in the understanding that God created a good world, including our bodies, and that we are called in all our relationships to love and serve the neighbor. Key principles, such as responsible love and care of oneself and others, can be used as a basis for understanding one’s own personal sexual identity, no matter what age or situation.

Third, as this session suggests, it provides an approach for deliberation and moral evaluation, grounded in theological and scriptural tradition, one that seeks to address the particular complexities of our time without glossing over difficult issues with pat answers.

### **Invitation to Moral Deliberation**

You are invited now to discuss the following questions.

1. In the vignette, what possible responses could the youth director offer to Abbey? Consider the evangelical approach described in the session, the commonly held convictions regarding sexuality within the Christian tradition, and Lutheran theological understandings of sexuality’s goodness and brokenness. Based on these and your own experience, what response should be given to Abbey? How does this response illustrate an understanding of the good of the neighbor?
2. Do you agree or disagree that the most basic question to ask in developing a Lutheran ethic regarding sexuality is this: What does it mean to lovingly seek the good of the neighbor in terms of human sexuality? What, if any, other question or questions may be more “basic”?
3. How do you respond to the idea that moral laws or traditional norms may not always provide the most life-giving answer to an issue of sexuality? What about this concept do you find disturbing? Helpful?
4. What did you think of Luther’s advice to the woman in the case study? How did he reach his conclusions? How may this help us understand how to make similar decisions, especially related to sexuality and sexual practices? If it doesn’t help, how does it hinder?
5. Describe the three key components of an evangelical approach to moral deliberation (p. 21). What you would add to or subtract from these components? Why?
6. What does it mean to you to say that God has created humans and human sexuality “good”? How is this “goodness” messed up?
7. As you look ahead to some of the topics in future sessions, what questions or concerns are uppermost in your mind?

## CLOSING

### **Prayer**

Power of the eternal Father, help me. Wisdom of the Son, enlighten the eye of my understanding. Tender mercy of the Holy Spirit, unite my heart to yourself. Eternal God, restore health to the sick and life to the dead. Give us a voice, your own voice, to cry out to you for mercy for the world. You, light, give us light. You, wisdom, give us wisdom, You, supreme strength, strengthen us. Amen. (A prayer of Catherine of Sienna, *ELW*, page 87)

### **Dismissal**

**Leader:** Go in peace.

**All:** Thanks be to God.

### **End Notes**

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- <sup>1</sup> Luther, Martin “The Estate of Marriage” (1522) in Timothy F. Lull, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings, Second Edition*, page 159.
- <sup>2</sup> Walter R. Bouman “Confessional Lutheran Resources for Addressing the Study of Human Sexuality,” unpublished manuscript offered on the Commemoration of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Northwestern Ohio Synod, ELCA, Findlay, Ohio, April 9, 2002. (p. 5)
- <sup>3</sup> Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 36, Wendel Ross, ed. (Fortress, Philadelphia. 1959), p.103f
- <sup>4</sup> Cahill, Lisa. “Sexual Ethics” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, eds. (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1986) p. 580
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 582-583.

# Sexuality, Culture, and Freedom

## Session

# 3

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## GATHERING

### Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

### Prayer

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you, eyes to behold you, ears to listen for your word, a heart to love you, and a life to proclaim you through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, page 76)

## HEARING THE WORD

### Galatians 2:11—3:14 • Christ Lives in Me!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 97.

## CONSIDERING THE WORD

### *Silence*

### *Discernment*

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

## RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

### Vignettes

Questions at the end of the session (p. 33) are provided for your reflection on these vignettes.

### *Ashley's wedding*

Ashley is planning her wedding, the one she has dreamed about for years. Ashley wants a big wedding with lots of bridesmaids and groomsmen. She would like the wedding reception to be at a luxury hotel with a sit-down dinner and a dance afterward, preferably with live music. She is having some problems, however, with her family.

Her maternal grandmother was married at home with a justice of the peace presiding. This grandmother can't figure out why something like that isn't good enough for Ashley. She is especially dismayed at the amount of money that will be spent. Ashley's paternal grandmother was a mail-order bride from Eastern Europe. She had never even seen her husband-to-be until the day of the wedding, which took place in a courthouse in North Dakota. She is appalled at the weddings she's

been to. “Even the simple ones,” she says, “seem like make-believe. Marriage isn’t supposed to be about happy-ever-after. I had no expectations when I married my husband. I didn’t even know him, but we learned to love each other.”

Ashley’s parents want to have a nice celebration for family and friends, but they feel Ashley’s plans are getting out of hand. Their own wedding took place at home the day before Ashley’s father left for overseas duty with the Army. Ashley’s fiancé Cody tries not to voice his true opinion about the wedding plans. He says, “It’s her big day. If she wants to go all out, we’ll go all out. All her girl friends have had big weddings so she should be entitled to one too.” Cody’s mother has said privately to Cody that she thinks all the money spent on a wedding is a sin when so many people are poor and homeless. Ashley’s pastor is no help either. She’s said a couple of things to Ashley about “the beauty of simplicity.” Ashley is sure her mother has put a bug in Pastor’s ear.

Today, Ashley’s maternal grandmother said something that really distressed Ashley: “You know, because you and Cody live together and share a common bank account, in this state you could just declare yourself married. You don’t even have to do any extra paperwork. Actually, in the eyes of the state, you’ve been married ever since you got your apartment together and pooled your money. There’s nothing wrong with Common Law marriage.”

Ashley is hurt that her family isn’t enthusiastic about her wedding plans. Having the wedding she’s dreamed about as long as she can remember is important to Ashley, and she thinks that the people who love her should be supportive.

### *Harmon*

Harmon is in his mid-fifties and has been co-owner in a small company for nearly twenty years. He and his family have been members of the same mid-sized Lutheran congregation for the last fifteen years. Because his business partner runs the day-to-day operations of the business, Harmon was able to run for and win a seat in the state legislature. His district and its constituents are generally known for being politically conservative, especially in comparison to some of the state’s more populated districts. When a bill came to the legislature that would allow same-sex partners to receive medical benefits under one shared plan, the responses from Harmon’s constituents were nearly 4 to 1 opposed. During coffee hour after church he heard both positive and negative comments about the bill. Harmon listened carefully and promised to take people’s opinions under advisement. He is also trying to assess what his understanding of Christian faith and morals would mean in this matter. It’s complicated to say the least, and it is personal. What he didn’t say, what he had never told anyone in his church, is that his own sister, with whom he was very close, had moved to a city on the coast so that she and her same-sex partner could be covered by his sister’s medical benefits.

### **Contemporary Context**

What is culture, and what does it mean for people of faith to live in relationship to culture? The term “culture” is notoriously hard to pin down but can be defined as the beliefs, values, customs, practices, and social behavior of a particular group. Another way of saying this is that culture is a basic set of assumptions that have worked well enough to be considered valid and are therefore taught to members as the “accepted” way to perceive, perform, think, feel, and interact. In this way, a culture shapes its members’ understanding of what is real.

First, it is important to recognize that we all are members of many cultures, large and small. A family unit constitutes a small culture. Our workplaces have their own unique cultures. The same holds true for each local congregation. These cultures all overlap with one another, and all operate within what we call the “dominant culture.”

Second, it is also important to remember that congregations are affected in a variety of ways by various cultural forces. For example, congregations are affected by the cultures around them. Moreover, congregations are made up of individuals who bring their own cultural experiences and perspectives into congregational life. That's one reason why in Harmon's congregation, opinions differed over the vote on the bill being considered by the state legislature. In the same way, congregations may experience differences of opinion on things such as worship practices or pastoral priorities because of different cultural backgrounds.

Third, we need to recognize that a denomination such as the ELCA is made up of many local congregations that have their own particular cultures. The same may be said for synods and regions of the church. For this reason, it is difficult to speak of one ELCA "culture," although there are shared commitments to Scripture, ELCA governing documents, certain beliefs and practices, and so forth.

What does this mean for us? People of faith, like all other people, view the world through the multiple cultural lenses that they have received from the communities of which they have been a part. The fact of multiple communities, the cultures tied to them, and the lenses they impart is not at all a bad thing. They are entirely consistent with our claim to live in a world that God has created "good." They are essential to the survival of the human species, and they are wonderful in themselves. Think of the gifts that come to us through the various expressions of the cultures in the world—art, music, literature, civil government, and educational institutions, to name just a few. Culture and its gifts are part of God's good creation.

We receive our religious faith as a gift from the community into which we are baptized and in which we participate. Faith is not an individual's personal reality alone; it is a community activity as Paul makes clear throughout his letter to the Galatians. We also inherit assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, practices, and values from the other communities in which we participate. For this reason, we often find that we have confused or conflicting feelings about particular beliefs, values, practices, and/or social arrangements. This confusion runs deep because such issues are personal, and they are also tied to the communities with which we identify. In choosing one set of beliefs, values, etc. we may betray, in some sense, one community for another. This helps us to explain why there can be so much controversy and uncertainty in churches with regard to many matters related to human sexuality.

Whether we talk of marriage, dating, gender roles, or sexual practices, we recognize that our cultural values are also strongly influenced by social, technological, and economic change in twenty-first century America. Unless we become hermits, as people of faith we cannot escape the many cultures of our world and the forces of change, nor do we seek to do so. But we can view our social world and the social practices of our time and place through the message of the gospel. And this view will in some respect change our perspective and influence our actions.

The first vignette is a good example of how the cultures we are a part of can shape our perceptions and influence our sense of what is right and appropriate in a given instance. Each of the characters has her or his own view of what a wedding should be like, and, to some extent, what a marriage should be. Some of these differences are generational. Other differences can be attributed to ethnic or national custom. Still other differences relate to individual experience. Each person has *inherited* something like a set of lenses through which they see weddings—along with how they see much of the rest of the world.

Philosophers, linguists, social scientists, and many theologians recognize that we make sense of things around us by using the lenses or filters we are given. Neither of Ashley's grandparents chose how their cultures shaped them, but they were born into a set of social circumstances that shaped their ways of seeing the world, with-

out their even being aware of what was happening. You should be able to see how this is true for each of the characters in the vignette. In addition, you might also be able to see how one character in the vignette has found something from her cultural experiences to help her deal with Ashley and Cody living together before their wedding. Ashley and Cody's family members are trying to view the world through more "contemporary" lenses, even though this conflicts with the sets of lenses that disapprove of their living together.

The matter of the lenses we acquire to make sense of our world is very complex. We never view our surroundings through only one lens. We have many, and they are constantly changing. Some of our lenses even conflict with one another. For example, various forces are impacting Harmon's vote on the bill in the legislature. His duty to his constituency, his family experience, and his faith may all weigh on his decision. Which "lens" of experience or understanding will sway his vote?

Understanding the role of the "cultures" in our lives helps us to understand that social practices are never simply "the way things are." When we use multiple cultural lenses, we are able to examine critically the social practices that we inherit, practices that can, and sometimes should, be changed.

Sociologists, psychologists, and other marital care professionals cite the category "unrealistic expectations" as one of the primary predictors of marital discord and possible eventual dissolution. Many of the unrealistic expectations surrounding marriage are formed and encouraged by aspects of the dominant culture. These expectations may not ever have much of anything to do with the experiences of real people in real marriages. The mass media have influenced many prospective spouses to consider marriage as a means of achieving a kind of "happy ever after." For instance, the happy endings of popular romantic comedies rarely hint about the hard work and commitment to communication that it takes to stay together over the years even after the couple has overcome the obstacles to falling in love. Even various church cultures, in holding out a visionary ideal, can contribute to expectations that can be hard at times to square with the day-to-day conflicts and failings of persons who have to share kitchens, bathrooms, and paychecks. Though it can be filled with great joy, marriage is demanding and filled with a lifetime of challenges. When we are free to examine the cultural lenses we have acquired about marriage, we can ask what a marriage looks like in which both parties give Christ to one another. Moreover, we can take practical steps, such as actively supporting marriages within congregational life.

We can and do view any matter related to sexuality through multiple cultural lenses, but as Christians we also bring our "gospel" lens. We can ask in each situation whether the social practices of our various communities and their cultures enhance our freedom in Christ to serve the neighbor, or whether they take away such freedom and make service of neighbor more difficult or even become an obstacle.

The issue of teenage sexual self-identity in the United States is one example. Cultural norms and practices may vary from location to location, and varying social and economic factors will continually influence these cultural norms. The mass media, which has become such a pervasive influence upon cultures large and small, certainly exerts great influence. Body image and clothes are factors especially influenced by media. Parental influence is normally a significant factor, while a yet bigger factor may be the practices and behaviors of teen peer culture.

All of these cultural influences contribute to the context for moral decision-making. To say that we are "free to choose" in an environment that exerts such influence may seem naïve. Yet it would be equally naïve to conclude that we have no freedom at all. Recognizing how cultural influences work in our lives is a key to

**"We can and do view any matter related to sexuality through multiple cultural lenses, but as Christians we also bring our 'gospel' lens."**

making informed decisions. Indeed, we can even say that the better we understand the way our behavior and thinking are shaped by cultural assumptions and social practices the freer we become in relation to them.

As people of faith, we trust in a living God who continues to work through cultural realities. We believe in the liberating presence and work of the Holy Spirit. We believe that the lens of the gospel introduces us to a radical freedom that has the power to view other cultural practices and assumptions for what they are—as life-giving or harmful. The Reformation has taught us that even the practices and assumptions of the church must be critiqued by the clear lens of the gospel.

## Reflections

This matter of culturally acquired lenses, or ways of looking at the world around us, is vital to our discussion. This is true whether we are trying to understand what Paul thought was at stake in the controversy in the Galatian churches, or whether we are trying to discern our response to contemporary expressions of human sexuality. The various social practices that each of us inherit from our various cultures help provide the guidance we need, but they can also direct us away from Christian freedom and/or the neighbor's need. The question then becomes: How do we discern which cultural practices regarding sexuality will help the neighbor to flourish, and which are detrimental? Where do we find the critical distance to examine our practices in order to affirm some and object to others? Where do we find the power to stand with cultural practices that are helpful, or against cultural practices that harm?

The issue of circumcision can help illustrate this matter. It is not explicitly a matter of sexual practice but as a matter of religious identity it was critical in Paul's correspondence with the Galatians. We first hear of male circumcision in Genesis 17:10-14 where it becomes a sign of the covenant between God, Abraham, and all the descendants of Abraham. Any male who is uncircumcised, says God, "shall be cut off from his kin: he has broken my covenant." Few, if any, Jewish religious and cultural practices are more central to Judaism than the covenant of circumcision. At times in the history of the Jewish people, political authorities prohibited and punished the practice of circumcision. Greek authorities killed whole families of Jews who circumcised their male infants (1 Maccabees 1:60-61). In the modern era, during the regime of the Nazis, circumcision was typically the way in which males were identified as Jews. Yet even in the face of threats and persecution, Jewish parents chose to have their male children circumcised, so strong was the force of the culture that they had been born into; so strong were the beliefs, values, and attitudes they had inherited from Jewish culture.

It is clear in Galatians 2:11ff. that early church leaders Peter (Cephas) and Barnabas felt pressure from one of their peer groups (the circumcision "culture") that led them to draw back from Gentiles. Their covenant with God, which they understood to require circumcision, was the cultural lens through which they were viewing non-Jews. The circumcision "culture" (called Judaizers) insisted that all believers in Christ must adopt the practices inherited from their culture of Judaism, such as circumcision, food purification rules, and more. All of these were absolutely central to Jewish cultural identity. Peter and Barnabas felt a huge inner pull to maintain those traditions, especially when "certain people came from James, the Lord's brother."

But Paul declared that the "lens" of Jewish religious culture was clouding their understanding. Rather, he appealed to the lens of the gospel, which declares "that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16). It was this lens that helped him reach out to Gentiles and invite them into the circle of God's people. In doing so Paul did not abandon his Jewish

**“Christian freedom frees us from both religious practices and secular cultural practices that hinder us from being Christ to the neighbor, to one another, to our spouses, and to our families.”**

### **Open To the Spirit**

In the assurance of [God’s] promise, we are open to the Spirit and to the learnings of our various [discussions]. We are open because in the freedom of the gospel and in obedience to the law of love we can seek the good of our neighbor rather than feel compelled at every turn to show how right we are.

This freedom and openness, simultaneously to God’s call and the world’s voice, are what equip us well for witness in a pluralistic world such as ours. —James Childs, as quoted in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 112.

heritage completely. He quite consciously appeals to the Jewish Scriptures that he and the Judaizers held in high esteem (see for example, Galatians 3:6; 4:21-31). In Acts, Paul is even depicted as having Timothy circumcised so that he would be more culturally acceptable to the Jews among whom Timothy would be preaching (Acts 16:1-4).

Still, certain traditions from both the Jewish religious culture and the dominant Greco-Roman culture had to become secondary to the work God was doing in Christ in order to graft the Gentiles into God’s inclusive promises (Romans 9). Paul, and in other times Peter (Acts 11:3), found the power and critical “distance” point for standing against such customary demands from the freedom they had in Christ. That is, both Paul and Peter associated and ate with uncircumcised unbelievers. Such freedom for them did not mean license to do just anything, but it was their basis for reassessing generally accepted practices and expectations that they had previously not questioned.

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul declares (Galatians 5:1). Christian freedom frees us from insisting upon religious and secular cultural practices that might hinder us from being Christ to the neighbor, to one another, to our spouses, and to our families. The gospel frees us to reconsider all cultural practices that on the surface may seem to be about “freedom,” but which actually may take away our freedom given in Christ. Part of the power of Paul’s insistence on the freedom of the Christian is that it should lead us to see that we are freed by God’s acceptance to search for truth in open and honest dialogue. It opens up the possibility of critical thinking.

### **Common Ground**

The social statement called *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (1993) reminds us that “Faith is active in love; love calls for justice in the relationships and structures of society.” It is appropriate for us as a church to examine the assumptions and practices of our various cultures—whether economic, political, educational, and social—in order to expose those culturally accepted practices that deny the neighbor of “justice...in relationships” (p. 1 of Internet edition). Only by this means can the church become “a serving and liberating presence in the world” (p. 2). Indeed, “[t]he gospel does not take the church out of the world but instead calls it to affirm and to enter more deeply into the world. Although it is in bondage to sin and death, the world is God’s good creation...” (p. 2).

The document called *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* reminds us:

The church must participate in social structures critically. Not only God but also sin is at work in the world. Social structures and processes combine life-giving and life-destroying dynamics in complex mixtures and in varying degrees. The church, therefore, must unite realism and vision, wisdom and courage, in its social responsibility. It needs constantly to discern when to support and when to confront society’s cultural patterns, values, and powers (p.3).

### **Differing Views**

With regard to sexuality and sexual practices, our culture is not monotone. It consists of various shades of opinion and perspective. It is shaped, if not driven, by powerful influences. It consists of various perspectives and influences that may be useful and life giving; others most certainly are not. As people of God, we are participants in culture. This means that our perspectives on sexuality and sexual practice are not monotone either. Here are three broad types of thinking about cultures offered to help you think about how you might view these matters.

### *View 1*

As a Christian, I view the dominant culture with great skepticism. In fact, I believe the culture is becoming increasingly immoral, especially with regard to sexuality and sexual practices. As much as I can, I stay away from things that might be a negative influence on me and my children—and that seems like just about everything these days. I especially limit my interaction with all forms of media. I think home schooling and faith-based schools where Christian values can be taught is the way to go. I want the church to make it a priority to warn people of the dangers of the dominant culture and provide clear guidelines for Christian living, especially what constitutes appropriate sexual practices.

### *View 2*

I view the dominant culture as a gift of God and something to be enjoyed. I believe God is active in the world, and culture is not something to fear. We can't understand how to change the world unless we are really engaged in the various cultures of the world and experience all the world has to offer. Regarding sexuality and sexual practices, I think the most legitimate criterion for judging right or wrong is justice. The church should protect any persons who may be victimized or hurt, but it does not need to obsess about sexual morality. That is primarily an individual's choice.

### *View 3*

I view various cultures as primarily human phenomena that are remarkable and enjoyable, as well as sometimes destructive and alien to faith. I don't think that retreating from the dominant mass culture is the way to change it for the better, but embracing it completely is dangerous. I would prefer that the values of the dominant culture regarding sexuality be stricter, but I realize that is unlikely to happen now. That is why I think the church should focus on providing its members with spiritual guidance and thoughtful education regarding sexuality and sexual practice.

## **An Invitation to Moral Deliberation**

We invite you now to discuss your own cultural beliefs, attitudes, values and practices regarding sexuality using the questions provided. If time is limited for discussion, focus on those questions that seem most relevant to you.

1. In the opening vignette, describe the various cultural lenses people used to draw conclusions regarding Ashley's wedding. From where have your own lenses regarding weddings and marriage come—family, movies, television, magazines, other media? How do such lenses shape our perceptions and drive our decisions?
2. A second "issue" in the vignette hints at different understandings or levels of comfort with Ashley and Cody living together before the wedding. How do various people seem to be dealing with this? In your opinion, how should people of faith view such an arrangement?
3. In the second vignette, how do you suppose Harmon will vote on the bill? Why? Why do you think Harmon has never discussed his sister's situation with anyone at church? The vignette suggests that people at Harmon's church view the bill differently. How is it that people of faith can view such issues in such different ways?
4. Do you agree or disagree with the idea that people of faith view social practices through a variety of lenses, including a "gospel" lens? As you think about your life, what lenses have affected your own thinking and your decisions regarding matters of sexuality? Has the gospel affected your thinking or your actions? If so, in what ways?

5. With which of the three views above do you feel most comfortable? What other view might one take on the matter of culture and sexuality?
6. What do you think about this statement: “Recognizing how cultural influences work in our lives is a key to making informed decisions”? Can you think of ways this has worked in your life?
7. What role does the church play in our country’s dominant culture? Is this role the right one, or should it play a different role? If the latter, what is that role?
8. Give an example of how a common social practice or some widespread expectation may hinder our freedom in the gospel or our ability to love our neighbor. Can you think of any situations in which a dominant secular culture has enabled a church culture or cultures to be more Christ-like?
9. With regard to widespread contemporary sexual practices, what is the meaning of Paul’s statement, “for freedom Christ has set us free”?
10. What additional thoughts do you want to share concerning the issue of sexuality, culture, and freedom?
11. What aspects of both dominant and religious cultures might contribute to promiscuity among gay and lesbian people? What are some of the beliefs, attitudes, and values of secular and religious cultures that might lead gay and lesbian people to self-destructive behaviors?
12. Since the church’s role in a wedding and marriage is not legal but primarily religious (that is, offering the prayer, pronouncing the blessing of God, and expressing the support of the community of the baptized) and ethical, what more might the church do to help people recognize wedding practices of popular culture that may actually cause harm? For instance, if some of the results of large, elaborate, and expensive weddings are debilitating debt and post-wedding depression, should the church offer a word of caution that this socially accepted practice may be harmful? If we view this issue through the lens of the gospel, might it make a difference in how we approach marriage ceremonies and provide guidance to those who are preparing to marry?

## **CLOSING**

### **Prayer**

In you, Father all-mighty, we have our preservation and our bliss. In you, Christ, we have our restoring and our saving. You are our mother, brother, and savior. In you, our Lord the Holy Spirit, is marvelous and plenteous grace. You are our clothing; for love you wrap us and embrace us. You are our maker, our lover, our keeper. Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen. (A prayer of Julian of Norwich, *ELW*, page 87)

### **Dismissal**

**Leader:** Go in peace. Share the good news.

**All:** Thanks be to God.

# Sexuality and Social Institutions

## Session

# 4

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## GATHERING

### Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

### Prayer

Holy Word, at the beginning of time your Spirit brooded over the waters and you brought forth life and hope and promise. Send that same Spirit to brood over us now. We live in the midst of so much change and yearn to live lives that are pleasing to you and which serve our neighbor. Teach us what it means to live as members of your body, where differences among us—Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female—are gathered up into your gracious promise that all people are one. In your name we pray. Amen.

## HEARING THE WORD

### Galatians 3:15–29 • Clothed in Christ!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 101.

## CONSIDERING THE WORD

### *Silence*

### *Discernment*

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

## RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

### Vignettes

Questions at the end of the session (p. 41) are provided for your reflection on these vignettes.

### *Doug*

Doug is in his early forties. He was recently laid off from his job, and even though he has a new job, he hears rumors about layoffs there as well. Doug has often considered seeking a life partner, but the timing hasn't felt quite right. He watched his own parents struggle financially, and he isn't interested in duplicating that in his own life. He's become comfortable being single and living on his own. In fact, he wishes family and friends would let up on the marriage questions and advice. Given the financial uncertainties in his life, getting married just doesn't seem reasonable right now.

To save on monthly rent, which is expensive in the area near his new job, Doug answered an ad placed by a single woman named Anna, who was looking for a roommate to share living expenses. Doug agreed to move in to her townhouse and

share the rent with her. They also pool household purchases and buy in bulk. They have agreed to keep the relationship platonic, and Doug doesn't mind the opportunity to talk with someone else at the end of the day. His relationship with Anna feels like a stand-in for family.

### *Fran and Chris*

They met at a party thrown by a mutual friend and immediately hit it off. Both are in their late twenties and have dated a lot. Fran's relationships have often included sexually intimacy and have often been short-lived. Chris has had many casual girl friends, but has only been sexually intimate with a couple of them. After only three months of dating marked by generous amounts of sexual activity, they decided to get married. Chris felt obliged to get married in the church, because his parents had that expectation. Fran was fine with this, but pleaded that the wedding be kept small and intimate. They went to the church Chris had attended, but where he was not a member. The pastor agreed to do the ceremony if they agreed to join the church and participate in three premarital sessions. Fran protested, so the couple declined. They searched until they found a church and a pastor who would host the wedding. Even better (as far as they were concerned), the pastor did not require that they do any premarital counseling.

### **Contemporary Context**

People often speak of "the sexual revolution" that took place in the second half of the twentieth century. This "revolution" has been both broad and profound. Consider how social dimensions of have been impacted. We've seen new attitudes toward and understandings of the following: gender roles, family size and planning, the body and sexuality, the selection of life partners, the durability of marriage, and the degree to which intimate sexual experiences apart from marriage are accepted.

A great deal of conversation and debate has emerged both in our church and in the public and political arenas about the condition and status of marriage as a social institution. These changes have prompted some to think about the many different living arrangements that emerge from today's circumstances, whether sexual intimacy is involved or not. It has led some to think anew about whether "family" might be arranged in new ways that allow members to experience love and to flourish. It has lead others to warn that much is being lost and to raise questions whether these changes are not, in the long run, personally and socially harmful. How will or ought the church respond to these changes? This session offers an opportunity to consider the social changes relating to courtship and marriage with precisely these questions in mind.

Because so many marriage ceremonies take place in churches, it is easy to forget that marriage is fundamentally a civil institution. As Luther reminds his readers at the beginning of his *Order of Marriage for Common Pastors* (see sidebar) weddings and the married estate are worldly affairs and thus are subject to regulation by the state, not the church, and may legitimately take a variety of forms. In the United States marriage is a legal contract, licensed by and recorded by the state, between two, and only two, people. Except for Massachusetts and several Canadian provinces that allow same-sex couples to marry, the marriage contract or license must be between one man and one woman.

As a social institution marriage is of central importance for a number of reasons: (1) it creates a context for protecting, supporting, and nurturing dependent children, as well as determining who has the right to make decisions concerning children; (2) it ensures that family members will be cared for when they are ill, disabled, unable to find work, aged, or otherwise dependant, and it determines who has the right to make decisions for those who are no longer competent to make

#### **Luther wrote:**

"Many lands, many customs, says the proverb. Since marriage and the married estate are worldly matters, it behooves us pastors or ministers of the church not to attempt to order or govern anything connected with it, but to permit every city and land to continue its own use and custom in this connection...All such things and the like I leave to the lords and the council...to order and arrange as they see fit. It does not concern me. But when we are requested to bless them before the church or in the church, to pray over them, or also to marry them, we are in duty bound to do this."<sup>1</sup>

their own; (3) it clarifies legal rights and responsibilities in the sphere of domestic life; and (4) it controls inheritance and other financial matters from taxes to incurred debts.

Although the state grants the license and a religious figure often officiates at the ceremony, it is the partners themselves who actually marry each other. The act of marrying is the act of mutual and public promising. The partners declare that the promise is in no way compelled, and they make the most solemn possible vow, before witnesses and, as Christians, in the sight of God. They promise to love, honor, cherish, and care for the other until death parts them—and to do so no matter what the surprises or misfortunes the uncertain future may bring. Within the reliable framework of these marriage promises, partners reveal themselves to one another and experience intimacy, generosity, and trust in a way that cannot be matched in any other dimension of our lives. Within the framework of these promises, sexual intimacy and sexual pleasure cease to be ends in themselves and become part of a larger pattern of relationship, faithful commitment, and care.

The religious understanding of marriage embraces the social, moral, and personal meaning of marriage but expands it as well. This religious aspect points to the opportunity to take up life together in marriage as one of God's continuing gifts to fallen creatures and to a fallen world. It understands that the purpose of the married relationship is to share together in God's work and to support one another in the life of faith. In our prayers for those being married we ask that Christ's love be reflected in their union and that they not only support and serve one another but also serve those in need as a "sign of the fulfillment of [God's] perfect kingdom."<sup>2</sup> In the Lutheran church, marriage is not understood as a sacrament, but we do think of the "estate" founded by this commitment as one that reflects God's good will for the world and stands under God's blessing. In fact, it is the couple's request for God's blessing upon their marriage vows and the pronouncement of that blessing on behalf of God by the presiding minister in the company of the faithful that signifies the distinctive aspect of a Christian marriage.

In the past half century the average size of families has rapidly diminished, and some couples elect not to have children at all. On average, people are marrying later, with the consequence that marriage is no longer so well matched to female fertility. Divorce has become much more common and has lost much of its social stigma. As more first marriages dissolve, and as these divorced persons (often with children still under eighteen) marry new partners, complex layered kinship networks are developing. Some children may find themselves interacting with four parents, eight grandparents, and two sets of step-siblings.

Changing also are the social customs and expectations governing how young people (and older divorced, widowed, or never married adults) seek and select potential life partners. "Dating" begins earlier and, although this is hard to gauge with certainty, seems to involve overt genital stimulation at earlier and less committed stages. In many cases, adult supervision of teenage couples is rare or nonexistent, perhaps because parents feel obliged to respect their children's privacy, perhaps because they want to build trust between themselves and their children, or perhaps because both parents are working or otherwise engaged. On the other end of the age spectrum, some older couples live together rather than marrying in order to retain certain financial benefits that may be nullified by legal marriage or to be able to pass those on to their children.

Perhaps most strikingly, virginity has come to be regarded by an increasing number of young men and young women as an embarrassment, something to be prudently lost rather than preserved. Sexual intercourse has, for many, become a feature of relatively casual companionship arrangements (including what young adults call "hooking up" and "friends with benefits"). Large numbers of couples in

### Marriage Rite

Marriage is a gift of God, intended for the joy and mutual strength of those who enter it and for the well-being of the whole human family. God created us male and female and blessed humankind with the gifts of companionship, the capacity to love, and the care and nurture of children. Jesus affirmed the covenant of marriage and revealed God's own self-giving love on the cross. The Holy Spirit helps those who are united in marriage to be living signs of God's grace, love, and faithfulness.

Marriage is also a human estate, with vows publicly witnessed. The church in worship surrounds these promises with the gathering of God's people, the witness of the word of God, and prayers of blessing and intercession.

From *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 286. © 2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

**"The Spirit confirms that we are made new in Christ. The transformed community that is the church reminds us of what we have experienced and calls us to place the needs of neighbor first."**

## Contemporary relationships

*With regard to marriage, the face of the American household is changing, as evidenced in a recent article in The New York Times by Sam Roberts:*

Married couples, who numbers have been declining for decades as a proportion of American households, have finally slipped into a minority, according to an analysis of new census figures reported by The New York Times.

The American Survey, released this month by the Census Bureau, found that 49.7 percent, or 55.2 million, of the nation's 111.1 million **households** in 2005 were made up of married couples—with and without children—just shy of a majority and down from more than 52 percent five years earlier.

The numbers by no means suggest marriage is dead or necessarily that a tipping point has been reached. The total number of married couples is higher than ever, and most Americans eventually marry. But marriage has been facing more competition. A growing number of adults are spending more of their lives single or living unmarried with partners, and the potential social and economic implications are profound.

...The census survey estimated that 5.2 million couples, a little more than 5 percent of households, were unmarried opposite-sex partners. An additional 413,000 households were male couples, and 363,000 were female couples. In all, nearly one in 10 couples were unmarried. (More than one in four households consisted of people living alone).

*From "To Be Married Means to Be Outnumbered," October 15, 2006. Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company.*

their twenties and thirties live together for months or years in cohabitation arrangements. Because this is also a trend for couples marrying in the Lutheran church, pastors report that they only rarely marry couples who are not sexually experienced. Some cohabitations offer a degree of pair-bonding, include sexual intimacy, and are usually monogamous, but may involve no long-term commitment and comparatively little mutual responsibility. Some of these develop into marriages; some do not.

## Reflections

The human social environment is constantly changing. Ethics can be described as an enterprise of managing change in a godly, wise, and life-enhancing way. Ethical deliberation involves trying to differentiate social changes that are beneficial and worthy of celebration from changes that threaten the common good or introduce suffering into individual lives. Because most change brings with it losses *and* gains, hazards *and* opportunities, this task is never simple or easy. As Lutherans we believe that God is about doing new things in the world, and we do not want to set ourselves against the future that God is bringing to be. Yet, we are also acutely aware of the power of sin to corrupt both our individual judgments and our social and institutional structures. As Lutherans, we believe that Scripture and our theological tradition offer valuable guidance in our encounters with new circumstances and new questions.

In his letters, the apostle Paul often addresses issues that can be described as having moral or ethical outcomes. For example, in Galatians he speaks to the controversy surrounding the cultural and religious question of circumcising or not. But even while addressing this specific issue he holds out to us a broad vision of what it would be like to be part of a new creation, to be "clothed in Christ," and to live and walk "by the Spirit." He describes a "newness of life" that comes first and foremost by faith, a faith that makes us confident that we are heirs of God "according to the promise" (3:29), a promise made possible through faith in Jesus Christ (3:26). Further, God also supplies the Spirit to the people of faith (3:5, 14).

The Spirit confirms that we are made *new in Christ*. The transformed community that is the church reminds us of what we have experienced and calls us to place the needs of neighbor first. Those who walk by the Spirit are known by "the fruit of the Spirit" which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). To live by the Spirit is to enter into social relationships free of self-conceit and envy, to refrain from "competing against one another" (5:26). Paul wants us to recognize that living in the Spirit changes our lives at the very core.

Paul's description of being led by, or walking by, the Spirit is relevant to our current topic in two ways: It helps us think about Lutheran attitudes toward change, and it helps us think about what is necessary if human relationships, including especially intimate relationships, are to thrive. As Christians living life in the Spirit and freed in the gospel, we have been given the confidence and courage to deal creatively and resourcefully with the cultural realities we confront. If the Spirit is present among us, then we do not need to fear social change; we need not regard change as threatening to what is valuable and godly. We can engage these realities with faith born of trust and hope.

Faith changes both who we are and how we see. Human sexual longing, loving, partnering, and family life are all joyous opportunities for walking by the Spirit. We know marriages often (perhaps always) fall far short of the ideals we hold for marriage. Even in happy and stable marriages couples often struggle to fulfill or stay true to their solemn vows. This knowledge becomes a source of discouragement, even cynicism, for some couples who fear that their conflicts and failures may be

fatal to their relationship. Guilt and anxiety can pile up, and fears can paralyze us, because we are imperfect creatures infected with a desire to be perfect. We can become turned in on ourselves and enslaved by our own needs. It is from this sort of slavery that we are set free by faith—free *from* envy and conceit and competition, free *for* kindness, gentleness, generosity, and love. The Spirit is given to us so that we can risk ourselves in relationships that we know will never match the ideal but can sometimes, with patience and faithfulness, be brought near it.

But we know that the Holy Spirit blows both within and outside of marriage. Single people promote the knowledge of God and serve the world, too. In Christian freedom we are called to serve our neighbor in love. What does this mean for all of us, married or single, male or female, who are now, Paul says, “one in Christ”?

## Common Ground

The message, “Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” (1996) affirms:

We live in various relationships, all of which are affected by the physiological, psychological, and social aspects of our sexual identity. People of all ages need information and experience to understand and responsibly live out their sexual identity in the varied relationships of their lives—as child or parent, sister or brother, spouse, friend, co-worker, neighbor, or stranger. This church affirms the importance of ordering society and educating youth and adults so that all might live in these relationships with mutual respect and responsibility.

As we think about the institution of marriage, we need to recognize the prior importance of relationships that are based on mutual respect and responsibility. Marriage is important because it is conducive to and supports right relationships. *Sex, Marriage, and Family*, the 1970 social statement of the Lutheran Church in America, describes marriage as “a covenant of fidelity” or “mutual commitment to lifelong faithfulness.” The function of the family is to “[nurture] human beings in relationships which are rich with creative possibilities. It provides the surrounding in which persons enhance rather than exploit one another, in which mistakes may be made and forgiveness realized.”

*Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*, the 1980 social statement of The American Lutheran Church, calls upon its members:

(1) to honor God’s gracious gift of human sexual life as “a sacred trust, from God,” (2) to build a Christian witness that takes account of God’s activity in an “ever-changing world” and that accordingly undertakes “constant review, interpretation, and perhaps reinterpretation” of received views, (3) to rejoice in our sexuality, (4) to uphold marriage, which “takes many forms in human communities,” (5) to welcome the responsibility of nurturing the young without expecting that every Christian will marry or that every couple will parent, (6) to avoid all “forms of exploitive sexual behavior,” and (7) to remember that “the church’s first concern is for people” and that “the body of Christ is a caring community...that reaches out to those most in need.”

## Differing Interpretations

Those who are connected to communities of faith view the challenges created by changing social practices regarding sexual relationships and marriage in various ways.

### *View 1*

I see nothing particularly distressing in these changes. The current situation is an opportunity to reframe the Christian message, so it will speak more appropriately to mature sexual beings living under new social expectations and practices. More relaxed attitudes toward sexual expression are far preferable to the guilt, shame, denial, and sexual anxiety of earlier eras that were “repressed.” In prior centuries marriage achieved social stability, but the results were far from ideal. I welcome a change in thinking about the institution of marriage. Because we live longer, and because of our expectation that marriage and romantic interest will remain closely linked, it is not surprising to me that a fair number of couples drift apart long before “death us do part.” I don’t see why they should have to remain in a loveless marriage, particularly if anger, dislike, and resentment come to characterize the relationship. I’m also not certain that it is wise to keep dysfunctional families together. I think that cohabitation will be inevitable, because in our culture marriage is often delayed until the late twenties or early thirties. I think the U.S. might do well to follow several European countries in developing a renewable legal arrangement that specifies certain limited rights for cohabiting couples but doesn’t require a long-term commitment.

### *View 2*

I am more ambivalent about these changes. Some of the changes we have witnessed in the past half-century are good, but other changes cause me concern. I worry about the effects of divorce and remarriage on children and wonder whether, for the sake of the children, the church should take a stronger stand against no-fault divorces. In many divorces one of the spouses experiences the divorce as abandonment, and suffers wounds that will never heal. I notice that divorced men are much more likely to find new (and often younger) partners than divorced women, and there does seem to be some correlation between the rise in divorces and the feminization of poverty. Most cohabiting couples seem to have a fairly high commitment to one another, and I hope that cohabitation will be, in most cases, a stage on the way to marriage. Still, I worry that cohabitation arrangements are particularly bad for women. They are more likely to expect that the relationship will lead to marriage, and they usually must delay childbearing. I am concerned that young people, especially young men, seem unwilling to make long-term commitments to one another even though they talk about loving one another. I am concerned about separating sexual intimacy from durable commitment. I wonder whether young people have developed totally unrealistic expectations with respect to marriage. I am concerned about the growing tendency toward self-indulgence that makes people leery of bonds and promises. I worry that people won’t have the strength, responsiveness, and other-directedness necessary to make a marriage work over the long term. I agree that a living tradition is a changing tradition, but I worry that important virtues and values are being lost because so few, even in the church, seem willing to argue for them publicly.

### *View 3*

I am profoundly distressed by all of these changes. Important behavioral boundaries are being violated to the detriment of individuals and the common good. I object to the attack on basic morals we are seeing. Sex has been trivialized. And I think both the church and the broader culture are validating selfishness and irresponsibility. I think that sexual intimacy outside of marriage, divorce, and cohabitation are deeply sinful behaviors. It is painfully plain to me that such conduct violates the commands of Scripture. The church should condemn these behaviors. It shouldn’t tolerate or affirm them. I am deeply troubled that this church has, without any apparent formal action, come to accept divorce and remarriage even among its clergy. Civil laws governing divorce have made divorce much too easy, so I believe that the church should lobby for legislation that would make it hard to

obtain a divorce without showing moral negligence on the part of one of the spouses. I think ministers ought to simply refuse to marry couples that have been living together outside of marriage, and the church should remove divorced and remarried pastors from its roster. The changes we are confronting today are nothing short of a moral and social crisis. Churches and Christian people need to take a stand.

### **An Invitation to Moral Deliberation**

Trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you are now invited to engage in deliberation regarding this session. The following questions are provided as a way for you to reflect on and discuss what you have read. If time is limited for discussion, focus on those questions that seem most relevant to you.

1. In your opinion, how is the issue of singleness and sexuality addressed in the vignette focusing on Doug? Imagine that Doug has been a fairly regular attendee at your church singles group. How might you or others in the group react to his decision to move in with Anna? Why? What, if anything, ought the church to say to and about people whose experience is like that of Doug's?
2. How does the vignette focusing on Fran and Chris match with your perceptions or experiences? In your opinion, which pastor acted more appropriately to the couple's request to get married? Why? What, if anything, ought the church to be saying to people like Fran and Chris?
3. Look again at the "Differing Views" above. Which is closest to your personal view? If you were to guess, which view may be the majority view in your congregation? Why do you think this is so? What other view could be taken?
4. What teachings of our church do you consider most relevant to deliberation about courtship, marriage, and family arrangements in the United States in the twenty-first century? Lutherans do not consider marriage to be a sacrament. How do we define the meaning and benefits of marriage? How might this be important to Lutheran reflection on social arrangements regarding courtship and marriage?
5. As you think about marriage and family arrangements, what do you see as being the strengths of these institutions? In your opinion, why should people get married?
6. Over the past thirty-five years, the church has been confronting a culture that is greatly altered. As Christians we believe that the God we worship is a living God who is always doing new things in the world and opening new possibilities. As you reflect on the current cultural situation, do you see the changes as harmful and an attack on traditional boundaries? Or do you see the changes as an opportunity for the church to use imaginative and creative discernment to provide new responses?
7. Keith Ablow, M.D., recounted in a New York Times column how he convinced a man not to divorce his wife for her adultery, telling him that he stood at "a critical moment" and that "it could be the beginning of the best part of your marriage." He suggested that the key is to focus not on the adultery but on the reasons for it. He persuaded the man to take his wife out for coffee and tell her that "he needed to hear three things to reconsider the divorce"—not an apology and a promise never to do it again but "why you think you felt the need to cheat, ...a romantic fantasy of yours that you've never told anyone, ...[and] what changes we need to make in our marriage for you to be able to honestly recommend it to our daughter when she's ready."<sup>3</sup> What do you think of this counselor's advice?

8. Galatians 3:28-29 states: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” What might these verses have to say to the Lutheran discussion of a variety of issues related to sexuality, including marriage, singleness, and same-sex relationships?
9. If you find the changes discussed in this session disturbing and believe that they present Christians with a moral challenge that must be addressed, what do you think should be done? Is it a matter for individual responses only, or should there be a response from the church as a church, at the congregational, synodical, or national level?
10. What do you want the church to help you learn or understand about this particular topic? What resources could and should the church provide for pastors and for lay people? What resources should the church make available for use by Lutheran parents to assist them in talking with and teaching their children? What resources should the church make available for use in Sunday school, in local or national youth gatherings, in campus ministry? What would you want seminary teachers to lift up for attention as they prepare future pastors for ministry?
11. Can you think of other moral perplexities that seem to fit under this heading but were not mentioned in the text? If so, what are they and why would you place them under “sexuality and the institution of marriage”?

## CLOSING

### **Prayer**

We give you thanks, gracious God, that you call us to be the church, Christ’s own body in a wounded and hurting world. By your Spirit confirm our faith, so that with joyful hearts we may serve you and our neighbor. May trust in you and love for others shape all our decisions under the guidance of your Word and the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Dismissal**

**Leader:** Go in peace. Christ is with you.

**All:** Thanks be to God.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 53; p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> From “Marriage” rite in *Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House & Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Ablow, M.D., “Finding New Passion after the Pain of Infidelity,” *New York Times*, (Late edition, East Coast), June 20, 2006, sec. F, p. 5.

# Sexuality, Power, and Abuse

## Session

# 5

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## GATHERING

### Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

### Prayer

God of new birth, we give you thanks that you have made us your beloved children. Fill our lives with your Spirit that we may be worthy heirs of your love and grace, so that all who see and know us will see and know of your love for your whole creation. Amen.

## HEARING THE WORD

### Galatians 4:1–20 • No Longer a Slave but a Child!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 105.

## CONSIDERING THE WORD

### *Silence*

### *Discernment*

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

## RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

### Vignettes

Questions at the end of the session (p. 49) are provided for your reflection on these vignettes.

#### *Overheard in hall before a youth group meeting*

“You’re going to wear WHAT to the party? How do you expect to get John or any other guy’s attention? You gotta show more skin. What do you think it’s for?”

#### *Overheard in the locker room*

“Really? I don’t think Ashley will do that.”

“She will, if she wants to stay together!”

#### *Overheard at work*

“I’m tired of working this shift for minimum wage. Look at that model on the cover of that magazine. I wonder how much she makes? I could do that.”

(Laughing). “All I’d need to do is stop eating for about three months and get fake ones” (pointing to chest). “I bet I’d get a raise if I walked in here tomorrow looking like that!”

#### *Shared in a synod bishop’s office*

“I let it go on too long. Nearly two years. It started with counseling sessions.

## Recognizing dating abuse

Beginning in the 1980s, scientific studies of dating and courtship behaviors have consistently shown fairly high levels of physical and sexual aggression in dating couples.<sup>1</sup> Studies of the way teens and young adults understand and manage their romantic relationships have disclosed that “some victims and perpetrators of courtship violence do not appear to recognize this activity as violence.”<sup>2</sup> Young people who can readily recognize hitting, slapping, kicking, and punching as unacceptably violent aggression in other circumstances often do not characterize it as violent or aggressive when it occurs in the context of romantic or erotic relationships.

Questioned about their troubled relationships, they are far more likely to mention that, as a couple, they are struggling with jealousy, difficulties with communication, or problems related to sexuality than to mention the physical abuse or sexual aggression that these conflicts precipitate. If researchers bring up behaviors like hitting and punching, the young people will admit that these occur, but perpetrators and victims alike usually resist labeling such actions as “violent.”

Some researchers speculate that young people “idealize dating relationships to the point where violence is either disregarded or minimized.”<sup>3</sup> Others note that young people appear to think that some level of physical abuse is normal and ordinary—and therefore not worth reporting. Often, when questioned specifically about hitting and grabbing or punching and bruising, they attribute the abuse to love.

**“...it is not possible to discuss human sexuality without discussing justice. It may seem a little strange at first to bring justice into a consideration of our most intimate relationships. But the intimacy of these relationships makes us vulnerable, and so justice becomes imperative.”**

At first it really helped to know he cared. I was hurting so much. When things turned sexual, I knew it was wrong, but I was too embarrassed to tell anyone. Maybe I asked for it. I don't know. I just need it to end. What do I do? What happens next? What will happen to pastor when this all comes out?”

## Contemporary context

The word “power” is one of the slipperier bits of our moral vocabulary. It is used with many meanings but at the very least it refers to the capacity to act or to effect change. On the one hand, power “names” something profoundly good and desirable; on the other, it names something profoundly wrong. Both uses are at play in any conversation about sexual ethics, and unfortunately, they often seem to overlap and intertwine.

We often think of our fundamental human capacities as powers: the power to think, the power to decide, and, most importantly, the power to act. To be completely without power is to be unable to do anything. Those who have no voice and no power find it difficult to influence the public and political arena. Our sexuality also is a power, perhaps one of the most profound of the powers we possess. As people search for life partners (or at least sexual mates), they consciously and unconsciously act in ways that emphasize and draw attention to their sexual powers. This is especially apparent among young people as they begin to mature sexually.

Though power is a key dynamic in this and the next two sessions, here we will focus primarily on how sexual power can be used to oppress, coerce, abuse, and cause violence. As Christian people we will reflect on correcting imbalances of power, protecting the vulnerable against violence and coercion, and preventing destructive behavior. This is why it is not possible to discuss human sexuality without discussing justice. It may seem a little strange at first to bring justice into a consideration of our most intimate relationships. But the intimacy of these relationships makes us vulnerable, and so justice becomes imperative. Because our sexual lives are so intense, so complicated, and so private, justice can be difficult to sort out and enforce. For a variety of reasons, persons in sexual relationships may find it difficult to recognize that they are being coerced or unjustly exploited. On the other hand, we are concerned about the state intruding into the private affairs of lovers and families. That is itself a moral issue.

In sexual ethics, certain abuses of power are clear and provoke little moral argument. For example, when someone attacks another by exercising power (physical strength, the power by use of a weapon, the power of authority, the power to harm the victim financially, and so on), the morality of that sort of act is clear. These exercises of power have always been recognized as deeply immoral. Still, as we scan the past, it is sobering to recall how traditional social arrangements permitted the violent exercise of power by men against women. It is only very recently, by historical standards, that women's willing and intentional consent to sexual relations has been elevated to a high order moral concern. Socially, we are still in the process of putting in place the laws, judicial practices, and police procedures necessary to protect both married and unmarried sexual partners from partner abuse and assault.

While we have become more aware of the need to protect partners from sexual assault, we see other examples in society where women especially are made sexual objects and targets of sexual violence. For example, some modern music and accompanying music videos glorify sex, including sexual assault and rape. Sexual fantasy and ecstasy replace love and happiness. Such music is often the product of broken dreams, broken families, and broken streets and the musical exercise of sexual power becomes a means to express or achieve power status.

We hear a sense of denial regarding certain examples of sexual abuse and violence in phrases such as: “boys will be boys”; “she asked for it”; “he had, after all, marital rights”; or “prostitutes can’t be raped.” Even some Christians and their pastors have found themselves contributing to ongoing domestic abuse by encouraging women to stay in abusive relationships because “marriage is forever” or because they owe it to their children. But protecting children is also about protecting them from manipulation, exploitation, and present or delayed psychological suffering and distress.

Over time our society has also been developing codes of conduct that define and prohibit sexual harassment in order to protect the vulnerable.

This is done by setting limits on the behavior of those who press their interests on others and exploit power in order to obtain or coerce sexual attention and sexual favors. Professional codes of ethics now often include explicit prohibitions of any form of sexual expression between a professional person (e.g. teacher, doctor, lawyer, pastor) and her or his clients, even when both are unmarried. These prohibitions are in place because friendship and affection, not to mention lust and manipulation, can impair the practitioner’s judgment. Practitioners are powerful figures in their clients’ lives, and the clients who are seeking professional help are often particularly needy and vulnerable.

Of particular concern for this church is the misuse of the pastoral office by ordained persons who become involved sexually with parishioners and/or persons who come to them for pastoral counseling. (This church’s expectation of proper conduct applies also to its diaconal ministers, deaconesses and associates in ministry.) This conduct by pastors is incompatible with the office of ministry and can seriously damage the faith and life of individuals, families, and congregations. The church has adopted disciplinary procedures to address such misconduct by members of the clergy and other rostered leader.

As is apparent in at least two of the opening vignettes, sexual attractiveness is its own form of power. This power of attraction can lead to what some may view as subtle forms of abuse. How often have we seen the story line in which the pretty or the sexy wields a kind of power via popularity? Media and the advertising industry extensively exploit the power of sexual attractiveness. Could we say that this, in itself, is a form of abuse?

All of us, but young people in particular and with special intensity, are acutely aware of the social and sexual power that comes with having a body that fits contemporary standards regarding male and female beauty. Reinforced by media and advertising, such standards are used to place the label of “sexually unattractive” on anyone who is disfigured, blemished, too short, too tall, too fat, too thin, or simply unappealing. Billions are spent each year in the pursuit of this elusive form of power: breast augmentation, breast reduction, cosmetic surgery, liposuction, steroid treatment, growth factor treatments, diet regimens, hair coloring, and the newest fashions. Young women and, increasingly, young men develop eating disorders that appear to be, at least in part, triggered by desperate efforts to bring their bodies into conformity with images of extreme body types (sometimes produced with special camera lenses) that dominate the visual media.

## Reflections

We have established in earlier sessions that sex and sexuality are good gifts of God. But we also know that even such good things can be used to hurt and abuse, because we are flawed creatures. New life in Christ and the presence of God’s Spirit are gifts provided to us by grace and through faith. They are not achieved, possessed or gained by reason, knowledge, or moral self-discipline. The apostle Paul is clear,

## ELCA policy

*The following material is from Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline of Ordained Ministers. Originally approved on November 19, 1989, and subsequently approved in this revised version on December 5, 1993, by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, pursuant to ELCA bylaw 20.71.11.*

...As an expression of its life in the gospel of Jesus Christ, this church embraces disciplinary processes of counseling, admonition, and correction, with the objective of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing.

Simultaneously, out of deep concern for effective extension of the gospel, this church remains alert to the high calling of discipleship in Jesus Christ. The ordained ministers of this church, as persons charged with special responsibility for the proclamation of the gospel, are to seek to reflect the new life in Christ, avoiding that which would make them stumbling blocks to others. To that end, this church recognizes that there is behavior that is deemed to be incompatible with ordained ministry, and that calls for disciplinary action...

...4. Sexual Matters - The biblical understanding which this church affirms is that the normative setting for sexual intercourse is marriage. In keeping with this understanding, chastity before marriage and fidelity within marriage are the norm. Adultery, promiscuity, the sexual abuse of another, or the misuse of counseling relationships for sexual favors constitute conduct that is incompatible with the character of the ministerial office...

(continued on next sidebar)

**The ELCA Constitution describes this church's disciplinary process and specifies the disciplinary action that may be imposed on ordained ministers whose conduct is incompatible with the character of the ministerial office:**

20.21.02 The disciplinary actions which may be imposed are:

- a. private censure and admonition by the bishop of the synod;
- b. suspension from the office and functions of the ordained ministry in this church for a designated period or until there is satisfactory evidence of repentance and amendment; or
- c. removal from the ordained ministry of this church.

**Synods also have policies regarding sexual misconduct by members of the clergy and rostered laypersons. Such policies can be obtained from your synod office.**

**“The challenge that confronts us as Lutheran Christians is not one of giving up desire and denying sexual needs...but of living bodily in ways that are not “of the flesh”—not abusive, unjust, careless, selfish, envious, vicious, or worse.”**

however, that this new life in the Spirit that draws us into relationship with God, does not end our struggle with “desires of the flesh,” which are broadly listed in Galatians 5:19-21. Certainly, we can add to this list the misuse of sex to abuse, injure, and take advantage of others.

When Paul describes the conflict of the Spirit against the “flesh” in Galatians he is not saying that the physical body is bad. Rather, he is describing the struggle of the old sin-sick Adam against the new creation. We might even say that he is describing the struggle of the Devil (all that opposes God) in us against the Holy Spirit in us. It is not some particular isolated part of us—not our physical drives and longings, not our restless reason—that is fallen and sinful. Our whole being resists God’s will and seeks to remain servant of sin.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, it is not some isolated bit of us (the mind or the soul) that receives the gifts of the Spirit and is animated by grace. Our *whole* person enters into that new creation. Luther draws the distinction this way in his *Preface to Romans*: “Hence the term ‘flesh’ applies to a person who, in thought and in fact, lives and labours in the service of the body and the temporal life. The term ‘spirit’ applies to the person who, in thought and fact, lives and labours in the service of the spirit and of the life to come.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul was concerned that people in the congregation at Galatia had fallen back into faithlessness. The people who came to faith through the Spirit of God had somehow forgotten that experience of freedom (from the law, from self-will, from guilt and shame, from death and despair). This was showing up in their individual lives and apparently in their life together as a community of faith.

Paul condemned their telltale works of godlessness: enmity, strife, anger, and dis-sentiment. By adding “and the like” to the end of the list, Paul makes it clear that this catalog of negative works is not exhaustive. These “desires of the flesh” represent human nature curled back on itself in self-regard and self-indulgence, indifferent to and careless of the needs and well being of others. These self-serving inclinations “are opposed to” the desires of the Spirit in order “to prevent you from doing what you would.” The desires of the flesh obstruct the work of the Spirit, but the desires of the Spirit prevent us from retreating into ourselves. The Spirit calls us out of self for the sake of the other. Commenting on Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian,” Timothy J. Wengert (p. 130) describes how:

...the Christian believer, free in Christ and willing to discipline one’s self and to serve the neighbor, encounters a “contrary will in his or her own flesh,” or, in the words of a more recent theologian, the old creature may drown in baptism, but it is a good underwater swimmer. This leads to the double life of the Christian as “saint and sinner” described by Paul in Romans 7 and 1 Corinthians 9:27 but also in Galatians 5:24 and 6:14. This is why Christians are in the business of daily “crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires.” Luther hastens to add that the works of reining in the body are not the means by which we are justified before God. The point of limiting and disciplining ourselves cannot be to earn salvation or get in good (or stay in good) with God. Instead, they are done simply “out of spontaneous love in obedience to God.”

In this regard, Luther and Paul help us understand and address many things that can go wrong in both the most superficial and the deepest relations of sexual creatures. Their teaching helps us leave behind the idea that most abuses of sexual power arise solely out of bodily urges. Other factors, such as jealousy, possessiveness, insecurity, manipulation, greed, and distrust infect our behavior—even in supposedly loving relationships. In creation, God has equipped us with very strong biological longings that require resourceful management, but much of the harm that sexual beings inflict on one another arises out of desires that are not themselves sexual at all. The challenge that confronts us as Lutheran Christians is not one of

giving up desire and denying sexual needs (The reformers criticized the Medieval monastic movement for having made that very mistake.), but of living bodily in ways that are not “of the flesh”—not abusive, unjust, careless, selfish, envious, vicious, or worse.

Sexual ethics is therefore not so much about the management of private physical desire. It is about deploying social and individual power to create and sustain healthy networks of relationships. It is about helping persons who are bound closely together by ties of attraction and reliance to flourish. Or, as Luther puts it so simply in his explanation to the Sixth Commandment: “in matters of sex our words and conduct are [to be] pure and honorable.” As private and individual as erotic attraction and sexual expression seem to be, this feature of human experience has a profoundly communal dimension. Justice, equity, and interpersonal responsibility are equally important whether we are talking about dating, conduct between marriage partners, the state’s intervention in private conduct, or the church’s teaching and response on matters related to sexuality.

## Common Ground

In the U.S. sexual violence is generally regarded as deeply wrong and extremely destructive of social bonds and social trust. Laws prohibit such activity as criminal and require the punishment of offenders. We also have extremely widespread agreement that sexual activity, violent or not, between adults and persons under the age of eighteen is unacceptable and subject to punishment. Even so, the right of free speech allows some forms of explicit sexual language and depictions in music and media.

Concerning justice, equality, and the protection of the vulnerable, especially children, the commitments and teachings of the ELCA are clear: “To participate in God’s mission, this church shall: ...Serve in response to God’s love to meet human needs, caring for the sick and the aged, advocating dignity and justice for all people, working for peace and reconciliation among nations, and standing with the poor and powerless and committing itself to their needs.”<sup>6</sup>

Injustice in domestic arrangements is no more acceptable than injustice in society. Exploitation and psychological abuse are no more acceptable in the home than they are in the workplace. Sexual relationships expose us to physical and emotional hurt, because we are, in the sexual dimensions of our lives, extremely vulnerable. The Christian calling to care for and protect others from harm is, if anything, more pronounced in domestic arrangements (and other forms of sexual courtship and partnering) than in other settings. Thus, the ELCA message “Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” (p.6) condemns sexual abuse:

Abuse can be physical, verbal, psychological, or emotional. Sexual abuse is the sinful use of power to dominate or control another person sexually. Victims of abuse are vulnerable because of their age, status, and emotional or physical condition. All forms of abuse are sinful—whether heterosexual or homosexual, whether by a spouse, family member, person in authority, date, acquaintance, or stranger.”

While some forms of violence and abuse are easily recognizable, other forms are less clear. What appears to one person to be unacceptable abuse appears to another to be acceptable behavior. For example, some adults may consider pain-inflicting behaviors acceptable in lovemaking so long as both partners truly consent to and find pleasure in the heightened danger and sensation of limited pain. A person engaged in displaying or using his or her physical body for pay may feel as if this exercise of freedom provides personal or financial power.

## Domestic Violence: A Crime

The Violence Against Women Act was initially passed in 1994 and was reauthorized in 2000 and 2005. This Act makes physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and economic abuse illegal within any dating or domestic relationship. According to the United States Department of Justice, Office of Violence against Women Web site:

Domestic violence can be defined as a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner.

Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone.

Domestic Violence affects women and men of all ages, races, ethnicities, socio-economic statuses, religions, sexual orientations, and is an issue in rural, urban, and suburban communities. The ELCA’s “Message on Community Violence” calls the members of this church community to act with empathy for victims, offenders, and their families, as well as advocate for laws and the individuals whose lives are affected by violence.

The issue of consent can be hard to gauge in emotion-filled, economically dependent, and psychologically needy relationships. Mature consent is certainly one necessary condition of morally acceptable sexual interaction, but it is by no means clear that it is a sufficient condition.

### **Differing Views**

How, then, do people of faith view the issue of power and sex? Here are some possible interpretations.

#### *View 1*

To me, power, like money, is not intrinsically bad. Power can be exercised to change environments and situations in a positive way. Powerful people can use strength, resources, knowledge, or imagination to uphold and enhance the good. Human life is itself power. Our virtues and capacities are powers, and exercising power is a necessary feature of all human communities and interactions. Persons in relationships never enjoy precisely equal degrees of power. What we should ask is not whether power is being exercised, but rather is power being used the right way. That includes sexual powers.

We are hardwired by nature to look for attractive mates, so it is not surprising when humans use ingenious methods to attract or compete for potential sexual partners. Maybe we should encourage more discussion about whether people should spend their discretionary income on cosmetic surgery or give those dollars to disaster relief instead. But we shouldn't pretend that the people making these decisions are the passive pawns of social forces. On the matter of sexual harassment, I tend to think that men and women who complain about being harassed are over-sensitive. Or maybe they are engaged in a reverse power play of their own to get an apology or concession. Maybe they want to distract attention from their own failings and behaviors.

I am skeptical about claims that certain aspects of the music industry victimize vulnerable people. I admit that some sexually explicit lyrics glorify sexual prowess, but listening to lyrics is a far cry from actually abusing another by acting out sexual fantasies.

#### *View 2*

I believe that powerful forces are at work in our culture that affect our view of sexuality. Relentless and pervasive messages about sexual attractiveness badly skew our perceptions of value and even distort our own sense of self-worth. That is how power works its will when it cannot actively coerce. The least we should do in the church is to educate people, especially young people, to the way powerful commercial interests (in advertising, fashion, entertainment, and even drug companies) use sexuality to market their wares and influence patterns of behavior. The complex psychological dynamics that skew people's perceptions can make it nearly impossible for abused spouses or abused children to accuse or to escape from their abusers—or even just seek help or counsel from a third party.

#### *View 3*

I believe that sexual rights and legal protections should apply to any form of sexual intimacy. Even in marriage sexual relations should happen by mutual consent. I would like to see our church publicly and vocally commit itself to the advancement of sexual health in our own country and around the world. I believe we are called to see that all persons are treated justly and that their human rights are protected, especially with regard to sexual rights. All cultural practices that deny this or put such pursuit at risk should be questioned, and if possible, eliminated. All persons should be free to pursue a satisfying, safe, and pleasurable sex life—within marriage.

I think the church has sometimes contributed to suffering and abuse, and has fostered negative Christian attitudes toward the body, sexual intercourse, and the female sex. Christian churches haven't exercised enough leadership in this critical area of human health, social justice, and protection of the vulnerable and the scorned. I hope the churches will begin to speak out more forcefully and constructively on these issues, and will shoulder more responsibility in seeing that the sexual rights of all persons are recognized, protected, and preserved.

### **An Invitation to Moral Deliberation**

Having laid out some of the resources available in our tradition to guide moral deliberation and having explored some of the moral issues that arise out of the intersection of sexuality, power, and justice, we now invite you to join us in deliberation. The following questions are provided to guide your reflection and discussion. If time is limited for discussion, focus on those questions that seem most relevant to you.

1. Regarding the first two vignettes (conversations) on p. 43, where do you see the potential abuse of power? How might you respond if you were the one hearing the conversations? Do you think these scenarios represent common attitudes about sexuality today? If so, from where do such attitudes emerge?
2. What issues of sexuality and power do you see in the third vignette? In spite of the humor, what rings true for you in the conversation?
3. How common do you imagine is the conversation in the bishop's office in the fourth vignette? Why? Why are those who experience such abuse sometimes afraid to come forward? Why is it important that they do so? What stance does, or ought, the church take in such instances?
4. Do you think the laws our society has in place regarding sexual offenses, including domestic violence, are too harsh, too lenient, or just about right? If you think they are too harsh or too lenient, what role might the church, with a mission in society, play in addressing that problem? If you or a member of your congregation notices signs of possible sexual abuse or other forms of spouse abuse, child abuse, or companion abuse within the congregation, what should be done?
5. The issues that arise from looking at sexuality and power are many and complex. Which of the issues introduced in the session are most disturbing to you? Why? What issues require greater attention by your own congregation? By the wider ELCA?
6. Do you agree or disagree with the statement in the session (p. 44) that "it is not possible to discuss human sexuality without discussing justice"? Why?
7. Look again at the three "Differing Views" of various aspects of sexuality and power. Which view or views make the most sense to you? Why? What other views might be added to these? What do you think of the idea that the church should be more actively involved in issues of sexual justice?
8. Consider the desires of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21. How do these desires show up in erotic expression, sexual companionship, love relationships, and family settings? How does living in the Spirit change the way we regard and express our sexuality?
9. In his explanation to the First Article of the Creed, Luther says that God "has given me and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers." That includes our sexual "powers." How does God act to preserve these powers? How might we preserve them and not abuse them?

10. What would you want the church to help you learn or understand about this particular topic?
11. What other moral perplexities seem to fit under this heading that were not mentioned in the text? Why would you place them under “Sexuality, Power, and Abuse”?

## **CLOSING**

### **Prayer**

We give you thanks, gracious God, that you call us to be the church, Christ’s own body in this wounded and hurting world. By your Spirit confirm our faith, so that with joyful hearts we may serve you and our neighbor. May trust in you and love for others shape all our decisions under the guidance of your Word, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Dismissal**

**Leader:** Go in peace to love and serve your neighbor.

**All:** Thanks be to God.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> David Sugarman and Gerald Hotaling, after reviewing the literature, conclude, “One can best guess that about twenty-eight percent of dating individuals were involved in intimate violence at some point in their dating careers.” “Dating Violence: A Review of Contextual and Risk Factors,” in *Dating Violence*, ed. by Barrie Levy (Seattle, Washington: The Seal Press, 1991), p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Riege Laner, “Violence or Its Precipitators,” *Deviant Behavior* 11/4 (1990): 319.

<sup>3</sup> Laner, p. 320.

<sup>4</sup> *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration, Article 2, Free Will, sec. 8. Found in *The Book of Concord*.

<sup>5</sup> *Luther’s Works*. Vol. 35, p. 371.

<sup>6</sup> ELCA Constitution 4.02.c.

# Sexuality, Money, and the Bottom Line

## Session

# 6

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## GATHERING

### Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

### Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks that through water and the Word we are clothed in grace and freed from the condemnation of the law in order to love you and serve our neighbor. Send your Holy Spirit to dwell with us now. Open our minds. Ignite our imaginations. Stir our hearts. Lead us into ever new discoveries of how our love for others might embody your unconditional and gracious love for us. Amen.

## HEARING THE WORD

### Galatians 4:21—5:1 • For Freedom Christ has set us Free!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 109.

## CONSIDERING THE WORD

### *Silence*

### *Discernment*

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

## RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

### Vignettes

Questions at the end of the session (p. 56) are provided for your reflection on these vignettes.

### *Sex at the Olympics*

From the Olympic Winter Games in Turin, Italy, comes this piece excerpted from the story by Juliet Macur called “Grin and Bare It! Oh, Skate a Little, Too” (published in the *New York Times*, February 20, 2006).

...[Isabelle] Delobel, who was in fourth place with her partner, Olivier Schoenfelder, was not the only Olympic ice dancer with a risqué outfit on an evening when there were an uncharacteristically high number of falls and a characteristically high number of flamboyant, skillfully engineered costumes, which seem to use less material every year.

“Nothing is off limits this year,” said the American Jamie Silverstein, who, with her partner, Ryan O’Meara, is in 17th place. “Everyone is trying to sell sex.”

To that, O’Meara piped in, “Oh, yes, lots of people will be tuning in, just to see if they can catch a peek of something.”

### *Debbie*

Once a year, Debbie hosts her women’s circle Bible study in her home. She makes sure that her latest “romance” novels are tucked away out of sight. She knows that some in the group might disapprove of her guilty pleasure.

### *Chad*

Chad is 25 years old and a lifelong Lutheran. He was thrilled to hear from his agent that he had been chosen as the model for a big full-page cologne ad that would pay his first really big bonus. When he got to the photo shoot for the ad, he was told that he would be photographed in the nude, so “we can show off as much of your great body as possible.”

### *Marcus*

Marcus’ music store has been doing a big business selling music he knows contains sexually explicit lyrics. He doesn’t necessarily feel great about selling the stuff to kids, but he figures if parents don’t want them to listen to the stuff, they can take it away. But hearing through the grapevine today that two of his 16-year-old customers had forced a 14-year-old girl to have sex with them in the back of a car, made him stop and think. He knew that both boys had purchased lots of the sex-laced CDs at his store.

## **Contemporary Context**

Is there any doubt that we live in a culture in which sex sells and sex is sold? Is there any doubt that the human body is more and more *commodified*, that is made into an object for profit? All of us are exposed to a continuous media barrage from businesses that hire ad agencies to sell their products along with a dose of sex appeal. It doesn’t matter that the products themselves have no sexual dimension—cars, jewelry, cosmetics, alcoholic beverages, food, toiletries and even clothes for children. If you stop and think for a moment, you can probably name a number of specific commercials or ads that rely on sex appeal to sell. Even Olympic figure skating exploits sexuality, as the *Times* story above reveals.

The use of sexuality in advertising would not be so prevalent if it didn’t work. Perhaps we need to ask why it works so well, and who its primary target is. Certainly it is aimed at children, adolescents, and young adults, who are maturing sexually. They also happen to be the most impressionable, because they are in the process of becoming who they will be. Evidence suggests that these appeals based on sexuality may have less impact on those children and youth who also have certain “assets” in their lives that are able to counteract the influence of such advertising.<sup>1</sup>

The use of sexuality in ads is only part of the total picture. Television, movies, music, and print media have taken advantage of this new degree of sexual license to treat sexual subjects and offer sexual images. Our media culture is awash in sexually explicit images—nudity, women in transparent underwear, sexual foreplay, and simulated sexual acts from fellatio to intercourse. Some contemporary music, especially popular among the young, is strongly erotic both in terms of the lyrics and the music itself. Some of it openly degrades women as sex objects and fantasizes male sexual powers. Media empires that specialize in the selling of sex are enormous businesses. Almost everyone who has a retirement account is probably invested in some manner of “selling” sex.

The Internet provides not only a venue for viewing sexually explicit material, but it now appears to be a virtual playground for sexual predators. Recent television investigative reports have uncovered how prevalent this activity seems to be. Again, the targets are often underage girls and boys. With the expansion of the “reach” of individuals through the Internet comes an expansion of the threat of potential illegal sexual encounter.

Prostitution is sometimes said to be the oldest profession, but the contemporary sex trade boggles the imagination in its scope and complexity. When we add to that the production, marketing, and sales of pornography, erotica, and sex toys, we have an industry which clearly grosses billions of dollars a year in the United States and billions more a year worldwide. Some of this activity is criminal everywhere; some of it is criminal in some countries but not others; much of it is entirely legal everywhere. And obviously, the market population of buyers and users is enormous. From the download of homemade fringe materials via the Internet to big name porn producers to local strip clubs to escort and prostitution services, millions of people a year participate in or purchase these products and services.

## Reflections

We have talked about sexuality as a dimension of our human identity and a good gift of God. While our contemporary culture appears to put few limitations on this “gift,” we may need to wonder about its effect not only on users but also on those who produce or profit from all forms of selling sex—from pornography to prostitution to sexually explicit lyrics to using people, including children, as sexual objects in advertising. Some of us work for businesses that exploit sex for profit, and most of us support the sale of sex, whether we know it or not.

Pornography, prostitution, and exotic dancing are high-profile and overt forms of selling sex. We know that some are forced into these businesses under threat or because of other desperate circumstances, including previous sexual abuse. Others may turn to selling their bodies as a way to support drug addiction. Still others appear to choose these professions simply as a way to make a living, and in some cases to escape poverty. As God’s people of faith, we are called to consider how we will respond in love to all who are actively involved in the selling or buying of sex.

Besides these high profile forms, there are subtle and “everyday” cases that touch closer to home. The purchase of clothing provides a simple example. We must wear clothes, of course, but they do more than just cover the body. They can also make a cultural statement, enhance individuality, symbolize power, and in this society they are heavily marketed for their “sex appeal.” This is evident to the most casual observer at any shopping mall in the U.S.! It is worth thinking about the purchase of and message implied in clothing today in relation to Paul’s use of clothing as an image in Galatians 3:27. There Paul states: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

Paul’s image of putting on Christ is a reminder that the community of Christians “wears” the garb of salvation and freedom. Through baptism we are drawn into relationship with God and connected to the community of faith. This “clothing” is given freely, made possible by water and the Word, and those who wear this clothing are to live in the Spirit of freedom (Galatians 5:1). The Christian community is a community of freedom, but it is a particular understanding of freedom. This becomes quite clear when Luther describes it in the startling passage—mentioned earlier in this study—whose two pieces do not seem to go together at first. He writes in “The Freedom of the Christian”: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” In this twofold understanding about the Christian life, we are freed in order to ask legitimate questions about what are responsible choices as dutiful servants of all. We are freed in order to judge our participation in the ways sexuality is used in this

## A Major Industry

During 2002, annual rentals and sales of adult videos and DVDs topped \$4 billion, with the industry producing 11,000 titles each year—an amount more than 20 times as many as Hollywood. (From a study by Adult Video News, an adult industry trade magazine. As reported in “The Actress, the Producer and Their Porn Revolution,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, 1/6/02.)

The *Wall Street Journal* estimated that total revenues from pornography during 2001 was likely between \$10-20 billion, which means that it exceeds revenues for any professional sport. (*Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 2001)

**“As God’s people of faith, we are called to consider how we will respond in love to all who are actively involved in the selling or buying of sex.”**

**“We are to ‘put on’ Christ when we go to school or work, to worship or to play, and to guide our sexuality. We wear the freedom of the gospel even as we face daily questions of sexual morality in an American culture that is driven by the bottom line.”**

### Stay tuned

Pharmaceutical contraception, test tube babies, surrogate mothers, sperm banks, pharmaceutical treatments for impotence, fertility treatments, artificial insemination, ultrasound images of the fetus and genetic testing, sex change surgery, designer babies, selective abortion, animal cloning and the looming possibility of human cloning. ...The second half of the twentieth century saw unprecedented changes in human reproduction. For instance, for the first time in human history, human reproduction can be completely severed from bodily intercourse. These developments constitute a remarkable moral (and legal) challenge and are attended by many moral (and legal) perplexities. They also are clearly matters of economics, business practice, and social policy. Such additional concerns related to sexuality and economics could not be addressed in this study. Certain aspects will be considered in the upcoming work mandated by the ELCA's 2005 Churchwide Assembly to develop a social statement on genetics and biotechnology. (Visit [www.elca.org/socialstatements/genetics](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/genetics) for current information.)

society.

This responsibility entailed by freedom in Christ means that all the baptized—sellers or buyers, producers or users—can experience freedom in the gospel and because of that freedom are called to responsible actions for the sake of the neighbor. Such freedom for responsibility calls us to a deeper understanding of the significance of the choices we make or what should be acceptable in a society. The choices we make about our bodies matter as one means by which we live out our duty to the neighbor. This is evident in Luther's commentary on the Sixth Commandment in the *Large Catechism*. There Luther explains the meaning of the command against adultery to include more than the act of betraying a spouse by being physically intimate with another. He says:

This commandment is also directed against every form of unchastity, no matter what it is called. Not only is the outward act [of adultery] forbidden, but also every kind of cause, provocation, and means so that your heart, your lips and your entire body may be chaste and afford no occasion, aid, or encouragement to unchastity...In short, all are required both to live chastely themselves and also to help their neighbors to do the same.

But isn't this enhanced understanding of the commandment just a new law, a new demand? No, by faith we recognize the command for what it is. It has no power to save, but those who live by their baptismal promise recognize its value in helping us identify the neighbor's need and in providing guidance for making responsible choices. The commandment reminds us that we cannot live chaste lives on our own. The law provides a form of protection and makes us aware of the danger of selling out to sexual activity that is not life renewing and is harmful to others and ourselves. We are to “put on” Christ when we go to school or work, to worship or to play, and to guide our sexuality. We wear the freedom of the gospel even as we face daily questions of sexual morality in an American culture that is driven by the bottom line.

Just as we must put on clothing each day, so must we make daily choices about how to live out our sexuality. How will we make such choices? How will we help our neighbors do this? How DO we enjoy God-given sexuality without leading our neighbor astray? How do we do that in a culture driven by a business model that often teases the natural sexual desires of human beings? What encourages appropriate sexual expression? What responsibility should government bear in this matter? On some of these matters there is widespread agreement. In other cases the answers are diverse and need our deliberation together.

### Common Ground

As is affirmed in the message “Common Convictions” this church firmly believes that both prostitutes and the people who pay for their services are engaged in activity that is profoundly wrong. The message on “Commercial Sexual Exploitation” builds upon the 1970 LCA social statement *Sex, Marriage, and Family* to denounce “sexual exploitation in any situation, either personally or commercially, inside or outside legally contracted marriage” as “sinful because it is destructive of God's good gift and human integrity.” The message specifies that sexual exploitation “includes what customers do by: viewing pornographic videos, downloading pornography from the Internet, visiting strip clubs, engaging in simulated sex by phone or computer, using escort services, and participating in sex tourism.”

But once we move beyond prostitution and hard-core pornography (however it is produced and delivered), the answers to these questions about whether we should be worried and what ought to be done are not entirely clear. Thoughtful persons of good will can and do give different answers.

## Differing Views

The issues related to selling sex are complex, and the responses of the faithful are varied.

### *View 1*

Of course, I think that hard-core pornography, prostitution, and sexual abuse are wrong, but I'm not particularly troubled by the loosening of repressed morals. The sex industry isn't inherently bad, and I'm not deeply troubled by all the sexual themes and depictions of sex in media. I'm certainly not concerned about most illustrations of sex in advertising used to sell products. I applaud this new positive attitude toward the human body and sex. It's a healthy development. A repressed cultural attitude toward sex and sexuality is unhealthy. I'm glad that we are growing out of old cultural values into more positive and natural attitudes toward our sexual bodies and our natural desires.

I like this less inhibited attitude because it allows people to discuss sexual matters more openly. The body is beautiful, and sexual expression is a joy and delight. Such joy is too often absent today. There's no particular reason to condemn erotica and soft porn, sex toys, and revealing clothing. Relaxed attitudes toward the body and a freer attitude about sexual desires don't have to lead to infidelity or abuse. On the contrary, I think most harmful sexual behaviors tend to arise precisely out of the condition of denial and repression. I see no reason to identify Christian morality with the old Victorian morality that reigned among the middle classes a hundred years ago.

### *View 2*

I find the sex industry and the use of sexuality as a marketing tool to be repulsive, but I believe that they are dangerous only to the naïve and uninformed. What we need is common sense and maturity. No one is forced to watch porn, buy sex toys, or play graphically sexual or violent video games. No one has to buy or let his or her children buy sexually explicit music. It's true that the advertising industry is trying to use sex to sell products, but that sort of manipulation only works on people who are not aware of these attempts at exploitation. I think the American public has become extremely sophisticated in its ability to recognize such manipulative marketing techniques. We do need more education and awareness, and we must work especially hard to be sure that our children see what is going on and learn to evaluate whether or not something is sexually exploitive. Beyond this, I don't really see much cause for moral concern. The sex industry is only as strong as its market. It will wither if people stop buying.

### *View 3*

I am deeply troubled by the increased level of sexually explicit materials and the way sex is used so casually in advertising. But I am uncertain about what should be done or whether anything can be done. We seem to be caught in a conflict of values. The remedies we might pursue for one group of moral concerns would create moral concerns of a different kind. I do feel that the television, movies, video games, and music industries have a strong influence on children. But I wonder how we can possibly succeed at providing our children with different and more Christian values.

I worry that sexual expression is being trivialized and that the human body is being exploited for commercial purposes. I am uncomfortable when I go to certain movies, see lingerie advertisements in the newspaper, or walk past couples making out in parks and on street corners. I am particularly concerned about the flagrant exploitation of the female body. But I do wonder whether the costs of suppressing

or altering this sexually explicit and exhibitionistic world would be worse than tolerating it. Many think you can legislate morality, but I feel uneasy about speaking up for censorship. I don't really want the government policing the bedroom or deciding what adults may and may not watch on television or obtain from the Internet.

Sometimes I just feel defeated by the complexity of the problem. Still, I do wish that someone would do something to restore modesty in the clothing industry and provide better "family entertainment" in the media. I do think something needs to be done to slow down the sexualization of children and to control what is available on the Internet. Our culture needs to reestablish some behavioral limits and boundaries with regard to sex.

#### *View 4*

I feel contemporary attitudes toward the body, taken together with the use of sex to generate and increase profits, is openly evil. Our culture has lost its moral compass and is sliding into widespread moral decay. We emphasize sexual performance at the expense of loving care. The body and its parts are treated as objects. The sale of sexually explicit material and the saturation of popular entertainment with sexual images is a flagrant disregard for privacy, modesty, self-discipline, and restraint. Many young girls are dressing too suggestively, and some young men act like their lives are all about sexual conquest. Our culture's preoccupation with sex verges on the demonic.

Cultural practices that violate certain sexuality norms are deeply harmful. We should name the selling of sex and sexuality for what it is, and we need to reaffirm clear boundaries. Civil laws should be tightened up and enforced. The churches should denounce promiscuity and institute their own rating system of movies, books, music, and video games. Christians should refuse to support the sex industry in any way and should boycott companies that use sexually charged advertising to sell their products. We should work to get rid of or penalize all businesses engaged in selling sex.

### **An Invitation to Moral Deliberation**

You are invited now to reflect on and discuss these matters. Give some attention both to the areas of broad agreement within our church and to the areas in which there is a range of perspective. In all of this recall that the underlying Christian moral question asks repeatedly: What is the good of the neighbor we are freed by Christ to love? The following questions are provided to guide your reflection and discussion. If time is limited for discussion, focus on those questions that seem most relevant to you.

1. Each of the vignettes on pp. 51–52 point to an aspect of using sex or sexuality to sell something. In each case, who is selling and who is buying?
2. In the vignettes, both Debbie and Chad are members of Lutheran churches. What, if anything, should the church say to Debbie about her reading habits or Chad his chosen vocation? How does sex or sexuality enter into your vocation? If your vocation involves selling sex or sexuality on some level, what questions have you had to face? What influences or limits your decisions?

3. What, if anything, might the church want to say to a person like Marcus, whose vocation involves selling sexually explicit materials? How likely, in your opinion, is it that sexually explicit lyrics may have caused the boys to molest the 14-year-old girl? What other factors might be at work? How big an influence do sexually explicit materials have on the way people act towards others? Who is most susceptible to such influence? Why?
4. Which of the four views described above best fits your own view? Why? If you were to guess which view is most prominent in your congregation, which would it be? What other views or viewpoints can be made regarding the selling of sex and sexuality?
5. With regard to the church offering sex education and lifting up issues related to sexuality, what has been your experience? In addition to what is listed above in “Common Ground,” what do you think our church teaches that is relevant to the issues raised in the session?
6. What other moral concerns or perplexities seem to fit under this heading but were not mentioned in the text? Why would you place them under the themes of “selling sex” or “sex sells”?
7. What did you find most helpful in the “Reflection” section? How might this affect your attitudes and responses to the issues raised in the session?
8. If you think the sex industry and the selling of sex in all its many forms is a problem, what do you think should be done about it? What can individuals do? What, if anything, could or should be done by the church at the congregational, synodical, or national level? What particular issue raised in this session needs your most immediate attention? Which needs the most immediate attention of the church? Why?
9. The session reminds us that the sexualization of our culture is a creation of both users and producers. Users vastly outnumber producers, so we tend to focus on the effects of “sold sex” on users or consumers. Do you agree? Why or why not? What, if any, response might we have to producers of porn and those who provide sex for money?
10. To what degree do you think the sex trade targets people who are in difficult economic or environmental situations? Why? How can we as a church better respond to such needs?
11. Imagine a scenario based on one of the following phrases. Share your scenario with others and discuss possible responses. Or, make up your own scenario.
  - Clothing choice for a teenage girl
  - Internet use
  - Neighborhood strip club
  - Teenage boy and cable TV viewing
  - Prostitute attends worship

## CLOSING

### **Prayer**

O God, you call us to live in a world where what is good and right is distorted by sin and the path to follow is not always easy to discern. Yet you invite us to live boldly with the sure and certain confidence of your grace made known in Jesus Christ who redeems not only us but all of creation. Amen.

### **Dismissal**

**Leader:** Go in peace. Christ is with you.

**All:** Thanks be to God.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the research done by the Search Institute around developmental assets, especially *40 Developmental Assets for Adolescents* (ages 12-18) at [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)

# Sexuality and Economic Justice

## GATHERING

### Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

### Prayer

Holy One, you scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, and bring down the powerful from their thrones. Make us ever and constantly aware of those whom the world counts as the least of your human family, especially the poor. In the mission and ministry of your church, make us servants who stand with and protect the vulnerable, knowing that they are beloved children, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

## HEARING THE WORD

### Galatians 5:1–26 • Freedom to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 113.

### *Silence*

### *Reflection and Discernment*

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

## RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

### Vignettes

Questions at the end of the session (p. 64) are provided for your reflection on these vignettes.

### *Kristi*

Kristi was born and raised in a relatively small town in upstate Minnesota. Her parents both worked, but money was always tight. She was an average student and she really didn't know what she wanted to do. She did know there weren't many jobs to be had near home. A few weeks after her senior year in high school, Kristi and a girlfriend got a ride to Minneapolis with a friend, hoping to find work. After a couple days of hanging out in the city, Kristi and her friend were approached by a guy who told them they looked like models, just what his company in Las Vegas was looking for. He took them to a nice restaurant, where he assured the girls that the modeling agency paid well. He showed them a picture of a nice townhouse where they could live until they could afford to buy their own place, which he said wouldn't take long because they would be making good money. He even said they could ride out to Las Vegas with him, since he had to return a car there. Excited by the adventure and lure of Las Vegas they decided to "go for it." The agency turned out to be a front for prostitution. Though shocked, frightened, and disgusted when she realized her situation, Kristi was afraid to call home or run away. The guy who had given them a ride watched their every move. Moreover, she and her friend soon *were* making more money than she had ever seen before. Sometimes she hated herself when she was alone, but she noted that she now had money to buy new clothes and told herself she would save up and find a way to get out of this trap. Still, she was surprised how quickly she was learning to turn off her emotions....

## Session

# 7

### More Complex

The full complexity of how economic factors impact people within poverty, racial or minority communities cannot be adequately explored in one session. Still, it must not be forgotten that the intersection of economic or class issues with race and gender complicates sexuality as a social issue. This session seeks to open a door for discussion on these matters.

### Prostitute "Factory"

A Minnesota-based organization called Source ([www.sourcemn.org](http://www.sourcemn.org)) states that its "mission is to be a friend and a voice to at-risk and alienated young people." An article appearing on their Web site on December 23, 2003, stated the following:

Pimps in Las Vegas refer to Minnesota as "the factory" for all the prostitutes the state produces. The FBI says that 10% of all teen prostitutes in Las Vegas are from Minnesota and more teens were arrested for prostitution in Minnesota than in Massachusetts, Maryland and Michigan combined. Blue-eyed blondes fetch a high price and pimps prey upon the girls' Midwestern politeness and innocence.

(continued on next sidebar)

A story by Las Vegas Sun reporter Jen Lawson reported the following statistics in "Children of the Night" (December 5, 2003).

"The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimates that between 100,000 and 300,000 children are sexually exploited through prostitution and pornography per year."

"And according to national statistics, approximately 444,000 children run away from home each year. [Founder of Children of the Night Foundation Lois] Lee estimates that about one-third of those runaways have brushes with prostitution."

"About half of the child prostitutes arrested in Las Vegas are part of the western United States 'pipeline' that includes Minnesota, Oregon, and Washington...The pimps shuttle children from city to city in those states.."

### **Brooke**

Brooke grew up in a poor neighborhood in a big city. She lived with her mother and four brothers and sisters in a small apartment. When Brooke turned sixteen, her mother died shortly after being diagnosed with cancer. Social services came to take Brooke and her brothers and sister to foster care, but Brooke decided to take her chances on the streets. She avoided authorities and survived by using a homeless shelter. She tried to find work, but the jobs she could get were part time and didn't even pay minimum wage. One of the guys in the shelter seemed to understand her problem and offered to help Brooke make some real money by selling drugs and, if she wanted really good money, he could hook her up with a guy who'd pimp for her. Brooke was feeling desperate....

### **Clark and Miriam**

Miriam never expected to fall in love again, but when she saw Clark at their 40th high school class reunion, they had a great time getting reacquainted. Clark had lost his wife to cancer three years earlier. Her husband Henry had died four years earlier. They soon started calling each other regularly and spent as much time together as possible. Clark lived ten hours drive away, so one day he finally said he was tired of all the driving. He asked Miriam to consider moving in with him. Clark owned a small business that did not earn him much money, but he loved the work. Her children were grown and were on their own, so she could consider moving. They would have considered marrying, but with three years to go before her 60th birthday, Miriam would have to forfeit Henry's good social security payments. Miriam had been a stay-at-home mom and only recently started working part-time. Miriam really loved Clark and wanted to be with him. It didn't seem fair that she would have to lose Henry's benefits if they married, but she didn't feel right "living together" for at least the next three years. She had been a faithful churchgoer all her life, so she asked Clark to go with her to see her Lutheran pastor. She could feel better about living with Clark, if the pastor would bless their relationship.

### **Bobbi and Tim**

Bobbi and Tim were high school sweet hearts and got married right after he got a job on the shop floor of the local factory. She found part time work as a grocery clerk so that they could start a family right away. Life was tough with both working but Tim's company gave him opportunities to continue his education and to advance into management where he has done very well. They now have money and were able to buy a really nice house. The years of long hours and raising a family, however, have clearly put a strain on their married relationship. Sometimes Bobbi feels like a "married single" because she and Tim have so little in common. Worst of all, she has noticed that Tim often finds excuses to prevent her from being around when he socializes with his management colleagues. She worries that he is embarrassed by her looks. The years of raising children and clerking have taken its toll on her. It's not that she minds all that much, since she feels insecure around such people anyway and does not really have much to say to the well-manicured wives of Tim's colleagues. About two months ago a friend warned her that Tim and a middle age but attractive female colleague had been seen arm in arm at a restaurant two towns over. Tim said that story was a malicious lie. He had been at a business meeting over dinner. Today Bobbi is devastated. She just received notice that Tim is filing for a divorce. One of her fears is what will become of her and the kids if Tim gets stingy. Clerking won't pay the bills and that's all she has ever done besides being a homemaker.

## Contemporary Context

In this session we address the complex realities of sexuality, economics, and justice. We ask questions like: Can or does one's economic situation affect one's moral decision-making and actions regarding sexuality? If so, how? Should standards of sexual morality be applied equally across all levels of economic situation? How can economic pressures and hardships lead to actions that conflict with one's values? The vignettes do show how one's economic status or situation can affect one's choices and limit one's options. It is clear that when economic and cultural realities intersect with sex, they throw issues of justice into stark relief.

The effects of economic situation and sexuality can be directly evident in observable ways. For example, sex workers are not generally drawn from the middle and upper strata of society (though their patrons often are). Sexually transmitted diseases are also more prevalent and more likely to go untreated among low income and the working poor, due in part to lack of access to medical care. One report states that women in lower income situations are more likely than women who have a higher income status to have unintended pregnancies and unplanned births.<sup>1</sup> But a report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services cautions: "When a community—defined by its culture—also has minority status, its members are potential objects of economic or social bias which can have a negative impact on sexual health."<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes the effect of economic situation on sexual behavior can be indirect. Continual economic stresses can be especially taxing on marriages, and some believe that welfare policies have actually encouraged low-income couples, including the elderly, to remain unmarried. On the other hand, men and women with resources, status, and good job prospects may identify success with occupational advancement. Many forms of social power are available to them, and it may seem very rational to make different choices related to sexuality. That might involve finding a more "appropriate" partner. For younger individuals it might mean delaying marriage or parenthood until they have financial resources in place to support such a commitment. They may have both the time and the opportunities to engage in sexual activities while taking precautions to avoid pregnancy.

Men and women who lack economic resources or status may take a different view. Some men may see fathering children as a way to gain respect, and their ability to father children may be one of the few forms of power that they can claim. They may see no reason to delay fatherhood until their economic situation improves, because they may have no confidence that it ever will. Women who have grown up under economic hardship and in environments where sexual activity and pregnancy at an earlier age is more common, may also feel as if opportunities to change their circumstances are limited.

The vignettes introduced us to just a couple of the economically influenced scenarios in which youth and younger adults enter dangerous sexual territory. For those who find themselves on the street, the window of opportunity to receive meaningful intervention is narrow. Sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, affect people in all socioeconomic levels, but they affect men and women living under economic hardship in challenging social environments at an alarming rate. A recent online newsletter from the Center for Disease Control reported that "Young people in the United States are at persistent risk for HIV infection. This risk is especially notable for youth of minority races and ethnicities." ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) Sometimes, persons like Kristi suddenly find themselves in a dire economic situation that leaves them vulnerable. In such cases the lure of economic stability may outweigh one's moral convictions

### Socioeconomics and HIV

From a June 2006 online report from the U.S. Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control and Prevention comes these statistics.

Nearly 1 in 4 African Americans and 1 in 5 Hispanics live in poverty. The socioeconomic problems associated with poverty, including lack of access to high-quality health care, can directly or indirectly increase the risk for HIV infection.

## The Church in Action

The initiative “Cherish our Children” is a synod-endorsed, congregation-based ministry of prayer, education, relationship building, and action to implement the ELCA “Message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation.”

The Cherish Our Children initiative incorporates the following Arenas for Action from the ELCA “Message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation”:

- Equip the saints for action informed by awareness of this social evil.
- Find out what is happening in your community to bring to light the exploitation that is happening.
- Prevent youth from becoming captives through education and prevention.
- Address the demand for what the system of sexual exploitation offers.
- Support social agencies that work with youth and adults who are in prostitution.

Began in 2005, this initiative is currently being implemented in six ELCA synods—Minneapolis Area, Northwest Wisconsin, Southwestern Minnesota, Southeastern Iowa, Western North Dakota, and North Texas/Northern Louisiana.

The governing body is the Minneapolis Area Synod Executive Committee who is using Adults Saving Kids as a fiscal agent.

**“Freedom in the gospel is certainly not a license to indulge sexual power or privilege. It does not release us from responsible behavior. Rather it is God’s radical call to serve one another and to love and treat our neighbors—regardless of economic situation or status—as we would want to be loved and treated by them.”**

What do we, as individuals and as a church, have to say to these situations? And how do we speak without playing the “blame game”? This is especially challenging for a church that is comprised almost entirely of individuals drawn from the middle strata of society whose lives seldom intersect directly with those in challenging socioeconomic circumstances. Still, the issues raised in this session do affect the entire community, and church people especially are challenged to consider how to respond.

## Reflections

Like a tangled web, economic situation and sexuality clearly intersect at many points. We turn to Scripture and our theological resources to inform our reflections about this. In Galatians 2, Paul describes what might be called his “commissioning” by leaders of the church in Jerusalem to go to the Gentiles and, as he did so, to always “remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do” (2:10). Here is an example of cultural and religious expression intersecting with a matter of justice so prevalent throughout all of Scripture—remembering the poor.

In the Old Testament, God’s people were often called to remember the poor and needy. The prophet Amos captures this theme in a dramatic way, proclaiming the word of the Lord to the people of Israel, some of whom have been trampling on and cheating the poor:

“I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your  
burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them...  
Take away from me the noise of your songs...  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
And righteousness like an  
everflowing stream.” (5:21-24)

God certainly desires our worship, but ritual performed for ritual sake is useless, if actions (individual or communal) derail the priority of justice.

In the Galatians reading at the beginning of this session, Paul describes how this justice is to be enacted in a practical way: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13-14). Freedom in the gospel is certainly not a license to indulge sexual power or privilege. It does not release us from responsible behavior. Rather it is God’s radical call to serve one another and to love and treat our neighbors—regardless of economic situation or status—as we would want to be loved and treated by them. By God’s grace and through the gift of the Spirit we are able to do this.

In Galatians 6, Paul’s tone is even more direct: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right” (6:7-9). As we have seen in earlier sessions, sowing to the flesh results in fruits (works) of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21), but sowing to the Spirit results in fruits of the Spirit (5:22-23). The danger and the promise is that we know we can and do “sow” both ways. We need to recognize that sowing to the flesh not only includes fornication and [sexual] impurity, but also judgments on others that are born of class perspective.

Sowing to the Spirit also includes concern for justice and the universal good of all, as Paul makes clear in Galatians 6:9-10. Here he summarizes the ethical task for those who sow in the Spirit, for those who are given freedom in the gospel. That task is to take every opportunity to “work for the good of all” (6:10). As Paul sees it, reaping eternal life in the Spirit energizes Christians to be concerned for all our neighbors. For Paul, the all-encompassing love of God shown in Christ corresponds to the all-encompassing moral and social responsibility of the Christian. Since God’s redemption in Christ is universal, the Christian community’s “love of neighbor” is not individualistic or even just localized but global and will not accept injustice perpetrated in the name of cultural, ethnic, sexual, and even religious distinctions (Galatians 3:28).

In the same verse Paul recognizes that serving the neighbor through acts of care and justice begins “especially” with the concrete and ever-present opportunities to care for members of “the family of faith.” Yet, this family of faith for Paul is not simply the local congregation, but all Christians in need wherever they are. His references in Galatians 2 (verse 10) have made this quite clear. His admonition to seek “the good of all” in 6:10 is as big as the justice needed by people everywhere.

These passages, then, highlight two important features of Christian moral deliberation and judgment: (1) Our ethical deliberation includes attention to the concrete realities of persons’ situations rather than being rigid and abstract, and (2) we are committed to seeking “the good of all,” with a special commitment to remember the distinctive needs and challenges of the poor and disadvantaged.

What does it mean for us to be committed to the “good of all” as we explore the web of economic situation and sexuality? One of the challenges to such a commitment is that people do not begin or experience life within the same social networks, and they do not have the same economic advantages. Economic position, family contexts, location, age, gender, race or ethnicity, and more—all can impact a person’s ability to choose. Persons in different social or economic situations may perceive and interpret situations differently. One person’s moral problem may be another person’s cultural norm. This is one of the reasons that persons of faith, deliberating together, may find that they disagree passionately on some moral issues even though they share one faith.

## Common Ground

*Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior*, the 1980 social statement of the American Lutheran Church suggests that a Lutheran understanding of law and gospel “commits” Lutherans “to the goals of justice and equity in the operations of social institutions and structures and of laws and policies, without confusing these goals of justice for all with the good news of salvation by grace through the faith of individual believers.”<sup>3</sup>

The first social statement approved by the ELCA, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, draws attention to the institutions and social structures through which God works: “the family, education, the economy, the state, and other structures necessary for life in the present age” (p. 3), and it refers to the work of the church both as a “reconciling and healing presence” and as a “prophetic presence.” As a reconciling and healing presence, “this church is called to minister to human need with compassion and imagination,” finding new ways to address “emerging social problems,” mediating conflict, and supporting “institutions and policies that serve the common good” (pp. 3–4). In its role as “prophetic presence,” the church understands itself to have “the obligation to name and denounce the idols before which people bow, to identify the power of sin present in social structures, and to advocate in hope with poor and powerless people” (p. 4).

**“One person’s moral problem may be another person’s cultural norm. This is one of the reasons that persons of faith, deliberating together, may find that they disagree passionately on some moral issues even though they share one faith.”**

## Differing Views

Here, then, are various ways persons of faith may respond to the intersection of issues related to sexuality and economic situation.

### *View 1*

I think a person's economic situation is irrelevant to the moral dimensions of his or her sexual conduct. All human beings have to deal with the same drives and need to exercise the same sorts of control. The expectations and boundaries regarding sexual activity should be the same for everyone. That's why there is law. It provides protection and prevents harm to others and ourselves. Churches, schools, and perhaps other government agencies need to provide education that will increase responsible behavior and develop firmer moral character. Responsible sexual conduct and behavior should be rewarded in visible ways. For example, some kind of financial or educational credits could be given to impoverished girls who do *not* become pregnant in their teens. I am worried that an emphasis on "race, class, and gender" obscures what we all have in common and encourages us to think that we are victims of social systems, rather than creators of our own circumstances and futures.

### *View 2*

I am not concerned about a one-size-fits-all morality with regard to sexuality and economic situation. The usual cultural morality of one group may simply be different than the cultural morality of another. I suppose I will always assume my group's view is best. It certainly does seem that the range of options that are available to the working poor and the poor are different than those available to middle- and upper-class folks. I don't think it is wise to say that the same moral ideals are desirable for all persons no matter what their circumstances. I really don't think you can legislate morality much beyond basic laws to protect the innocent. Moral deliberations need to take circumstances into account. We should seek what's best for a person in a particular situation rather than what would be best in the abstract for some person who didn't have the same situational constraints. We should identify the constraints on real people in real situations, because identifying the constraints increases the options that are available for choosing.

### *View 3*

I think it is most important to address structures and systems, rather than focusing on personal responses. It's fine to encourage personal responsibility that helps people make good choices, but that won't actually have much effect unless we first identify and address the underlying social forces that push people in certain directions. When ethical teachings concerning sexual practices conflict with the values and requirements driven by peoples' economic arrangements, we shouldn't be surprised if they fail to conduct their sexual lives in accordance with those teachings. We need to take a close look at how our social world has changed and then ask which changes actually enhance the possibility of human well being.

## **An Invitation to Moral Deliberation**

With the themes of love for neighbor working for the "good of all" in mind, we ask you to turn now to deliberate together using the questions provided below. If time is limited for discussion, focus on those questions that seem most relevant to you.

1. In the vignette about Kristi, do you agree or disagree that economic circumstances affected her situation? Why? It may be surprising to many that a significant number of girls entering prostitution in Las Vegas come from Minnesota, or many from smaller towns and cities elsewhere. What role, if any, might the church play in slowing or shutting down this “pipeline?”
2. How common do you think Brooke’s story is? Why? Are you aware of groups, including churches, in your community that try to reach out to persons like Brooke? Some see failed education systems in urban areas as a contributing factor in the attitudes of young people about sexual practices. They believe that some young adults are limited in their power to earn money when they leave poor schools and have fewer options in terms of career choices. Do you agree or disagree? If this is true, how can we as a church address this issue?
3. If you were Miriam’s pastor, how might you respond to Miriam’s request to bless her relationship with Clark, knowing that they intended to live together as a sexually active couple? What economic factor or factors are at play in this scenario? If you identify anything as a problem, what might you offer as a solution?
4. In the vignette featuring Tim and Bobbi, what economic factors seem to have had an effect on their relationship? How do these factors appear to intersect with issues related to sexuality in their lives? What, if anything, may be said to Bobbi and/or Tim? How common do you think this sort of scenario is?
5. As you read the “differing views” above, which seems to most closely represent your opinion? Why? Which do you think may best represent the majority opinion in your congregation? What other views may be added to those provided?
6. What factors (experience, media, reading, etc.) figure most in your view of the connection between sexuality and economic situation?
7. If you feel comfortable doing so, describe how economic forces and/or economic changes influenced your own sexual conduct or the sexual conduct of people you know?
8. To what degree is the church responsible for evaluating social policies, social arrangements, and economic inequities that may have an impact on sexual behavior?
9. Both the Old Testament prophets and the Gospels have a great deal to say about justice, economics, and morality. Further, the Bible is clear about its concern for the poor. How does this help us to think about these problems? What, if any, new insight did you discover in the Reflections section?
10. What sexual behaviors would you say are inappropriate no matter what the economic situation? What criteria help you make this decision? What sexual behaviors may be most directly related to or influenced by economic situation?
11. How do economic forces in your community have an impact on matters related to sexuality? Which of the economic factors discussed in this session are at work in your community? Does your congregation need to respond to what is happening? If so, what response is needed?

## CLOSING

### **Prayer**

O God, we give you thanks that your grace overflowing the world comes also to us. Bless us now, and send us forth in the strength and wisdom of your Holy Spirit that we may ever know your love for us, and proclaim your redeeming love for all the world. Amen.

### **Dismissal**

**Leader:** Go in peace. Remember the poor.

**All:** Thanks be to God.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley K. Henshaw, "Unintended Pregnancy in the United States," *Family Planning Perspectives* 30/1 (February 1998), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> From *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health*, July 9, 2001 (available online).

<sup>3</sup> *Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior: A Social Statement of The American Lutheran Church*, adopted by the tenth General Convention of the American Lutheran Church, October 1980. Quotations are from the document as posted on the ELCA Web site, p. 2ff of the Web site printout.

# Facing our Responsibility in the Freedom of the Gospel

Session

8

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## GATHERING

### Hymn

See hymn suggestions on p. 79.

### Prayer

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred that infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and through our struggle and confusion, work to accomplish your purposes on earth; so that, in your good time, every people and nation may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, page 79)

## HEARING THE WORD

### Galatians 6:1–18 • Working for the Good of All!

The full text of this reading can be found on p. 117.

## CONSIDERING THE WORD

### *Silence*

### *Discernment*

What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?

## RESPONDING TO WORD AND WORLD

### Your Task

In earlier sessions, you were introduced to individuals who were faced with making choices or responding to circumstances related to sexuality. Now it is your turn to play a role. As your study group meets for this final session imagine yourselves in the role of the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality. Your assigned task is crafting a social statement that will probe for shared convictions and the boundaries of faithful action. This involves a careful engagement with the variety of viewpoints and concerns abroad in the church, some of which are reflected in the study materials. Then ask yourselves the kind of questions that need to be considered in the development of a social statement: “What should the statement accomplish? What are the crucial theological and ethical convictions that need to be at the core of the statement? What are the issues that must be specifically addressed?”

## Task Force Goals

At the start of their work, the members of the Task force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality laid out goals for what it wanted the church to be able to say about the process of studying and discussing matters of sexuality. Here are several of those:

- We have been faithful to the church's call and produced an honest and faithful outcome.
- We have been able to discuss tough issues without undue division.
- We have grown in our understanding of the Bible and its interpretation.
- We have engaged all generations.
- We have grown in a more comprehensive understanding of sexuality in all its dimensions.
- We have been able to chart and celebrate common ground wherever possible.

**“...tough situations don't define or dismiss the norms that guide our love for neighbor but, rather, love in the freedom and confidence of the gospel, struggles to find how best to be faithful when the path is not clear.”**

The following reflections on the study may prove helpful as you pursue this exercise and prepare to submit your comments to the task force. It might also be helpful to reflect on the goals that the task force adopted for its work. Have these goals been apparent to you in your experience of the study? (See sidebar)

### *Galatians and Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian"*

We have pursued this study in the light of Paul's letter to the Galatians and Luther's treatise, "The Freedom of a Christian." Paul's ringing statement, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1) is echoed by Luther's assertion that, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." These affirmations remind us that we live in the gospel, free in Christ from the condemnation of the law. Freedom, however, is not license. Free from the condemnation of the law, we are free to serve our neighbor as Christ has loved us. Paul makes this plain in Galatians 5:13-14, and Luther does so as well when he gives us these words for the second half of his key statement: "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant to all, subject to all." It is this grace and faith that shapes our approach to moral deliberation as we seek the truth in love, confident of God's love in Christ and of the ministry of the Spirit in our deliberations.

Galatians 6, which was read at the beginning of this session, makes some judgments and proposals that are appropriate both for our sisters and brothers in this church and for its witness to the world. Paul's words capture the spirit of our journey through the entire letter and echo Luther's treatise on Christian freedom. There is no boasting except in the cross (6:14). In a spirit of gentleness (6:1) we express our concerns for one another. Seeking to fulfill the law of Christ (6:2), the law of love (5:14), we work for the good of all (6:10) in the power of the Spirit.

- ***What difference has the experience of Galatians and Luther's teaching on Christian freedom made in your deliberations?***

### *One in Christ, but Holding Differing Views*

Throughout the study we were reminded that we are united one with another in Christ through the grace of our Baptism and that we share some strong common convictions. At the same time we also had to recognize that matters of ethical judgment are not always obvious, and differences among the faithful can and do arise.

Sometimes the life situations in our fallen world can create terrible conflicts and tough moral choices. The Luther case study presented in Session Two was a powerful illustration of that reality. There we saw Luther trying in the gospel-born spirit of love to sort out a situation which, given the realities of that day, seemed to have no perfect resolution. Luther was not "making up" his ethics as he went along. He realized—as do we—that tough situations don't define or dismiss the norms that guide our love for neighbor. At the same time love, in the freedom and confidence of the gospel, struggles to find how best to be faithful when the path is not clear. Sorting out ethical conflicts in the middle of our world is a common experience for Christians and everyone will not see matters the same way.

- ***What do we need to say to one another about the reality of moral dilemmas and Christian freedom? What dangers might we face in such a discussion? What might we do in our congregations to equip one another to face tough choices?***

### *Different Lenses*

Each of us sees life and matters of sexuality through "lenses" that are fitted by our particular life experiences and by cultural influences. We explored this reality in Session Three. The evidence of these differing lenses is apparent in the different interpretations we looked at in Sessions Four through Seven. These sessions also

presented us with the additional complication that changes in our culture and its institutions and practices often present us with challenges to traditional viewpoints. At least two questions follow.

- *If we agree that we do indeed see things through a variety of lenses, is the “gospel lens” suggested in Session Three—whether or not a given view enhances our freedom in Christ to serve the neighbor in love—sufficient to make discerning judgments in a “spirit of gentleness” (Galatians 6:1)? How might such a gospel lens find expression in a social statement?*
- *Looking through the gospel lens at the issues of cultural challenges presented in Sessions Four–Seven, is it possible that Christian sexual ethics may need to undergo some new interpretations in order to be faithful to the true spirit of Christian love in today’s world? Why or why not? What might be some of the issues in which this is the case?*

### *Justice and Sexual Ethics*

There is an element of concern for justice in all aspects of sexual ethics. Love seeks justice in all relationships by actively recognizing and protecting the equality and integrity of the other and by treating all fairly. Session Seven raises the question of justice in a special way, however. It asks whether the economic disparities of our culture promote disparities in sexual ethics that call for understanding and appreciation. It raises the further question of economic justice and its impact on sexual morality.

- *Does society have an obligation to promote the sort of economic conditions conducive to Christian ideals of sexual morality? Should the ELCA connect the concerns of its social statement on economic life (Sufficient, Sustainable, Livelihood for All) to this social statement on human sexuality? Why or why not? In what issues might these connections be made?*

### **More Common Ground**

All these reflections and the questions raised are the stuff of the moral deliberation this study is designed to promote. Here are some excerpts from ELCA documents that speak of moral deliberation and the formation of social statements that may serve to underscore a few important points about our deliberation and its purpose.

The first of these excerpts expresses a caution that the study has sought to convey: as we face the influences and challenges the culture of our society presents, it is important neither to glorify or demonize our culture, nor simply accept it.

The church must participate in social structures critically. Not only God but also sin is at work in the world. Social structures and processes combine life-giving and life-destroying dynamics in complex mixtures and in varying degrees. The church, therefore, must unite realism and vision, wisdom and courage, in its social responsibility. It needs constantly to discern when to support and when to confront society’s cultural patterns, values, and powers. (*Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*)

The differences we discover among ourselves in matters of sexuality and sexual ethics can be deep and serious. The study materials take note of this in various ways as we have seen. The study also operates with the understanding that differing views, when held in good conscience and in respect for God’s Word, need not divide us; they are not matters of salvation. This is the clear implication of Paul’s argument in Galatians.

“The study also operates with the understanding that differing views, when held in good conscience and in respect for God’s Word, need not divide us; they are not matters of salvation.”

Christians fulfill their vocation diversely and are rich in the variety of the gifts of the Spirit. Therefore, they often disagree passionately on the kind of responses they make to social questions. United with Christ and all believers in baptism, Christians welcome and celebrate their diversity. Because they share common convictions of faith, they are free, indeed obligated, to deliberate together on the challenges they face in the world. (*Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*)

This understanding is consistent with one key function of social statements. They are teaching documents designed as a resource and guide for further reflection and discussion among members of the church.

Church members are called upon to give social statements serious consideration as they form their own judgments. In their use as teaching documents, their authority is persuasive, not coercive. Their teaching function builds upon and seeks to nurture the freedom of Christians to decide and act responsibly. Social statements help shape the conscience of Christians by appealing to their faith, moral convictions, and reason. (*Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Statements*)

- ***Reflect on your experience in your discussion group's effort at moral deliberation in this study process?***
- ***Are you comfortable with the conviction that we can disagree on matters of sexuality and sexual ethics without being divided over it? If not, why not?***

### **Invited to Respond**

The study guide has raised a number of important contemporary issues of human sexuality in addition to matters previously addressed in *Journey Together Faithfully Part One: "A Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions."* and *Journey Together Faithfully Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality.* However, it is not possible to cover all the areas of concern. A common feature of social statements is a series of *implementing resolutions*. Such resolutions provide an opportunity to commit the church to the development of additional resources or programs relevant to the concerns of the social statement. This process, then, is an opportunity to direct the church's attention to questions the study and/or the statement was unable to address.

- ***What topics not covered in the study might be important for the implementing resolutions to address? What suggestions might you have as to the sort of action that would be most helpful in addressing those topics?***
- ***If you were a member of the ELCA Task Force on Sexuality, what one or two things might you want to be sure were communicated to the church through a social statement on sexuality?***

Now turn to the Response Form on p. 73, and provide as many answers as possible.

## CLOSING

### **Prayer**

O loving God, to turn away from you is to fall, to turn toward you is to rise, and to stand before you is to abide forever. Grant us, dear God, in all our duties your help; in all our uncertainties your guidance; in all our dangers your protection; and in all our sorrows your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, page 87)

### **Dismissal**

**Leader:** Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness; be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**All:** Thanks be to God.

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# Response Form

## Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality

Please select the circle that indicates your response by filling it in completely.

**1. Did you complete the study process on your own or with others in a group?**

- on my own (Skip to question 5.)
- in a group, but the answers in this survey represent my opinions, not the group's
- in a group—this survey represents the opinions of the group

**2. How many participants were in the group?**

- 2 to 5
- 6 to 10
- 11 to 20
- 21 to 35
- more than 35

**3. Who was the leader of the group?**

- a pastor
- I'm not sure if the leader was a pastor or lay person.
- a lay person

**4. Did the leader make use of the Foundational material toward the end of the study booklet?**

- Yes
- No
- I don't know.

**5. How many people of the following characteristics were in the group, or which of the following describes you as an individual? If you are an individual, please put a "1" in the category that describes you. For a group, make your best estimate or ask people to raise their hands if possible. Please enter only numbers and not percentages or "X's"**

- |                     |              |  |
|---------------------|--------------|--|
| _____ 24 or younger | _____ female | _____ Asian or Pacific Islander        |
| _____ 25 to 44      | _____ male   | _____ Black or African American        |
| _____ 45 to 64      |              | _____ Latino/Latina                    |
| _____ 65 or older   |              | _____ American Indian or Alaska Native |
|                     |              | _____ White or Caucasian               |
|                     |              | _____ Arab and Middle Eastern          |

**6. As you think about what you (or the group) believe about human sexuality, how well were those beliefs represented in the study documents?**

- I (we) didn't see my (our) beliefs in the study documents. It didn't come close.
- The documents did a fair job of representing my (our) beliefs.
- The documents did a good job of representing my (our) beliefs.

**7. Did the study experience help you better understand the views of other people within the ELCA?**

- Yes, I (we) think the experience helped me (us) better understand the views of other people. I (we) learned some things.
- No, I (we) already understood the views presented or I (we) didn't learn anything new.
- Other (Please explain.)

**8. Please indicate the sessions you read and/or discussed. Then rank order those sessions from 1 to 7, with 1 for the session which generated the most helpful conversation/was most important and 7 for the session that was the least helpful or least important.**

	<u>Read/Discussed</u>	<u>Ranking</u>
a. Session 1: Christian Foundations for Deliberation	<input type="radio"/>	_____
b. Session 2: Created as Sexual Beings	<input type="radio"/>	_____
c. Session 3: Sexuality, Culture, and Freedom	<input type="radio"/>	_____
d. Session 4: Sexuality and Social Institutions	<input type="radio"/>	_____
e. Session 5: Sexuality, Power, and Abuse	<input type="radio"/>	_____
f. Session 6: Sexuality, Money and the Bottom Line	<input type="radio"/>	_____
g. Session 7: Sexuality and Economic Justice	<input type="radio"/>	_____

**9. Thinking about the topic you ranked number 1 in the question above, what makes this an important issue for the church?**

**10. What did you learn about this issue from participating in the study? What new insights, if any, did you gain from the study process?**

**11. What one or two concerns—besides homosexuality or marriage—would you want to be sure were addressed by the church through a social statement on sexuality?**

a)

b)

**12. If there are topics not explored in this study—or the previous two studies—that you think are important enough to be addressed in a social statement, please list them here.**

### 13. Seeking your input beyond a social statement:

The task force believes important aspects of sexuality need attention beyond what can be covered in a social statement. Please help the task force gather input about what members of this church believe they need and would find useful in this regard. If you are a layperson, consider your own social situation and the problems and dilemmas that arise in your family or among your friends. If you are a rostered person, consider the questions and problems that have come up over the years in your ministry. If you are active in outreach and social service ministries, consider what you have learned about the predicaments of those whom you serve. If you are engaged in youth work or in campus ministry, consider what problems and questions you see recurring among the young people whom you know.

Out of your own experiences, tell us what the ELCA could do to be helpful. For example, does this church need to develop materials specifically for use with youth? What kind? Does this church need to develop new courses in its seminaries? Is there a way the church can better address the interests and questions of single Lutherans? Can the church do a better job of addressing the situation of sexually abused women and children? In what way? Can it do a better job of fostering healing and forgiveness when marriages are dissolved? How? These are only a few possibilities—we really want to hear from you about what resources you think would be used and what problems you would like to see addressed. Your constructive identification of these unmet needs will help the task force to design effective resolutions for implementation (see page 70), so that the social statement will be a statement of current convictions that opens toward a program for engagement, growth, and mission.

—Please feel free to use additional sheets of paper for your response—

Thank you for participating in the study. Return this response form by November 1, 2007.

Mail to: ELCA Studies on Sexuality, 8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631

**This response form can be filled out and submitted online at [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney)**

# Leader's Guide

Because this study has multiple features, it provides a variety of options for individual and group use. Though primarily designed as a group study around the eight study sessions, it is important to recognize the potential for supplementing and extending the eight study sessions. The study is suitable for individual reading and reflection, and we welcome responses from individuals who, for some reason, are not able to participate in group study.

## Preparing to lead the study

Here are some things to keep in mind as you plan for the study and prepare to lead the sessions:

1. Discussing matters related to sexuality can be especially sensitive. Be aware that some participants in your group may have experienced a range of harmful effects from simple teasing about physical traits to sexual abuse or violence. Before your sessions begin, discover the resource people in your area who may be called upon to provide support or counseling for a person whose experience may trigger negative emotional responses. Create a safe environment for discussion by reminding participants that they need to take care of themselves. No one will be required to participate in conversations that are likely to cause them discomfort or trauma.
2. Invite people of all ages, from youth to older adults, to participate. Though the study is not specifically geared to youth, older youth especially may add their experience to the discussions.
3. Leaders do **not** need to be a pastor. Discussion facilitators from within the congregation can be recruited and prepared. If you have multiple facilitators and groups, consider working through a session with leaders before the study sessions begin.
4. Read and become familiar with the content of the entire session. Consider how the sessions relate to the Foundational Resources (pp. 83–136). Are there connections you want to highlight?
5. Take time to read the foundational essay by Timothy J. Wengert based on Martin Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian" (see below).
6. Before each session, spend some time studying the foundational resource by David Tiede called "A Readers' Guide to Galatians" (see below). Note the role of the reader in introducing the Galatians reading for the sessions.
7. Select a strong reader or readers to present aloud the selected portions of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, which have been chosen for the opening of each session. An audio recording of the Galatians readings is included on the back cover of the study booklet and may be used in place of a live reader if that becomes necessary.
8. As a leader, don't be afraid of silence. Do allow time for silence and if some time has lapsed and no one seems ready to share out loud, simply remind the group that scripture tells us God works through stillness too (Psalm 46:10) and then move on.
9. Each session begins and ends with brief worship suggestions. Be aware of the need to make hymn choices, if you intend to have the group sing. (p. 79)
10. If you choose to follow the worship suggestion for the sessions (see "Gathering time" below), you will need to collect some items.
11. Be prepared to take some notes or assign a recorder to capture ideas and thoughts from the discussion. This may be especially helpful when you get to the final session and prepare to fill out the Response Form.
12. Sessions can be adapted for use in a variety of time frames, but it is probably best to prepare 60 minutes for review of the content and discussion. You may find it helpful to encourage participants to read the session content before gathering for discernment and deliberation.

## *A Special Word about Sessions 1 and 2*

As you prepare to lead, it will be especially helpful to note that Sessions 1 and 2 contain important foundational material that will set the stage for the remainder of the sessions. Both focus on theological content and methodology, and provide less specific material for discussing topics related to sexuality. You may find it helpful to spend extra time reviewing the key concepts presented in those sessions. For example, as you read those sessions ahead of time, write down the key concepts you want to review with your group. Check the glossary for hints about how to explain them. During the session, allow the group time to ask questions of clarification. Taking time in Sessions 1 and 2 to become familiar with the methodology and theological assumptions that lie behind the study's model of moral deliberation will enhance the discussion in the remaining sessions.

### *About A Readers' Guide to Galatians (p. 83)*

Paul's letter to the Galatians has been divided into eight "readings," one to begin each of the eight study sessions. In the sessions, the selected portion of Galatians is read, and the reading is followed by a single question to engage the group in describing what they "hear" in the text. However, author David Tiede's "Readers' Guide to Galatians" provides commentary and reflections on Paul's letter that may help you provide background as needed. Leaders are encouraged to read the Guide as preparation for leading the sessions. The Guide offers basic facts and insights to help the leader interpret this exercise and the beloved but challenging, passionate letter of Paul to the Galatians, a community in turmoil. But a group may also wish to extend their eight-session study with additional Bible study sessions based on A "Readers' Guide to Galatians". Sessions on Galatians could precede or follow the main eight-session study, or they could be studied alongside the other foundational resource, Timothy J. Wengert's essay on Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian."

### *About Martin Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian" (p. 121)*

"Luther's 'The Freedom of a Christian,'" says essay author Tim Wengert, "may be thought of as a meditation on the central teachings in Galatians." The title of Luther's booklet, "The Freedom of a Christian," calls to mind Paul's comment in Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free."

Together with Galatians, Luther's text and Wengert's commentary provide rich insights into the meaning of the gospel and the law, faith and service, human nature, and life in the Spirit. "The Freedom of a Christian," better than most other writings, clears the spiritual and moral air, so to speak. More than that, Luther's booklet calls pastors and teachers of the church to return to their essential task: to plant good trees by letting loose the free, unconditional promise of God in Christ. Christian lives are not driven by self-aggrandizing purposes or external, pride-filled decisions but only by God's freeing Word. Christian lives emerge from the proclamation of the law that strips us bare and the gospel that clothes us in the righteousness of Christ's death and resurrection.

Again, leaders are strongly encouraged to read and reflect on this essay in preparation for leading the main study sessions. As with the "Readers' Guide to Galatians," this essay on Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian" could also provide the basis for extended group study, either before participating in the main eight-session study, or after. Participants can be encouraged to read the essay on their own, even if it is not the subject of separate study sessions.

### *Gathering time*

Each gathering space is different, and you will want to be creative in how you arrange your space to accommodate your group's needs. You are encouraged to incorporate the following elements to remind all of their Baptism and to invite a focus on dwelling in the Word. Together they may provide a visual focus for the study sessions:

- A large bowl of water in a central location. If you are gathered around a table, it could be in the middle of the table; if using chairs in a room put it on a small table in the center or front of the room. You may want to find some blue cloth to cover the table; or "puddle" the cloth around the bottom of the bowl, allowing it to drape on to the table or cascade to the floor.

- A candle next to the bowl of water.
- A Bible, preferably large, open to the book of Galatians next to the candle.

As the study begins, you may wish to welcome the participants and orient them to the study, indicating that the study itself will be an experience of how we as the baptized people of God “dwell in the Scripture” as we engage in moral deliberation around a variety of matters related to human sexuality. Invite them to note how the shape of the study itself does more than ask us to discuss the matter of human sexuality. Rather, it invites us to open our minds and hearts to the hearing of the Word and to the discernment of what that means for our lives as baptized people of God.

### *Hymn Suggestions for Gathering*

#### *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

175, 451, 503, 506, 513, 708, 712, 716, 725, 729, 798

#### *Lutheran Book of Worship*

228, 290, 294, 408, 419, 423, 433, 492,

#### *With One Voice*

658, 666, 698, 712, 760, 765, 780, 799

#### *This Far By Faith*

83, 130, 132, 192, 217, 220, 228, 247

#### *Libro de Liturgia y Cantico*

403, 508, 520

#### *Worship and Praise*

14, 96, 144, 146, 147, 155, 526, 137

### **Leading the sessions**

In addition to the preparation suggestions listed above, you may wish to keep in mind the following as you lead each session:

1. Following the selected Galatians reading at the opening of the session, give the group time in silence to let the Word touch each individual and to help them reflect on what they have heard. The comfort level of silence will likely grow as you practice it each week. Following the silence you may ask the question provided: “What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?”
2. Encourage participants to keep their comments to one main insight in order to let everyone have a chance to speak, who wishes to do so. It is not a failure if even no one wishes to share. The exercise is expected to take 10 to 12 minutes, but as a leader you will need to determine the balance needed between this important discernment, the contributions being offered, and the interest of getting to the chapter’s deliberation.
3. It is most helpful if participants read the material for each session in advance. Nonetheless, it is helpful to review the material in each session before getting to the discussion questions. Vignettes and the “Differing Views” will need to be read before they can be discussed.
4. If questions are raised about the meaning of terms or concepts in the study booklet that are not satisfactorily answered, record them and seek help before the next session.
5. In every group some are more vocal than others. Encourage as broad a participation as possible. Encourage the discussion to take place in a spirit of mutual respect. Engaging in discussion of sensitive issues requires trust, and trust is built when participants listen respectfully to one another.

**Completing the Response Form**

The task force is eager to receive responses to this study. Please record key insights and views as you participate in the study sessions. Session 8 provides a procedure for gathering your thoughts and concerns and for filling out the Response Form found on p. 73. Follow the directions for submitting the form found there. You may also submit thoughts and ideas not specifically required on the Response Form. Note that the form includes instructions for how it may be completed online.

# FOUNDATIONAL RESOURCES



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# “For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free!”

## A Readers’ Guide to Galatians

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## Reader’s Notes

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### INTRODUCTION: DWELLING IN THE WORD

*“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”* Colossians 3:16

The Task Force for ELCA Studies of Human Sexuality believes that Bible study is a crucial practice for the congregations and gatherings of this church as a way to enter the subject of sexuality together. Paul’s letter “to the churches of Galatia” has been chosen as the meeting ground for what will surely be a complex and promising consultation of the faithful on a difficult topic. This “Readers’ Guide to Galatians” is intended to accompany the study and specifically to support those who will be leading congregations and other kinds of gatherings in their hearing of Galatians. That kind of background and support for the consultation at hand is enhanced by the decision to provide an introduction to Luther’s treatise on “The Freedom of the Christian.” These two are naturally linked together because the latter is a kind of meditation by Luther on the meaning of Galatians for Christian life.

Luther’s introduction to his lectures on Galatians makes it clear why all participants and those who lead this study will do well to draw the life-giving gospel of Christ from the well-springs of Galatians:

Therefore I admonish you, especially those of you who are to become instructors of consciences, as well as each of you individually, that you exercise yourselves by study, by reading, by meditation, and by prayer, so that in temptation you will be able to instruct consciences, both your own and others, console them, and take them from the Law to grace, from active righteousness to passive righteousness, in short, from Moses to Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This reading of Galatians in the church is not seeking to make fine points of historical scholarship. Therefore, this Readers’ Guide is not a “commentary,” although a few good commentaries are listed in Appendix I for those who are ready to pursue those questions. This Readers’ Guide is also not devotional or sermonic, although this reading of Galatians will be surrounded by the prayers and song of the community. The task force also expects some good preaching on Galatians will follow as congregations begin to hear Paul’s clear witness to the gospel. This Readers’ Guide will rather follow the segments of Galatians assigned to the eight sessions of the study, providing information and observations about things that are important to Paul’s letter and insights to help the communities engaged with the whole church in discerning God’s presence among us and the purposes for our sexual lives as God’s creatures.

## Why Galatians?

If the public media are right, the historic churches of North America are divided and could well split over the issues of sexuality (particularly homosexuality), reproduction (especially abortion), and public health (notably sex education). The immense efforts mainline denominations are investing in studies and statements on these topics indicate their pervasive impact on families, communities, and church bodies. Many members are deeply distressed, calling for more definitive legislation and resolutions. In taking a different tack, however, this task force is pointing the church to respond from its deepest faith, its trust in the God who gives hope in Christ Jesus for the sake of the world. This faith grounds the church's response in its "evangelical wisdom," always returning to God's promises in the gospel ("the evangel") to define its distinctive witness to God's purposes for the church, the neighbor, and the world.

Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia is a tested and trusted source of such evangelical wisdom. Galatians was originally written as Paul's response to provocations of another kind. In the letter we see Paul contending with people who thought they were defending God's law. But Paul declared that their views undermined the clarity of the gospel and threatened the unity of the church. Written when the Christian movement was still discerning its calling in the Greco-Roman world of many cultures and religions, the public witness of Galatians was dramatic and far reaching, testifying to the inclusion of non-Jewish people.

Galatians teaches the church to give first place to the gospel, to interpret questions of morality and justice, even the biblical commands of God (the law), in the light of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. In the midst of conflicting views about what is the right thing to do, no one is allowed to pull rank from their position—not Peter the first apostle, nor James the brother of Jesus (Galatians 2:6-9), and not even an "angel from heaven" (1:8). When people begin quoting one portion of Scripture against another to make their points about what will please God, Paul testifies, "the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:14). Paul moves to a new vision of fulfilling "the law of Christ" by "bearing one another's burdens" (6:2) and working "for the good of all" (6:10). Secure in our trust of God's promises, we are encouraged to debate, discuss, and seek to understand, both from common human knowledge and Scripture, how our sexual identities and behaviors can truly be a blessing to the world and to our neighbor, especially the vulnerable neighbor.

## How Will We Read Galatians?

Galatians was written for believers in churches known to Paul. His letter provides intimate access to communities that came to faith through his apostolic ministry. Now their hope and trust in Christ had been questioned by others. Galatians is not a private letter to an individual and may well have been passed around from community to community. Paul wrote to the "churches of Galatia." *In the same way we will read his letter in the congregations and communities of the ELCA in North America*, in hundreds or thousands of places during this year of study.

How was Paul's letter made known to the original hearers? Most likely, it was read aloud in the communities of faith. It can be completely recited in 25-30 minutes. Most people in the first century could not read, and copies of a letter had to be hand written on expensive papyrus or leather. If Paul's representative read it aloud to the congregations as they gathered for worship, how did people respond? What may those who had been criticizing Paul have thought of the letter? There is much we do not know.

As the letter moves toward its ending, Paul seems confident that the congregations will receive his message favorably. Clearly, they saved the letter because we still have it, and we know Galatians has been widely read throughout the church throughout the centuries. Paul put himself into this letter: telling the stories of how the risen Christ brought him to faith (1:11-17), and drawing heavily on his relationships with these churches (see 3:1-5; 4:12-20). Perhaps he even took the quill from the person who was transcribing his words to write: “See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!” (6:11).

*So we will read Galatians aloud, and in so doing we will put ourselves into the discussion too.* One scholar noticed that reading Paul’s intimate engagement with the Galatians makes us feel as if we are listening to someone else’s mail. To be sure, Lutheran congregations cannot claim to be founded directly by the apostle Paul’s missionary ministry as the Galatian churches were. But we are heirs of faith in God’s grace for us and the world as proclaimed by Paul. Some other Christian traditions prefer to discuss moral or ethical questions while reading the book of James or the letters to Timothy and Titus. Some Lutherans may also find Paul in Galatians either too radical about the gospel or too strict about God’s law for them to be comfortable. Yet, as Luther’s treatise “The Freedom of the Christian” shows, Galatians is a favored Lutheran book.

But Galatians is not only ours, and neither is it only Paul’s. While he put himself deeply into it, Paul’s letter was an apostolic testimony to God’s will and ways. Paul’s conflict with Peter and James was neither about personal importance nor about who was the most successful apostle. To put it in other terms, Paul is not claiming mere subjective authority, but testifying to the objective truth of the gospel. He is emphatic about this at the beginning, in the body, and at the close of the letter. The divine authority of the gospel is the basis of his commission “through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (1:1). Paul is subject to that authority himself, saying, “even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed” (1:8). The witness of the body of the letter is based in God’s action and validated by the Scriptures. At the end of the letter, he again subjects himself to the objective truth of what God did before Paul saw the light: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14).

*So we will read Galatians as Holy Scripture, subjecting our views to its testimony.* This does not mean we will shut off our minds or silence our concerns. The Bible is full of people arguing with each other and even with God about what they believe is right, just, and true. But we will give the word of Galatians priority in our discussion, and we will restrain ourselves to “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” (see Colossians 3:16). We will listen first to Scripture at the beginning of each session, and we will discipline our deliberations by asking, “What do we hear the Holy Spirit saying to us?” And “How can we best love our neighbor in our lives as sexual creatures and thus fulfill God’s law?”

### **How to use this “Readers’ Guide to Galatians”**

Please notice the word “Readers” is plural. Whoever stands up to read the Scriptures or lead the discussions in this study will be joining hundreds or perhaps thousands of others throughout the church doing about the same thing. Perhaps the “Readers” can think of themselves like the apostle’s first representatives who stood up in the churches of Galatia to read Paul’s letter. Even in our time, people stand up in their Christian assemblies all over the world to read aloud, just as was done in the ancient synagogues and churches (see Luke 4:16 and Acts 13:15, 27; 15:21, 31; 1 Timothy 4:13). For good reasons, worship is one of those rare places in our lives where someone reads aloud to us.

The actual reading of the selected Galatians texts can be done in various ways. Readers assigned from the group may read aloud, or the audio recording that accompanies the study may be played. Still other groups may wish to view the video recording of Dr. David Rhoads, who presents his fresh translation of all of Galatians from memory. (See Appendix I.) In addition to the reading of the texts, the task force hopes the study will be led by an individual or team who makes study of the Galatians text part of their weekly preparation. Groups could decide to go even further by committing themselves to accompany the eight-session study in their congregation with additional and sustained attention to Galatians, as well as readings from Luther's treatise on "The Freedom of the Christian".

In this "Readers' Guide to Galatians," each of the passages that is assigned for reading to accompany the sessions of the study is introduced by two kinds of comments. Items of *Information* are numbered with footnotes in each section of Galatians. Although the historical questions will continue to be debated by scholars, these notes should be generally straightforward and non-controversial. A few of these notes will be somewhat more substantial (and hopefully more interesting) than mere facts, but like annotations in a study Bible, they are intended simply to inform group leaders and public readers about important matters in Paul's argument in Galatians. These notes may help readers and leaders understand details, but they are not intended to be read aloud or discussed.

Each segment of this Readers' Guide will introduce "Insights for Readers and Leaders." These "Insights" seek to draw readers and leaders more deeply into the scriptural context in which congregational groups will discuss the issues of the sessions. Summary statements of the *insights* are printed in *italics*. Readers and leaders may choose to introduce the oral readings with these insight "summaries" to help participants listen. Most importantly, the whole church in every community is being invited to "Let the word of God dwell in you richly." Together, we will first seek to *discern* God's word, and then *deliberate* the issues, before *deciding* our policies.

### **Hearing the Word**

We are seeking to *discern* God's presence among us. Depending upon your group's needs, the opening gathering time may include the singing of hymns and the offering of prayers. This may be followed by a time of dwelling in the word of God among the faithful through the oral reading of the Galatians text followed by a time of silence. Communities will certainly adapt these practices in various ways. Conformity is not expected. For reasons of coherence week to week and for consistency throughout the church, however, suggestions are offered for each of the eight sessions.

Readers are expected to prepare themselves for their significant responsibility by attending in advance to the prayers, reviewing the "Items of Information" in the footnotes, and considering the "Insights for Readers and Leaders" for each session. It will be all the better if readers and leaders also prepare themselves with more extensive study and meditation. But this Readers' Guide is designed to help the readers fulfill their roles confidently so people can move directly into the deliberations of each session. Readers and leaders do not need to be experts, but reliable guides for the people of God.

In the presentation of the readings, the following steps may prove helpful.

1. After the conclusion of the devotional “Gathering,” the readers may briefly introduce the hearing of the Word with the “Insights Summaries,” supplied in the Readers’ Guide for each session.
2. Pausing briefly before each reading, the readers may say to the people: “Let the Word of God dwell in you richly.” The reading itself will then be presented either by a local reader or from a recording.
3. After the reading, the readers may pause and say, “This is the Word of the Lord.” And the congregation may respond. “Thanks be to God.”
4. After a more sustained time of quiet, the readers or leaders may ask calmly, giving time for people to respond:
  - What did you hear?
  - Is there a word of God for us?

Note: Throughout Christian history, listening carefully, even when only silence prevails, has proven valuable to discernment. This is not a time for disagreements or debates. The youngest or newest member of the community may have a crucial witness. While spending even a few minutes each week will be valuable, the readers and leaders will need to agree on how much time is given for responses to these questions of discernment.

5. Following the time of discussion, the leader of the study session will then introduce the topic for the day.

## Information Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians 1535,” *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963) p. 10.

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# SEEKING GOD'S APPROVAL!

## Hearing the Word

**Reader:** “We will begin by *dwelling* in the Word of God in Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia. Our first hope is to *discern* God’s calling to us. Then throughout all eight sessions of the study, we will *deliberate* how we can love our neighbors, especially our vulnerable neighbors—human, mortal, and sexual creatures as God has made all of us.

“As we seek to let the Word of God dwell in us richly, let us sharpen our listening with three insights from others who have heard God’s word in Paul’s letter to the Galatians.”

*(Note to reader: You will find additional comments on the insights after the reading.)*

## Insight summaries

1. *Alarm can sound like anger.* Paul’s letter is direct, even fierce, but this is the cry of alarm of a parent whose child has run into the street: “Get back, right now!” In the letter, Paul often calls God “Father,” even “our Father,” and shows his own tender maternal care: “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.” Can you hear care in his alarm?
2. *Persuasion can sound like argumentation.* Paul is seeking to persuade all of us who hear this letter, and he makes his witness with a strong argument. Can you hear how the word of God is strong medicine for our most grave diseases?
3. *How will we please God and love our neighbor?* Just agreeing with everybody else, even agreeing with people in authority, isn’t the same as pleasing God. Listen for the patience you need and for the Holy Spirit’s wisdom in our deliberation.

**Reader:** “A reading from the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia.

May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

### *Galatians 1:1-10*

<sup>1</sup>Paul an apostle<sup>a</sup>—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—<sup>2</sup> and all the members of God’s family who are with me,<sup>b</sup>

To the churches of Galatia:

<sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,

<sup>4</sup> who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>6</sup> I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you<sup>d</sup> in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—<sup>7</sup> not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you<sup>e</sup> and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

## Galatians

# 1:1-10

## Reader’s Notes

<sup>8</sup> But even if we or an angel from heaven<sup>f</sup> should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

<sup>10</sup> Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.<sup>g</sup>

**Reader:** "This is the Word of the Lord!"

**Community:** "Thanks be to God!"

*Pause for Contemplation*

**Reader:** "What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?"

*Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.*

## Information Notes

- <sup>a</sup> An "apostle" is someone who is "sent," generally with an authoritative commission, such as a ruler's official ambassador. The New Testament sometimes appears to limit the number of Jesus' apostles to twelve, as when Jesus "conferred a kingdom" on his closest circle, to sit on thrones "judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29-30). But in The Acts of the Apostles (14:4, 14), Paul and Barnabas (see Gal. 2:9) are also identified as "apostles," although they did not belong to the original twelve or even to the restored twelve when Judas was replaced (Acts 1:17-26). By Paul's account, Jesus' appearance to him after James and "all the apostles" marked him as "one untimely born," and because of his earlier persecution of the church, he saw himself as "the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle" (1 Cor. 15: 7-9). Thus in his statement that he was appointed directly "through Jesus Christ and God the Father," Paul is not so much asserting himself as affirming his accountability from and to God. "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain" (1 Cor. 15:10; see also Rom. 1:1: "Paul a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God).
- <sup>b</sup> We don't know where Paul was when he wrote the letter, but he is already making his point about who are truly God's chosen people i.e. *all the members of God's family who are with me* (see "the Israel of God" at the end of the letter, 6:15-16). Because two areas (a province and a territory) in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) were called "Galatia," scholars debate the locations of "the churches of Galatia" to which the letter was sent. Clearly Paul knew these Greek-speaking, Gentile (non-Jewish) communities well.
- <sup>c</sup> Paul regularly begins his letters with the apostolic greetings of grace to you and peace, not simply as friendly wishes but as authoritative declarations *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. In Galatians, Paul did not commend the churches with his usual thanksgivings to God for them (see Rom. 1:8-15; 1Cor. 1.4-9; Phil. 1:3-11; 1 Thess. 1:2-10; 2 Thess. 1:3-4), but he drove to the point of what God has done. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, God brought in the promised new era of "the age to come" (see Isa. 60; 65:17-25; Gal. 6:14-15), liberating believers in Jesus from the powers of *the present evil age*. Christian freedom is the theme of the letter, and spiritual freedom is at its core.
- <sup>d</sup> *Deserting the one who called you* means deserting God (Gal. 1:15; Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:9; 7:17; 1 Thess. 2:12; 5:24). Paul sees the problem as deeper than personal disloyalty; the danger is that they will be confused by those who *want to pervert the gospel of Christ*.
- <sup>e</sup> The charge is that "some who are confusing you" have come in after Paul has left the Galatians in order to "trouble," "disturb," or "pervert" God's gospel that Paul had proclaimed. Paul sees them not only disrupting his work but twisting the gospel of Christ. Like Paul, these are Jewish Christians, but they are probably claiming apostolic authority from Jerusalem.
- <sup>f</sup> The mention of "even we or an angel from heaven" is stunning. Were Paul's opponents claiming angelic visions for their teaching? Or was Paul simply emphasizing the point that the gospel stands above the messengers, whether apostles (including himself) or even heavenly messengers such as angels?
- <sup>g</sup> Once again, Paul makes the point that winning in the court of human opinion doesn't matter. The deep question is what pleases God, judged solely by fidelity in service to the Lord Jesus Christ.

## Insights for readers and leaders

Those who are leading in this process may at first be surprised, even distressed by the intensity of Paul's letter. Some will think Paul is angry, argumentative, and arrogant. This is not a letter of sweetness and light, advocating the power of positive thinking. The word of God is seldom a mild medicine for mild diseases. But how will the strong medicine of this letter be administered? In fact, the word of God can do its work without any help or apology from us. In the first ten verses of his letter, Paul introduces himself, his mission, and his concern.

### 1. *Anger or Alarm?*

Paul's letter is direct, even fierce. His words about letting those who pervert the gospel be "accursed" (1:8-9) or wishing those who insist on circumcision would "castrate themselves" (5:12) sound especially violent to us. The Bible includes statements that are dangerous, especially when taken out of context.

Many commentaries describe Galatians as Paul's "angry letter." They point to Paul's harsh language in these opening verses about "the present evil age," "deserting the one who called you," perverting "the gospel of Christ," and letting people be "accursed." They also note that Paul abandoned his normal practice of following his apostolic greeting with words of thanksgiving (compare Rom. 1:8-15; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; Phil. 1:3-11). They see Paul stepping straight into his argument because he is angry.

But is that right? And if our congregations and communities dwell in an angry letter throughout the Study on Human Sexuality, what Spirit will guide our discernment, and what will be the results of our deliberations?

*What tone of voice will you use as reader? You may sound intense, focused, concerned, and even alarmed, but not angry! You are drawing the people into the anguish of God.*

As was noted above, Paul definitely puts himself in this letter, but it is finally not about him or the defense of his own authority. When the whole letter is read and the pieces carefully studied, even the wrath—and it is there—is not so personal as it is prophetic. The apostle Paul, like the prophets before him, is caught up in the passion of God. God's love for God's children or people entails God's distress when they have set themselves against God and includes God's wrath against the evil that threatens them.

In these opening verses, Paul refers to God three times as "the Father" or "our Father" (1:1, 3, 4). In 4:6, he uses the word "Father" again to indicate the loving bond God has built with the Galatians through the gospel: "Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" A few verses later, Paul speaks in words of strong yet tender, maternal care: "My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you."

When a child is about to run into traffic, the most tender parent will yell at them in alarm, "Get back! Right now!" They may even feel anger, but not truly at the child. The intensity of Paul's letter to the Galatians is better read as alarm at a real and present danger, with anger at those who put them at risk, but finally a tone of concern and care.

### 2. *Persuasive or Presumptive?*

Luther's wonderful "Lectures on Galatians" are introduced with his detailed study of "The Argument of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians" (*Luther's Works*, volume 26: Jaroslav Pelikan editor, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963. pp. 4–12). Luther was well trained in the arts of persuasion (rhetoric) and recognized how Paul's letter defined the problem in the opening verses, brought forth evidence to

demonstrate the point he was making, and appealed for a hearing at the end. Several fine modern commentaries also investigate Paul's "argument" with attention to how persuasive Paul would have been to Jewish scriptural interpreters and to Greek traditions of persuasion.

The opening verses, therefore, anticipate Paul's case for what is the truth of the gospel (2:5, 14; see also 4:16; 5:7) and what is its perversion into "another" or false gospel (1:6-9). In his use of the story of Abraham (3:6-29), Paul is probably picking up an argument his opponents used that Abraham is the father of Israel and that all the males in God's family need to be circumcised, as Genesis 17:9-27 clearly commands. For Jewish males, circumcision was the sign that God's covenant or bond and promise will "be in your flesh as everlasting covenant." It will not suffice for Paul simply to shout louder or to presume his power is greater than theirs. No, the witness of the Scriptures must be brought forward. Now in the light of Christ Jesus, God's covenant with people far beyond Israel is established on a new basis.

Letting the Word dwell in us richly, therefore, means listening to the witness of the Scriptures of Israel in the light of Christ and learning how to make our testimony persuasively.

### *3. Pleasing People or God?*

Paul's sharp question in Gal. 1:10 could make people defensive as they seek to discern God's will, but his contrast between pleasing God or people is not an impossible trick. Paul later testifies that God's "whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Loving is not the same as pleasing, but how will we as sexual creatures love our neighbor and so please God? In his introduction to the letter, Paul opens such questions for our faithful and intelligent deliberation.

# THE FREEDOM WE HAVE IN CHRIST JESUS!

## Hearing the Word

**Reader:** “We will begin by *dwelling* in the Word of God in Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia. Our first hope is to *discern* God’s calling to us. Then throughout all eight sessions of the study, we will *deliberate* how we can love our neighbors, especially our vulnerable neighbors—human, mortal, and sexual creatures as God has made all of us.

As we seek to let the Word of God dwell in us richly, let us sharpen our listening with two insights from others who have heard God’s word in Paul’s letter to the Galatians.”

## Insight Summaries

1. *They are talking about us!* Those of us who are non-Jewish, or Gentile, by birth and identity overhear this discussion with awe and wonder. Without waiting for us to qualify, or as Paul says in Romans (5:8) “while we were yet sinners,” and not keeping the law, “Christ died for us.” Listen! Wonder of wonders, God’s promises to Israel have already included us.
2. *God still loves the Jews.* As we listen to Paul’s letter, we are not only amazed to discover we are the subject of the dispute. Perhaps we thought we had a birthright to God’s love in Jesus Christ. We also discover that Peter’s apostolic mission to the Jews is as legitimate as Paul’s to the likes of us. Why is it good news to us that God has not abandoned the Jews?

**Reader:** “A reading from the first two chapters of Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia.

May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

## Galatians 1:11—2:10

<sup>11</sup> For I want you to know, brothers and sisters,<sup>a</sup> that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin;<sup>b</sup> <sup>12</sup> for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

<sup>13</sup> You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God<sup>c</sup> and was trying to destroy it. <sup>14</sup> I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

<sup>15</sup> But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles,<sup>d</sup> I did not confer with any human being, <sup>17</sup> nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia,<sup>e</sup> and afterwards I returned to Damascus. <sup>18</sup> Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas<sup>f</sup> and stayed with him fifteen days; <sup>19</sup> but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord’s brother. <sup>20</sup> In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!

<sup>21</sup> Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, <sup>22</sup> and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; <sup>23</sup> they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.” <sup>24</sup> And they glorified God because of me.

**2** Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. **2** I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders<sup>8</sup>) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. **3** But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.<sup>h</sup>

<sup>4</sup> But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us— <sup>5</sup> we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. <sup>6</sup> And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me.

<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised <sup>8</sup> (for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), <sup>9</sup> and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.<sup>i</sup> <sup>10</sup> They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.<sup>j</sup>

**Reader:** “This is the Word of the Lord.”

**Community:** “Thanks be to God!”

*Pause for Contemplation*

**Reader:** “What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?”

Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.

## Information Notes

- <sup>a</sup> Greek, Paul’s letter only mentions “brothers,” but the NRSV rightly shows that both males and females are siblings in God’s family. Furthermore, as Paul says in Gal. 3:28, all who are baptized into Christ are included without distinctions of ethnicity (Jew or Greek), social standing (slave or free) or gender (male and female). In Christ Jesus, God’s family has been redefined.
- <sup>b</sup> The New English Bible (NEB) translates this as: “The gospel you heard me preach is no human invention.” God is the source both of the gospel and of Paul’s authority to proclaim it.
- <sup>c</sup> When he was still persecuting the followers of Jesus (see also Acts 8:3; 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:12-14), Paul would not have called them the “church of God” because “church” (*ekklesia*) was the word in Greek for Israel, the assembly of those called by God. Once the warrior for “Judaism” (a common term for those who observe the practices of the religion of Judea), Paul now sees all who follow Jesus, Jews and Gentiles, as God’s people, or true Israel.
- <sup>d</sup> Paul’s words resound with the call stories of Jeremiah (1:5, 10) and Isaiah (49:6), where the prophet is also called to bear God’s mission to the nations beyond historic Israel.
- <sup>e</sup> In Paul’s time “Arabia” was the name for the lands south of Damascus and east of the Jordan river.
- <sup>f</sup> Cephas is the Aramaic word for “Rock,” just as *Petros* (Peter) is the Greek word for “Rock” (see Matt. 4:18).
- <sup>8</sup> Here Paul recognizes the importance of the endorsement of his message from the “acknowledged leaders,” but in verse 6, he again stresses that he did not get his authorization from them. In verse 9, he names them, again crediting them only for “recognizing the grace that had been given to me,” not for being the source of his apostolic mission.

<sup>h</sup> This is a crucial point because it shows that the leaders of the Jesus movement (they were probably not yet called “Christians”), all of whom were Jews, did not insist on Titus’ circumcision for being included. By contrast, it is reported that even after the Jerusalem council had agreed that the Gentiles did not need to be circumcised (Acts 15), Paul had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3) “because of the Jews that were in those places,” probably referring to Jews who were not followers of Jesus and fearful of Gentile impurity.

<sup>i</sup> Paul trusts that all the apostles were bearers of the same gospel, but differing communities have differing needs. Missionary adaptations in various contexts have their integrity from God’s profound acceptance of all people in the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:20-23: “To those under the law, I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.”

<sup>j</sup> “The poor” were probably the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem for whom Paul regularly gathered funds.

## Insights for Readers and Leaders

Not everything in the Bible is immediately relevant to us. For example, the lengthy discussions of food sacrificed to idols in Paul’s letter “to the church of God that is in Corinth” (see 1 Cor. 8—11) sound peculiar to our ears. Most of us have not lived in a world where the town butcher shop is also run by the priest of some Greek god and where a portion of the blood from the slaughter was regularly poured out as a libation to the god before the rest of the meat was eaten. This, however, created a potential problem for followers of Jesus who did not want to participate in the worship of idols. Some Christians in remote cultures still face such problems. But even when the words don’t speak to us so directly, listening in on the apostle’s profound witness can help us overhear God’s word to us.

In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, the issues are about the observance of Israel’s laws by the followers of Jesus who are not Jews. This is a struggle among Jewish believers in Jesus, some of whom argue for strict observance of all the laws of God, while the apostle adamantly protects the non-Jews from such requirement. This could seem to be a distant and irrelevant debate, except for the fact that they are discussing most of us. Few Christians in this century are Jewish by birth or identity. Those of us who are “Gentile,” or non-Jewish, Christians have huge stakes in the questions. Who is acceptable to God? And on what basis?

### 1. *They are talking about us!*

As we hear Paul’s letter recited, it dawns on us that Paul’s opponents and Paul are discussing where non-Jewish people fit in God’s reign of mercy and justice. Both Paul and his adversaries are all Jewish followers of Jesus, the Messiah. They know from the Scriptures that God promised Israel the Messiah, which is the Hebrew word for Christ. Probably Paul’s zealous protection of Israel’s purity once prompted him to persecute Jesus’ early followers.

Now Paul is the apostle called to “proclaim him among the Gentiles.” The word *Gentiles* means the nations. In Greek the word is *ethne*, as in the English word “ethnic.” The question is about all the ethnic groups, nations, races, and peoples who are not Jewish by birth or family origin. It would be one thing to include them in Israel if they all observe the requirements of the covenant God made with Abraham, Sarah, and their children. It would take much more than an “act of Congress” to include all the Europeans, North and South Americans, Africans, Asians, and Pacific Island peoples who are called Christian in God’s people. It required the proclamation of “the gospel that...is not of human origin” (1:11).

Even Paul’s opponents favored including people like us. All we have to do is keep the laws of God, starting with circumcision, just as Abraham did. In Paul’s mission to proclaim the gospel, however, the word is that God has altered the covenant,

changed the rules. Those of us who are non-Jewish, Gentile by birth and identity, therefore, overhear this discussion with awe and wonder. Without waiting for us to qualify, or as Paul says in Romans (5:8) “while we were yet sinners” and not keeping the law, “Christ died for us.” Wonder of wonders, God’s promises to Israel have already included us.

## *2. God still loves the Jews.*

One of the great sins of Christians who are not Jewish has been to turn the good news of our being accepted by God into a self-righteous attack on the Jews. In his letter to “all God’s beloved in Rome who are called to be saints” (Rom. 9—11), Paul explicitly warned against this sin of arrogance by non-Jewish Christians. “I ask then,” he said, “has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.” And as the “apostle to the Gentiles” he warned all non-Jewish, or Gentile, followers of Jesus, not to boast, but rather to “stand in awe” that by faith they are “branches grafted into the tree” that God is renewing.

As we listen to this portion of Paul’s letter, therefore, we are not only amazed to discover that we are the subject of the dispute. Perhaps we thought we had a birthright to God’s love in Jesus Christ. We also discover that Peter’s apostolic mission to the Jews is as legitimate as Paul’s to the likes of us. This does not answer questions about how we as Gentile Christians should relate to Jews who do not believe Jesus is Israel’s Messiah, but it does chasten our awareness. The God who has included us has not abandoned the Jews.

# CHRIST LIVES IN ME!

## Hearing the Word

**Reader:** “Our theme verse from Colossians calls us to *let the Word of God dwell in us richly*, which means that we are not simply *discerning* God’s will as if we were solving a puzzle. Rather we welcome the word of God dwelling in us as God’s very presence, the Holy Spirit as the promise of the Father, and Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead. When we say, *This is the Word of the Lord*, we speak spiritually, not just literally. When we then deliberate the complex questions of sexuality, culture, and freedom in this session, we hope we are not simply pushing our opinions, but seeking to view the world as the place God so loves as to send Christ Jesus to die for it. How shall we then live?”

“In our reading today from Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia, we hear both the story of Paul’s encounter with Peter, called Cephas, and Paul’s reminder that the gift of the Holy Spirit and being justified before God come simply by the faith. Two brief insights may aid our listening for a word from God for us.”

## Insight Summaries

1. *God has done a new thing.* Listen carefully to Paul’s accusations of Cephas, or Peter, and others of hypocrisy. God has done a new thing. Sometimes our established patterns of faithfulness may be more about our efforts to be righteous than about trusting God. How must your views of who is in and who is out change when God does the inviting?
2. *Christ lives in us.* In the midst of his complex argument and appeals to the Scriptures, Paul lets the light of promise shine into his life and ours. Listen to his remarkable confidence that “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” How is your life in the world empowered when it is no longer you who live, but Christ who lives in you?

**Leader:** “A reading from the second and third chapters of Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia. May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

## Galatians 2:11—3:14

<sup>11</sup> But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; <sup>12</sup> for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles.<sup>a</sup> But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction.<sup>b</sup> <sup>13</sup> And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.<sup>c</sup> <sup>14</sup> But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” <sup>15</sup> We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;<sup>d</sup> <sup>16</sup> yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified<sup>e</sup> by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

<sup>17</sup> But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! <sup>18</sup> But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. <sup>19</sup> For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; <sup>20</sup> and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.<sup>f</sup> And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

## Galatians

# 2:11–3:14

## Reader’s Notes

<sup>21</sup> I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

**3** You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! <sup>2</sup> The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? <sup>3</sup> Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? <sup>4</sup> Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. <sup>5</sup> Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?

<sup>6</sup> Just as Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” <sup>7</sup> so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.” <sup>9</sup> For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed. <sup>10</sup> For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.”

<sup>11</sup> Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” <sup>12</sup> But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, “Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.” <sup>13</sup> Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”<sup>h</sup>— <sup>14</sup> in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

**Reader:** “This is the Word of the Lord.”

**Community:** “Thanks be to God!”

*Pause for Contemplation*

**Reader:** “What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?”

*Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.*

## **Information Notes**

<sup>a</sup> In biblical cultures, sharing meals is more than personal hospitality. It is a sign of acceptance. In Jewish communities where food laws were carefully observed to avoid eating things that were declared unclean, scrupulous observance could make it difficult to share meals (see Lev. 11; 27:10-14; Deut. 12:16, 23-25; 14:3-21; and see the story of Peter’s dream where unclean animals and eating with Gentiles are linked in Acts 10:9-16; 11:1-18, especially 11:3).

<sup>b</sup> The “circumcision faction” was apparently a group of Jewish Christians who were strictly observant of the food laws as well as insisting on circumcision. Perhaps Cephas (Peter) and Barnabas refrained from their usual practice of table fellowship with the Gentile Christians in deference to the visitors from Jerusalem. Paul confronts this behavior as dishonoring God’s acceptance of the Gentiles. No nonsense about “separate but equal” and no condescension toward the new disciples of Jesus could be tolerated.

<sup>c</sup> “Hypocrisy” is a strong word for what Barnabas and the others probably thought was pious observance of the law.

- <sup>d</sup> “Gentile sinners” is the strong language of rejection of all the nations who do not observe the Jewish Law. Paul appears to use this term to force the issue that the Jewish Christians were no better off than the Gentiles. Both were subject to sin (see also 2:17), and all were made right with God (justified) by faith in Christ.
- <sup>e</sup> “Justified” means “declared righteous,” as when a judge in court declares someone innocent of all charges. Paul is profoundly aware that no mortal human being is so pure or holy or righteous as to be declared innocent of all charges in the presence of God who is truly righteous and just (see 3:11, and Romans 5:8: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us”).
- <sup>f</sup> Even the Christian’s saving faith in Jesus is not a human accomplishment, but it is faith toward Christ, being joined with the resurrected Jesus in his faith and faithfulness. As Sam K. Williams says in his commentary (see bibliography on p. 00), “God justifies or gives the Spirit ... through the medium of Christ’s faith on behalf of those persons who themselves have faith” (p. 68).
- <sup>g</sup> God’s promises to Abraham already envisioned the “blessing” of the Gentiles (see Gen. 12:13; 18:18; 22:18). Paul interprets the Scriptures of Israel in the light of the gospel as testifying to the validity of the apostolic mission (see also Luke 24:45–49). The risen Christ gives new authority to the Scriptures.
- <sup>h</sup> In Deut. 21:23, this phrase required the immediate burial of an executed person, lest the curse of such impurity be visited on the land. Jesus’ vile death by crucifixion became “the curse” that blesses the world.

## Insights for Readers and Leaders

Lutheran Christians who are committed to honoring the authority of Scripture will do well to let the apostle Paul teach us about how to interpret what is written in the light of the gospel. Galatians gives us a window through which we can hear Paul and his opponents debating how to make scriptural sense out of the new reality of Gentile believers. If we read Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we can see how Paul’s opponents could accuse him of compromising God’s commands, making it easy for the Gentiles. That form of the discussion had gone on for centuries as Jewish communities lived in the midst of the Persians, Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans. These Jewish Christian leaders from Jerusalem were not the first delegation to visit synagogues or churches in order to teach them proper observance. And they had strong scriptural warrants for their efforts.

How does Paul dare to accuse Peter and Barnabas of hypocrisy when they “merely” had adapted their practice to conform to the scriptural arguments of the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem? What effect would their behavior likely have had on the new believers who were Gentiles? More critically, notice how Paul’s fierce response challenges all interpreters to read the Bible in the light of what God has done in Christ Jesus! The truth of the gospel to which Paul pays such profound attention is not a statement of words on a page to be enforced. In fact, the truth of the words on the pages of the Bible lies in their faithful testimony to the gospel of God’s mercy and justice for the world in Christ Jesus.

We are near the heart of Paul’s witness to the gospel that moved Martin Luther so profoundly. It is clear that, for Luther, “God’s Word is a necessity” but that “Word” means the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ, as well as God’s Word of promise conveyed in the Bible and addressed to believers who receive God’s commands and promises in faith.

### *1. God has done a new thing*

Listen carefully to Paul’s accusations of Peter and the others of hypocrisy. Paul teaches that God has done a new thing by allowing Gentiles to receive the blessing of Abraham through faith. Because of this new promise, it is not necessary that they be circumcised in order to be part of God’s people. To expect male Gentiles to be circumcised is not required. Sometimes, our established patterns of faithfulness may be more about our efforts to be righteous than about trusting God. In which case, they are dangerous to our souls. Luther even testified that if a Christian “should grow so foolish...as to presume to become righteous, free, saved, and a Christian by

means of some good work, he would instantly lose faith and all its benefits” (“The Freedom of a Christian,” *Luther’s Works*, 31: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957, p. 356).

## *2. Christ lives in us*

But Paul is not simply on the attack. This portion of his letter also sings with the faith he has in the living Christ, the risen Lord who has given him new life. He insists that his justification before God, like that of all believers, is strictly the work of Christ. He grasps it in faith and even enters into the faith of Christ. Thus he also understands his life to be sanctified or made holy, not by his spiritual or moral progress, but by the empowering presence of Christ Jesus. In the midst of his complex argument and appeals to the scriptures, therefore, Paul lets the light of promise shine into his life and ours. Listen to his remarkable confidence that “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

# CLOTHED IN CHRIST!

## Hearing the Word

**Reader:** “Healthy sexuality gives energy to all kinds of mutual relationships, including yearning for unity with the beloved. Broken or sinful sexuality insists on self-interest or even control. When the deep restlessness of our hearts finds its fulfillment in the love of God, what vision are we given of who we are in relationship to one another and the world?”

“Our reading today from Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia moves beyond the apostle’s complaints with his adversaries to a profound vision of life in Christ. The freedom of the Christian to be a blessing to the neighbor and the world is grounded in God’s legacy of promise, given to Abraham, kept in Christ Jesus, and enacted among all who are wrapped up in Christ, like clothing for their roles and relationships in the world.

Two brief insights may aid our listening to hear God’s word of promise for our lives.”

## Insight Summaries

1. *It’s all about the promises.* Paul’s rich and complicated history lesson scores the point that God began with the promise, then brought in the rules, and ultimately made it possible through Christ to live in the promise, and not just by the rules. When are your relationships not just running by the rules, but alive with promise?
2. *It’s all about Christ Jesus.* The apostle’s conviction is that faith is not only that we believe, but that our trust in Jesus is the bond by which Christ’s own faithfulness comes alive in our lives. When have you sensed Christ living in your relationships?

**Reader:** “A reading from the third chapter of Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia.

May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

## Galatians 3:15-29

<sup>15</sup> Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person’s will<sup>a</sup> has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it. <sup>16</sup> Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, “And to offsprings,” as of many; but it says, “And to your offspring,”<sup>b</sup> that is, to one person, who is Christ.

<sup>17</sup> My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later,<sup>c</sup> does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. <sup>18</sup> For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise. <sup>19</sup> Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions,<sup>d</sup> until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator.<sup>e</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.<sup>f</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could make alive, then righteousness would indeed come through the law. <sup>22</sup> But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin, so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

<sup>23</sup> Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> Therefore the law was our disciplinarian<sup>g</sup> until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.

<sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian,  
<sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

<sup>27</sup> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ<sup>h</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>i</sup> <sup>29</sup> And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.<sup>j</sup>

**Reader:** "This is the Word of the Lord."

**Community:** "Thanks be to God!"

*Pause for Contemplation*

**Reader:** "What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?"

*Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.*

## Information Notes

- <sup>a</sup> A will is a particular kind of contract, or in biblical terms, a "covenant" (see also verse 17: Gk: *diatheke*). It is a unilateral or one-way "contract," because the will is under the control of the one who writes it. Paul's "example from daily life" makes it clear that God is the one who established this "covenant" strictly on the basis of God's promise or gift (see verse 18: "God granted it.")
- <sup>b</sup> Paul knew full well that the collective noun "seed" included many "seeds," but the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translation already emphasized that the many in Israel were collectively the heirs of the promise to Abraham and Sarah's one offspring who is the father of Jacob or "Israel" (see Gen. 32:22). So also in 2 Sam. 7:12, the "offspring" from David's body is understood as singular, the one who is the Messiah.
- <sup>c</sup> We do not know how Paul calculated the years between the promise to Abraham and the giving of the law to Moses, but the point is clear. The promise has priority, both in time and in God's purposes.
- <sup>d</sup> The history of interpretation is rich with debate about whether God gave the law to reveal people's transgression and thus cause them to depend on God's mercy in Christ rather than their own righteousness, or whether God gave the law because human sinfulness needed to be restrained until the time of promise could be inaugurated (see verse 24). In either case, Paul's point is that God's law protects humans from themselves.
- <sup>e</sup> Moses is known as "the mediator" (Lev. 26:46; Num. 36:13), and Paul's point seems to be that the law was "mediated" through the angels and Moses, while the promise was given directly to Abraham.
- <sup>f</sup> "God is one!" is the great confession of Israel (see Deut. 6:4). Yes, God used mediators for giving the law, but the promises came straight from God.
- <sup>g</sup> In the Greek and Roman worlds, "disciplinarians" (see also verse 25) were used by wealthy families to teach their children lives of virtue and discipline. (Many of these "pedagogues" were well-educated slaves.) God's law announces "Thou Shalt" or "Thou Shalt Not!" much like the "pedagogues" instructed their charges. The new life in Christ Jesus is not based on commands, but God's promises, the presence of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Christian vocation is empowered by God's promises, putting the commands in their place, yet preserving their benefit for the world. God's promises are the strong foundation of Christian callings, liberating our lives for responsible work and witness in the world. The "law is not opposed to the promises of God" (3:21). God doesn't need our good works, but our neighbor does, and our neighbor, especially our vulnerable neighbor needs the protection of God's law.

- <sup>h</sup> Being “clothed in Christ” means when people see you, they see Christ. This powerful image is not about self-importance. Jesus taught that his followers would be quite unaware when they were bearing Christ to their neighbors in need (see Matt. 25:31-46). The promise of this “clothing” rests on the presence and power of the risen Christ in the lives of those who trust in him.
- <sup>i</sup> The first pairs are contrasts (“no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free), and the last pair echoes and overturns the orders of creation in Genesis 1:27 (“no longer male and female”) because in Christ Jesus, God has made a new creation according to God’s promises, not God’s rules. This witness drives to the root of the changes in everything God inaugurated in Jesus.
- <sup>j</sup> The law is good, but the point is, as Sam Williams (*Galatians*, p. 96) puts it, “the heir can receive his ‘inheritance’ either by the instrument of the law or by the instrument of promise, but not by both.”

## Insights for Readers and Leaders

In his “Lectures on Galatians,” (*Luther’s Works* 26, p. 298), Martin Luther delights in Galatians for the clarity of its witness. When some people were offended that Paul began this section with “an example from daily life” or “a human example,” Luther said, “It is as though he were saying: ‘In wills and in other human business there is a performance, and what the law commands is observed. Why does not the same thing happen even more in the testament of God, which God Himself promised to Abraham and his offspring?’”

If people could perform what the law commands, God would not have needed to send Jesus to suffer, die, and be raised. But if we fail to perfect our performance, how then will God restore promise as the basis of our relationship?

This is where Luther and Paul testify to the wonder of what God has done in Christ. Christ Jesus does not simply exemplify a better way to fulfill the righteousness the law requires, but Christ enters our lives, transforming them in their earthy particularity to bear God’s promises. Luther says:

To put on Christ according to the gospel is a matter, not of imitation but of new birth and a new creation, namely, that I put on Christ Himself, that is, His innocence, righteousness, wisdom, power, salvation, life and Spirit. ... To put on Christ according to the Gospel, therefore, is to put on, not the Law or works but an inestimable gift, namely, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, peace, comfort, joy in the Holy Spirit, salvation, life, and Christ Himself” (*Luther’s Works* 26: “Lectures on Galatians,” 352-353).

### 1. *It’s all about the promises*

Paul’s rich and complicated history lesson scores the point that God began with the promise, then brought in the rules, and ultimately made it possible through Christ to live in the promise, not just by the rules.

### 2. *It’s all about Christ Jesus*

God’s “covenant” or “contract” with humans is all about Christ Jesus. This does not simply mean believing the right things about Jesus as the Christ and our Savior. As Luther often pointed out, even Satan knows these things are true. But saving faith trusts the justifying and sanctifying power of Christ Jesus, conveyed through the Holy Spirit. Our lives are means through which the living Christ blesses the world. It is not our faithfulness, but Christ’s that comes alive in our lives.

In all our relationships, including our sexual relationships, our hope and prayer is to live according to God’s promise—belonging to Christ and clothed in Christ—so that our neighbors, especially those who need Christ most, may see Christ Jesus.

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# NO LONGER A SLAVE BUT A CHILD!

## Hearing the Word

**Reader:** “In every day life, we are often stuck in our ways, making our relationships unsatisfying. Try as we do, our personal reforms slump back into old ruts. The “work harder” religion doesn’t produce fresh results, but increases our judgments of ourselves and others. If we can’t get it right ourselves, maybe we can improve our children or you or somebody else.”

“The apostle reaches the depth of his anguish for the Galatians in our reading today. He can hardly believe that they are tempted to abandon the exhilarating freedom God has given them for locked down systems of rituals and practices. Confused and perplexed, Paul hopes that his pain may be a sign of Christ being formed in them for a new birth.”

“Listen for both the apostle’s anguish and for hope in God’s promise for your life.”

## Insights Summaries

1. *We are enslaved.* Paul’s anguish is about how enslaved we often are to what he calls “the elemental spirits of the world.” We are tempted to settle for what we were dealt by the fates of our birth, our education or class, and our family histories. “So,” says Paul, “what is your bondage? Have you forgotten the freedom Christ has given you?”
2. *We are God’s children.* The hope is not only that you know better because you have come to know God. In Christ Jesus you are known by God. You are God’s child. You are an agent.

**Reader:** “A reading from the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia.

May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

Galatians 4:1-20

**4** My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; <sup>2</sup> but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>3</sup> So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.<sup>b</sup> <sup>4</sup> But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,<sup>c</sup> <sup>5</sup> in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. <sup>6</sup> And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”<sup>d</sup>

<sup>7</sup> So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

<sup>8</sup> Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. <sup>9</sup> Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again? <sup>10</sup> You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years.<sup>e</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

## Galatians

# 4:1-20

## Reader’s Notes

<sup>12</sup> Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. <sup>13</sup> You know that it was because of a physical infirmity<sup>f</sup> that I first announced the gospel to you; <sup>14</sup> though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. <sup>16</sup> Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? <sup>17</sup> They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them. <sup>18</sup> It is good to be made much of for a good purpose at all times, and not only when I am present with you.

<sup>19</sup> My little children,<sup>g</sup> for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, <sup>20</sup> I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

**Reader:** “This is the Word of the Lord.”

**Community:** “Thanks be to God!”

*Pause for contemplation*

**Reader:** “What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?”

*Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.*

## Information Notes

- <sup>a</sup> Paul personalizes his earlier summary of Israel’s history, describing the child of a minor age as no better off than slaves who can only do what they are told. In Paul’s era, children had almost no rights, although children who were designated as heirs of an estate could see freedom ahead if they lived long enough.
- <sup>b</sup> “The elemental spirits of the world” or “the weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (v. 9) were commonly thought to be spiritual powers or even demonic forces that served the fates while promising freedom.
- <sup>c</sup> The phrase “born of a woman, born under the law” not only marks Jesus’ human and Jewish identity. It may also have been a memory phrase by which Jesus’ followers held on to his becoming one of us.
- <sup>d</sup> These Greek-speaking Gentiles apparently experienced calling out to God in the Aramaic word *Abba* which is an endearing form of the word “father”. Paul reminds them that this prayer was a sign that the Spirit of God’s Son Jesus was crying out with them, for them, and through them (see Jesus’ use of the word in Mark 14:36 and Paul’s interpretation of the spiritual power of the word in Rom. 8:14-16).
- <sup>e</sup> Some Christians have thought this means we should never celebrate Christmas or Easter, let alone a full liturgical calendar. Paul’s issue, however, seems to be with traditions that make right observance of holy calendars and rituals the basis of hope in God, as if what God did in Jesus merely marks another festival.
- <sup>f</sup> Volumes have been written on what Paul’s “physical infirmity” might have been (see also 6:17; 2 Cor. 11:23-27; 12:7-10). The point here appears to be that the Galatians did not discredit Paul for his physical problems, whatever they were. On the contrary, they would have “torn out their eyes” for him (v. 15).
- <sup>g</sup> Paul’s reference to his churches as his “children” has offended some modern readers because it sounds so patriarchal. Of course, Paul was living in a patriarchal culture where leaders and founders of communities were often identified in parental terms. Galatians is interesting because he also uses overtly maternal images of himself as in the labor of childbirth. While he again uses these words of family affection, even calling them “little children,” with himself as their father (see also 1 Cor. 4:14; 2 Cor. 6:13; 1 Thess. 2:11-12), Paul’s whole point is that God has dealt with them as grown-up heirs, children in the adult sense of being heirs and belonging.

## Insights for Readers and Leaders

### *1. We are enslaved.*

In his anguish about our enslavement to “the elemental spirits of the world,” Paul is not speculating about such “spirits” but pointing to the structures and systems to which people pay homage, turning themselves into servants or even slaves. Paul is criticizing the attraction that strict religious observance has for promising freedom. Modern ads for economic freedom by winning the lottery or sexual freedom through Internet pornography reliably yield even more crushing bondage.

Many useful programs and schemes have proven helpful for improving human efficiency and performance. There is no problem with them, unless they begin to claim to provide the means by which we will make ourselves right with God or prove our righteousness. Then the freedom they promise turns out to be another kind of spiritual bondage, substituting a system, even a very pious sounding system, for the liberation of our identities and lives that come as a gift from God.

### *2. We are God's children.*

Paul, however, does not simply identify the problem, but announces what God has already done in Christ Jesus. Verse 9 states this promise profoundly. The hope is not only that you have come to know God. In Christ Jesus you are known by God. You are no longer enslaved to endless effort to make yourself acceptable to God. You are God's child, a member of the family and heir to the promises God gave to Israel and kept in Jesus. The freedom to go out and live in this promise has already been given.

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# FOR FREEDOM CHRIST HAS SET US FREE!

## Hearing the Word

**Reader:** “Today the apostle will tell a strange and delightful story. To get started, remember that Paul claims that we Gentiles, or non-Jews, belong to Abraham and Sarah’s family, because it is all built on faith in God’s promises, and not keeping the law. Still Paul’s story is strange to us because we have not heard other Jewish interpretations of the story, not even the version of Paul’s opponents. Paul, of course, was Jewish. He knew the stories. He was also writing centuries before Abraham was claimed as the father of Islam.

“In a delightful way, Paul takes the allegorical interpretations of his day and turns them upside down. The first-century Jews were interested in Abraham and Sarah. Generally, Sarah is presented as the mother of Israel, and Hagar, her slave girl, is the mother of all non-Jewish nations. Just imagine the joy the non-Jewish Christians in Galatia must have felt to discover that they are the numerous children that desolate Sarah wondered if she would ever have. They are in the story on the promise side. So are you! God has done a wonderful thing by including the non-Jews in Abraham’s family. Yet this is the blessing of the nations God had in mind all along.

“And listen for two important insights beyond the sheer delight of the story.”

## Insights Summaries

1. *God is for us!* Imagine yourself as a non-Jewish Christian hearing Paul’s story for the first time. Where are you in the story? How would you feel about making yourself righteous by relying on your observance of the law?
2. *We are free to be slaves.* This insight is more difficult, yet very important. Paul concludes with the resounding declaration, “For freedom Christ has set us free!” But notice he says nothing about independence or personal liberty. How do you feel about being set free to belong and to be engaged with the needs of others?

**Reader:** “A reading from the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia.

May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

## Galatians 4:21—5:1

<sup>21</sup> Tell me, you who desire to be subject to the law, will you not listen to the law? <sup>22</sup> For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman.<sup>a</sup> <sup>23</sup> One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Now this is an allegory:<sup>c</sup> these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. <sup>25</sup> Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.<sup>d</sup>

<sup>26</sup> But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. <sup>27</sup> For it is written, “Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married.”<sup>e</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac.

<sup>29</sup> But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.<sup>f</sup> <sup>30</sup> But what does the scripture say? “Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.”<sup>g</sup> <sup>31</sup> So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.

**5** For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.<sup>h</sup>

**Reader:** “This is the Word of the Lord.”

**Community:** “Thanks be to God!”

*Pause for contemplation*

**Reader:** “What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?”

*Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.*

## Information Notes

<sup>a</sup> The stories are told in Genesis 16 and Genesis 21 with important details through the whole narrative.

<sup>b</sup> Hagar’s pregnancy was arranged by Sarah, because she thought her own biological clock had run out. However Sarah’s pregnancy by Abraham is thought to have occurred, it was an amusing, joyful miracle. Those who think that geriatric sexuality is a new reality should read Genesis.

<sup>c</sup> When Paul alerts us that this is an “allegory,” he is about to interpret something in a non-literal sense. Perhaps he is picking up directly from his opponents, since they would probably have used the Sarah-Hagar story to put all the non-Jews in the lineage of the slave woman. In any case, we know from earlier in Galatians that Paul saw all those who trusted in Jesus as heirs of the promises made to Abraham (3:14).

<sup>d</sup> “The present Jerusalem” may refer to Jews who do not believe in Jesus or perhaps to Jewish followers of Jesus who came from Jerusalem to disturb the Galatians.

<sup>e</sup> See Isaiah 54:1 and Isaiah 51:1-3.

<sup>f</sup> Paul seems to equate the disturbance his opponents are causing with persecution, regarding their required observance of circumcision as “according to the flesh,” while the Gentile believers in Jesus have been born “according to the Spirit.”

<sup>g</sup> See Genesis 21:10.

<sup>h</sup> This declaration is the culmination of the first four chapters and introduction to the ethics that follow.

## Insights for Readers and Leaders

This chapter is both delightful and dangerous. The danger lies in the fact that the intra-Jewish debate of Galatians is so distant to modern non-Jewish Christians. Paul’s strong engagement with his adversaries, who also believe in Jesus, is a struggle within the family. How shall we be faithful Israel now that the Messiah has come? Once the Jewish Christians became a tiny minority and these disputes fell into Gentile (non-Jewish) hands, the result was often anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism. It is very important that even Paul’s opponents be understood as believers in Jesus who simply could not imagine including the Gentiles without circumcision.

### 1. *God is for us!*

The delight of God’s promises is heard in Paul’s confident reading of Israel’s Scriptures in the light of Christ Jesus. Non-Jewish Christians who hear Paul’s story for the first time, can quickly understand how profoundly he is arguing for their (our) full inclusion. This is not an inclusion of toleration by people who want to be

generous. This is God's inclusion on God's terms of those who were previously judged as outsiders and sinners.

*2. We are free to be slaves.*

Paul's confidence of God's inclusion first disturbs those who read Genesis literally, instead of in the light of Christ. Then his resounding conclusion, "For freedom Christ has set us free!" will also disturb those who believe Christian freedom only means personal liberty.

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# FREEDOM TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF!

Galatians

5:1-26

Reader's Notes 

## Hearing the Word

**Reader:** “Today we will hear Paul bring the pieces of his letter together like an attorney giving a summation of the argument, and God’s people are the jury. He recites his clear declaration: “For freedom Christ has set us free.” Then he repeats his argument that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything with God. He concludes by sketching a vision of Christ at work in us, one in which our lives are transformed by faith working through love.

“We could spend hours discussing this powerful chapter from Galatians, but for now we will listen for help to discern God’s presence and purpose as we deliberate in our session on “Sexuality and Economic Justice.” Two brief insights may help us focus our listening.”

## Insights Summaries

1. Notice how living according to the flesh results in self-indulgence and self-absorption, while being led by the Spirit frees you to be agents of God’s care for the world. If you are “called to freedom,” why do you need your neighbor?
2. Listen for the contrast between “the works of the flesh” with their evil results and “the fruit of the Spirit,” which is the good the Spirit of Christ does through you. Why do you suppose the saints you know are often unaware of their good deeds?

**Reader:** “A reading of the fifth chapter of Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia. May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

## Galatians 5:1-26

**5** For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

<sup>2</sup> Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. <sup>3</sup> Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. <sup>4</sup> You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off<sup>a</sup> from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

<sup>5</sup> For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.<sup>b</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>7</sup> You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup> Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. <sup>9</sup> A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. <sup>10</sup> I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.

<sup>11</sup> But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. <sup>12</sup> I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!<sup>d</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>e</sup>

<sup>15</sup> If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. <sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.<sup>f</sup> <sup>17</sup> For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

<sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

<sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>g</sup>

<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.<sup>h</sup> <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

**Reader:** “This is the Word of the Lord.”

**Community:** “Thanks be to God!”

*Pause for contemplation*

**Reader:** “What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?”

*Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.*

## Information Notes

- <sup>a</sup> Paul makes several word associations, especially around “cutting” and “the flesh.” These word pictures are powerful, because circumcision literally required a cutting of the flesh. In verse 4 the point is that those who have submitted to circumcision have “cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” In Genesis 17:13-14, the same word association was used, but with the opposite point: “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” See also Galatians 5:7 as it is more literally translated in the New International Version (NIV): “You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?” And Paul’s fearsome comment in verse 12 might be translated, “I wish they would cut it off completely” (but see note d below).
- <sup>b</sup> “The hope of righteousness” is a remarkable phrase, indicating again that we do not strive to achieve our righteousness, but we yearn for God to complete the good work that Christ Jesus has begun in us.
- <sup>c</sup> “Faith working through love” is the key to an “evangelical ethic,” i.e., an ethic of the gospel. It is clear in Galatians, that the “faith” that is at work is not simply our belief, but it is “the faith of Christ,” Jesus’ own faithfulness at work in us through God’s love and ours. It is not that we are cooperating with God for our salvation, but that Christ is at work in and through us making good things happen!
- <sup>d</sup> No matter how this word is translated, Paul is being fierce or sarcastic or at least ironic in his word association. It could be literally translated, “I wish those who have gotten you all disturbed would cut themselves off,” which could mean they would exclude themselves from the community of grace in Christ Jesus (see verse 4). Jews who knew the discussion of “cutting off” from Deuteronomy 23:1, however, could also have remembered that a man whose penis was cut off was excluded from the assembly of the Lord. Translating the word to imply castration (removal of the testicles) is questionable.

- <sup>e</sup> Reducing the law to a single commandment (see Lev. 19:18) is even more radical than Jesus' response when pressed by the Pharisees (Matt. 23:34-40; Mark 12:28-32; Luke 10:27). Furthermore in the apostle's witness, the "law of love" is "the law of Christ" (see Gal. 6:2), because Christ is at work in the believer, producing the fruit of the Spirit (see 5:22). To quote Sam K. Williams, "Paul does *not* say that Christians should obey Torah's command to love the neighbor! Jesus-people do not love because the Law commands it. They love because the Spirit produces its fruit in them (5:22)." (*Galatians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, p. 147).
- <sup>f</sup> Like most Jews who believed God created the world to be good, Paul has a very positive view of human life. He speaks plainly of natural, human, mortal "life in the flesh" (see 1:16; 2:16, 20; 4:13-14), but living "according to the flesh" (see note a) is to think and act in a self-centered way, controlling or using others rather than serving them. To live by what "the Spirit desires" is not to rise to a higher self-consciousness, but "to be led by" (v. 18) the enduring and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit.
- <sup>g</sup> Paul is reciting common wisdom on good and harmful behaviors and practices. Moral teachers in Paul's world, especially Jews, would have agreed with his list of vices. It is important to remember that when Paul says Christians "are not subject to the law" (v.18), he is not in any way endorsing a view that good moral behavior does not matter. Rather he is confident that those who are clothed in Christ will exhibit extraordinary care, service, and love to the neighbor, especially the vulnerable neighbor.
- <sup>h</sup> The fact that Paul speaks in the plural voice ("we") indicates that the question of how we live by the Spirit is a community concern. The Christian community must discern the Spirit as it deliberates and decides which attitudes, behaviors, and policies it commends as exhibiting love to the neighbor.

### Insights for Readers and Leaders

In this session, the notes that are linked to the verses indicate the wealth of understanding that can be gathered through careful Bible study of Galatians 5. The method of the current study on human sexuality is an exercise in what was said in note h above:

"The fact that Paul speaks in the plural voice ("we") indicates that the question of how we live by the Spirit is a community concern. The Christian community must discern the Spirit as it deliberates and decides which attitudes, behaviors, and policies it commends as exhibiting love to the neighbor."

Luther's treatise on "The Freedom of the Christian" is largely an exposition of Paul's powerful witness in Galatians 5.

In a remarkable essay on Galatians 5-6, Dr. James L. Boyce of Luther Seminary offered the following insight:

At the heart of Paul's argument in Galatians stands the ironic assertion that this strange freedom belonging to the new creation in Christ should be exercised in community, through the transforming power of Christ, precisely in its opposite—through becoming slaves of one another. If this were not strange enough, now we hear that this new sphere of existence has power even to transform and revalue the function of law—can now legitimately speak of fulfilling the "whole law of Christ." ("The Poetry of the Spirit: Willing and Doing in Galatians 5 and 6," *Word and World* 20 (2000), p. 295.

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# WORKING FOR THE GOOD OF ALL!

## Hearing the Word

**Reader:** “Today as we conclude the eight sessions of our study, we will also hear the conclusion of Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia. Although he has been intense in the letter, he now seeks peace in the community. Along with words of encouragement for good behavior, the apostle concludes with confidence in God’s new creation.

“The following insights are again offered to help you focus your listening for God’s word.”

## Insights Summaries

1. *Listen for the divine importance of the work of believers.* God’s mercy in Jesus Christ justifies us, and therefore God puts us to work so that our lives hold promise for our neighbors and the world. What are your opportunities “to work for the good of all,” as Paul says, “and especially for those of the family of faith”?
2. *Listen for his encouragement of “a spirit of gentleness,”* and remember that your only boast is in the cross of Christ, where God’s great love was sealed for you and your neighbor. What will “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” mean to the spirit of your community?

**Reader:** “A reading of the sixth chapter of Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia. May the Word of God dwell in you richly.”

## Galatians 6:1-18

**6** My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.<sup>a</sup> Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. <sup>2</sup> Bear one another’s burdens,<sup>b</sup> and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup> For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.

<sup>4</sup> All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor’s work, will become a cause for pride. <sup>5</sup> For all must carry their own loads.

<sup>6</sup> Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. <sup>8</sup> If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. <sup>9</sup> So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.

<sup>10</sup> So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.<sup>d</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

<sup>12</sup> It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.<sup>e</sup> <sup>13</sup> Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh.

<sup>14</sup> May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

## Galatians

# 6:1-18

## Reader’s Notes

<sup>15</sup> For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!<sup>f</sup>

<sup>16</sup> As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. <sup>17</sup> From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

<sup>18</sup> May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen<sup>g</sup>.

**Reader:** “This is the Word of the Lord.”

**Community:** “Thanks be to God!”

*Pause for Contemplation*

**Reader:** “What did you hear? Is there a word of God for us?”

*Allow time for sharing thoughts and listening for the Spirit in the witness of the community. After a few minutes, the leader of the study will then introduce the topic for the day.*

## Information Notes

- <sup>a</sup> When a Christian community has experienced deep disruptions, those who have formal or spiritual leadership roles must pay particular attention to restoring those who have been wounded or confronted. Restoration and reconciliation, not reprisals, must be the goals. This is also the work of the Spirit.
- <sup>b</sup> Paul’s emphasis on mutual care expresses his awareness that at various times every person can be dealing with burdens too heavy to bear. Bearing burdens is what servants and slaves do, and the followers of Jesus know they are not above having such difficulties or doing such work for others (see verses 3-5).
- <sup>c</sup> This is a traditional encouragement for rewarding teachers, perhaps now putting Paul back into that role.
- <sup>d</sup> In verses 7-10 Paul returns to his main testimony to God’s presence and agency in the community. A Christian community must remember that God is among them as they deal with their conflicts. Mere power politics, in the church or anywhere else, are seeds sown according to the flesh, as if there were no God. Sowing “to the Spirit” is dealing with one another as those for whom Christ died, confident that the One who began a good work in them “will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (see Phil. 1:6). Even in our conflicts, especially then, we regard one another in the family of faith with holy awe.<sup>e</sup>
- <sup>e</sup> This is the only clue Paul gives us that the Jewish Christians who are insisting on circumcision may be facing persecution, if they are not strict on this question. Paul who had been a persecutor of the followers of Jesus could understand their plight, even if he disagreed forcefully with them.
- <sup>f</sup> Paul does not make an issue out of circumcision, but he refuses to let his adversaries make it essential. He rose up with fierce objections because they were making a requirement out of something that was no longer the basis of God’s covenant or bond with God’s people. The “new creation” God established in Jesus put everything on a new basis. Going back to cover ourselves by keeping the old rules endangers our trust in the promise for ourselves and for our callings in the world.
- <sup>g</sup> Although Paul neglected his usual thanksgiving for the Galatians at the beginning of his letter, he still began and ended with an apostolic blessing (see also 1:3-5). His hard work in this letter receives its authority from his confidence in God’s blessing for them and for him.

## Insights for Readers and Leaders

### *1. Listen for the divine importance of the work of believers.*

It has been said that the pillars of the Lutheran Reformation were the teaching of God’s justification of sinners, and the priesthood of believers. Galatians is about both, as Luther showed in his lectures on Galatians and his treatise on the “The Freedom of the Christian.” Galatians demonstrates these teachings were more than corrections of the abuses of the medieval church. They are the living witness to the gospel.

Galatians never uses a term like “the priesthood of believers.” Paul was not contending with a churchly hierarchy, and apparently the church didn’t even have priests. But the priesthood is not the focus anyway. What matters is the discovery that all of God’s people have vocations, callings in the world. The promise of the gospel is that all forgiven sinners become agents of God’s mercy and justice in the world. The Holy Spirit dwells in the believers so that the faithfulness of Christ is at work in their faithful lives. Christians bear Christ to their neighbors in every conceivable situation, just as Jesus dealt with everyone where they were. Christians cannot wait for themselves to be fully formed in Christ to be ready for these callings, and they surely cannot wait until they find people who are worthy of Christ. No one is.

Sometimes it is most trying to bear Christ or even just to be a Christian in our own families. Sometimes the opportunities arise at work, in our public lives, and even in our communities of faith. Having a calling is having a commission into the world God loves. God’s mercy in Jesus Christ justifies us, and God puts us to work for the blessing and benefit of our neighbors and the world. Your vocations or callings lie in the opportunities God gives you “to work for the good of all,” as Paul says, “and especially for those of the family of faith.” Christ did not promise it would be easy.

## *2. Listen for his encouragement of “a spirit of gentleness.”*

As the Study of Human Sexuality has indicated clearly, the world has often turned human sexuality from its created promise of freedom and life into an entrapment in bondage and death. Christians have often withdrawn in disapproval instead of engaging the common quest for what sexual understandings and behaviors will truly benefit the world. The love of God in Christ Jesus is not a sentimental acceptance of everything that happens, but it is a commission to meet people in their greatest need, a call to abandon the ways of death, and a promise of the enduring presence of Christ as his disciples learn to be formed in his Spirit and conformed to him. As it turns out, “working for the good of all and especially for the family of faith” (Gal. 6:10) is the challenging work of discipleship. Discipleship means learning with the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ. Then the “gentleness” for transgressors is human kindness, but more, it is bearing the compassion of Christ, perhaps including the apostle’s marks of suffering.

Galatians 5 and 6 are not only the practical or moral sections of the letter. These chapters are the conclusion for which the apostle was heading. “For Freedom Christ has Set us Free!” is the joyful declaration of forgiven sinners who are now empowered to become servants of their neighbors, especially the most vulnerable, and the world that has forgotten God.

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# An Introduction to Martin Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian"

Timothy J. Wengert

One way to avoid unnecessary conflicts when it comes to discussing our differences about sexual ethics may be to define the common ground upon which Lutherans stand when viewing social issues. Thus, the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality decided to accompany examination of problems in sexual ethics with two companion pieces, one on Galatians and one on Martin Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian." Both texts, apart from any specific ethical cautions they may mention, contain clear guidelines about *how* Christians approach moral deliberation. The more closely we observe the apostle Paul's and Luther's methods in general, the more successful we may be in talking with each other about specific matters of sexuality.

For Lutherans, Christian moral deliberation arises out of the free, unmerited love and forgiveness of God in Christ. Any other center for our discussion could undermine our work, no matter how noble our goals or praiseworthy our results. We offer studies of Galatians and "The Freedom of a Christian" because they state with unparalleled clarity the core of Christian faith, as confessed by Lutherans. They bring us back to the center of the Christian gospel: freedom through faith in Christ to serve the neighbor. In Galatians Paul states with remarkable assurance the nature of the gospel. Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian," first published in 1520 in both Latin and German editions, may be thought of as a meditation on the central teachings in Galatians. Luther had just published a commentary on Galatians the previous year. Moreover, the title of his booklet, "The Freedom of a Christian," calls to mind Paul's comment in Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free." It was the fourth important treatise published that year. Here Luther reflects on what the consoling gospel of forgiveness in Christ means for the life of the Christian. By taking a close look at this booklet, Lutherans involved in discussion of moral issues today may discover the ground rules, so to speak, with which Luther approached similar issues in his own day and age. Understanding how Luther himself reached the conclusions he did on specific issues may assist us in our own reflections on similar issues.

Anyone who uses this Introduction may want to read the entire booklet. A translation of the Latin is available (among other places) in *The Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989/2005), and *Luther's Works* (American Edition, 55 vols. [St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress] 31: 343-77 (henceforth: *LW* 31: 343-77)). An English translation of the German will soon be available in a collection of Luther's writings appearing in the series, *Classics in Western Spirituality*. In this Introduction, we will include excerpts from the booklet using page references from *LW* and slightly updating the language [indicated with square brackets]. We will also provide a running commentary with hints as to how this material might relate to our common study of Galatians and to the process of moral deliberation.

I first read this booklet in the early 1970s and have been reading student papers on it since 1979. What follows are suggestions arising from that experience for how to understand this document. As a Reformation historian, I have come to realize that recognizing the structure and style of a written document helps enormously in understanding what an author is trying to say. Thus, these remarks will follow the order of Luther's own thinking, making some remarks about how to connect

## Introduction: Martin Luther's "The Freedom of a Christian"

his thoughts both with our common reading of Galatians and with our moral deliberations. This analysis hardly exhausts the rich meaning of this booklet. Readers are also invited to examine “The Freedom of a Christian” on their own and use it in discussions with their congregations and synods, as they see fit.

## 1. LUTHER’S INTRODUCTORY REMARKS (343-44)

Luther’s “The Freedom of a Christian” probably began as a sermon on Philippians 2, the text appointed for Palm, or Passion, Sunday. An earlier piece, *The Two-Fold Righteousness* (LW 31), was based on that sermon, and many of Luther’s thoughts and expressions flowed from that writing into this one. Clearly, the issues of Christian freedom and Christian righteousness were uppermost in Luther’s mind during this early phase of the Reformation. In the sixteenth century, this booklet was very popular, and at least thirty-one printings appeared during Luther’s lifetime.

### What Is Faith?

The very first things an author says are often the most important. Such is the case in this booklet. Luther begins by rejecting a common definition of faith and supplying his own. For him, faith is not a “virtue,” that is, something human beings must manufacture in themselves. In Luther’s day, this definition came from Aristotle and conflicted with biblical usage. In our own day, many Christians make the same mistake when they equate faith with decisions that human beings make. From Luther’s biblical perspective, both are mistakes because they transform our relation with God into a work that we do and in which we may boast over against others (that is, it becomes a virtue). Instead, as Luther makes clear, faith is an experience, something that happens to us when *God* decides to come into relation with us. (This echoes Paul’s comments in Galatians 2:1-10, where he asserts that his relation to God in Christ depends upon God alone.) Thus, at the very beginning of “The Freedom of a Christian” Luther writes:

Many [people] have considered Christian faith an easy thing, and not a few have given it a place among the virtues. They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith. It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a [person] when trials oppress him [or her]... [Faith] is a living “spring of water welling up to eternal life,” as Christ calls it in John 4[:14]. (p. 343)

### The Paradox: We Are Completely Free and Bound

Probably the most famous passage in this entire booklet comes in the second paragraph.

To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together, they would serve our purpose beautifully.

While this states clearly how Luther will organize his thoughts, it does not yet explain what Luther means. We are free in faith and bound to our neighbor in love. How this paradox occurs in the life of the believer will be the subject of the rest of this little book. Although Luther specifically cites Philippians 2:6-7 among other Pauline texts, his comments also call to mind Galatians 5:13. Here is how he begins.

“Instead, as Luther makes clear, faith is an experience, something that happens to us when *God* decides to come into relation with us.”

## 2. THREE PRELIMINARY MATTERS (344-49)

Sometimes when students read this booklet, they skip over the next few pages after glancing at Luther's introduction to this section: "Let us start, however, with something more remote from our subject, but more obvious" (p. 344). They immediately assume they know what Luther is talking about and want to rush on to the "important" part. This is a serious mistake because Luther begins here with what we would call his presuppositions. He introduces three important topics: human nature, the nature of God's Word, and how faith saves. Without them, what he says later will make little sense. With them, a new world of faith opens up to us.

### Human Nature Defined

When Luther writes that human beings have "a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one," many people assume that he is talking like the philosopher Plato and other "spiritual" writers, who separated material things from ideas and spiritual things. He is not, as his quotation of Galatians 5:17 makes clear. Instead, he is distinguishing the whole human being in relation to God (what he calls our "spiritual nature") from the whole human being in relation to the world and others (what he calls our "bodily nature"). At the same time, he also calls this "bodily nature," "carnal," and "the old creature," making it clear that he is already framing human existence in terms of what we trust. When we make our relations in this world the center of our life, then it is indeed carnal and part of our old, sinful nature. Where true faith in God arises, then in God's sight we are "new" creatures, as Luther calls us here:

[Human beings have] a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one. According to the spiritual nature, which [people] refer to as the soul, [they] are called spiritual, inner, or new [human beings]. According to the bodily nature, which [people] refer to as flesh, [they] are called carnal, outward, or old [human beings]. ...Because of this diversity of nature the Scriptures assert contradictory things concerning the same [human being], since these two [human beings] in the same [human being] contradict each other. ... (p. 344)

On the basis of this distinction, Luther then examines where works fit. He concludes that they are always external and thus have nothing to do with our relation to God and whether we are bound or free. Name any human situation (the food we eat or the robes priests wear), and there is no connection to our life with God, since anything (even a "decision" to follow Jesus!) is external and has nothing to do with our relation to God. "Such works produce nothing but hypocrites," Luther writes (p. 345). In other places, Luther characterizes such works, using a line from Colossians 2:23, as "self-chosen spirituality." How much of this infests our thinking about relating to God!

Now, because Luther used the words "spiritual" and "bodily," one might assume that if works are "spiritual" they may affect our relation to God. However, such is not the case. "Furthermore, [so that we may exclude] all kinds of works, even contemplation, meditation and all that the soul can do does not help." (p. 345). This is a further indication that the words "soul" and "flesh" do not indicate philosophical, or speculative, categories but relational ones. The person cannot trust outer or inner works in relation to God. Does this not sound a lot like Paul's point in Galatians 2:11-21?

### God's Word a Necessity

"One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom," Luther continues (p. 345). "That one thing is the most holy Word of

God, the gospel of Christ, as Christ says, John 11[:25], ‘I am the resurrection and the life...’”. Here the most common mistake readers make is to assume that Luther is talking about the Bible, as if reading or having a Bible could save us. Less than a year later, in 1521, he would write in sermon helps on John 21, “The church is not a quill house but a mouth house.” That Jesus wrote no books reminds us that we do not trust a book but a spoken message of good news. That is why here he immediately explains what he means by “Word of God,” namely, “the gospel of Christ.” Thus, for Luther the most important thing about the Word of God is not that it is in a book but that it is addressed to us as the good news of Christ. Listen to how he describes the effect the hearing of the Word has on the soul.

Let us then consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God, it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing. ...On the other hand, there is no more terrible disaster with which the wrath of God can afflict [human beings] than a famine of the hearing of his Word. ...Nor was Christ sent into the world for any other ministry except that of the Word. Moreover, the entire [clergy]—all the apostles, bishops, and priests—has been called and instituted only for the ministry of the Word. (p. 345)

To explain further what the Word of God is, Luther uses Paul’s comments in Romans. We could add to these texts Galatians 3:1-5. Luther concludes: “To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God” (p. 346). Now, to the notion that the Word is alone necessary for the person’s relation to God, Luther adds that faith alone uses that Word. Here it is important to remember that he has already warned us not to make faith itself into a virtue, that is, into a work or decision that human beings offer to God. Thus, he adds, “The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith. ...This faith cannot exist in connection with works” (p. 346). Such faith teaches two things. First, it teaches that “all things in you are altogether blameworthy, sinful, and damnable...” Second, it teaches “that you need Christ, who suffered and rose again for you so that, if you believe in him, you may through this faith become a new [creature]...” (pp. 346–347). Here Luther uses an image to describe faith that relates well to baptism, where the old creature is drowned and the new creature of faith brought to life.

Furthermore, he says that “this faith can rule only in the inner [person]...and since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inner [person] cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and that these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with this inner [person]” (p. 347). At the same time, “only ungodliness and unbelief of heart, and no outer work make [a person] guilty and a damnable servant of sin” (p. 347). Here Luther arrives at one of his central insights into human life: that every sin touches at its heart the sin of unbelief and that our entire righteousness before God consists only of faith, never works. Only faith saves; only unfaith damns. Listen to how absolutely he rejects importing works into our relation to God: “Wherefore it ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus, who suffered and rose for him [or her]...” (p. 347).

Finally, Luther does not view this faith as a decision or choice we make, but he calls it instead a treasure. In fact, throughout this section it is clear that Luther does not reduce faith to a human work but instead describes it in terms of relationship and experience, as a gift arising from the experience of hearing God’s Word. No

**“Here Luther arrives at one of his central insights into human life: that every sin touches at its heart the sin of unbelief and that our entire righteousness before God consists only of faith, never works.”**

wonder it is a treasure! It does not depend upon us but upon God's Word. Thus, nine years later, in the *Small Catechism*, Luther interprets the Lord's Prayer as first asking God for the preached Word ("Hallowed be your name") and then for faith in that Word worked through the Holy Spirit ("Your kingdom come").

### **The Word Saves through Law and Gospel**

Without this final preliminary comment, we would be forced to make faith into a work, something we do in order to accept the Word. However, what Luther had discovered was that God's Word works on us. It is a perspective that he shares with Paul in Galatians 2:19. The way Luther describes that work here (p. 348) is to distinguish between commands and promises, that is, between Law and Gospel. "Here we must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises." He first defines the Law.

Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach [human beings] to know [themselves], that through them [they] may recognize [their] inability to do good and may despair of [their] own ability. (p. 348)

Using the example of the ninth commandment ("You shall not covet"), which Paul also used in Romans 7, Luther concludes: "As we fare with respect to one commandment, so we fare with all, for it is equally impossible for us to keep any one of them" (p. 348). The result of an encounter with the Law is helplessness and distress. The first step of faith, that we are humbled and reduced to nothing in our eyes, is fulfilled in us through the law working on us. People "find in [themselves] nothing whereby [they] may be justified and saved" (p. 348).

In this predicament, Luther does not instruct people to trust themselves and their choices or works. Instead,

The second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God which declare the glory of God, saying, "If you wish to fulfill the law and not covet, as the law demands, come, believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you". ... Thus, the promises of God give what the commandments of God demand and fulfill what the law prescribes so that all things may be God's alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments. He alone commands; he alone fulfills. (pp. 348–349)

Incidentally, when Luther uses the words "Old Testament" and "New Testament" here to describe Law and Gospel, he is not talking about books of the Bible (he knows there are commands and promises in both testaments) but about the relation of the Old and New creature to Scripture. More importantly, it is clear that we are not in charge of this Word (as if it left us with things to do or facts to believe) but rather the Word does something to us (namely: humbles and raises; terrifies and comforts; puts to death and brings to life). Here Luther likens it to Christ's touch: "If a touch of Christ healed, how much more will this most tender spiritual touch, this absorbing of the Word, communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word" (p. 349).

### 3. THE THREE POWERS OF FAITH AND THE RESULTS FOR THE INNER PERSON (349-58)

Upon this backdrop, Luther can now sketch a fuller picture of faith and the complete freedom it bestows upon the Christian. He first describes the three powers of faith and then adds comments on the results these powers bring and their effect on preaching. Having argued in the preceding pages that faith is not a human work, that the human being stands before God without works, and that God's Word works faith in us, Luther can turn with renewed confidence to the topic at hand: the freedom of a Christian.

#### **The First Power of Faith: United with God's Word**

The first effect or power of faith is that it alone unites the soul (the whole person before God) with God's Word. Paul speaks of a similar union in Galatians 3:27. For Luther, this eliminates absolutely all works and all law in our relation to God.

No good work can rely upon the Word of God or live in the soul, for faith alone and the Word of God rule in the soul. Just as the heated iron glows like fire because of the union of fire with it, so the Word imparts its qualities to the soul. It is clear, then, that [Christians have] all that [they] need in faith and need no works to justify [them]; and if [they have] no need of works, [they have] no need of the law; and if [they have] no need of the law, surely [they are] free from the law. (p. 349).

The radical nature of Luther's statements should not escape us. The old creature in us is forever trying to smuggle works in the side door to make them count for something in our relation to God. There is a place for works, as we shall see, but never in relation to God. Thus, talk about "cheap" or "expensive" grace is often misplaced. The scandal of God's Word that kills the Old creature is simply this: God's grace is free!

#### **The Second Power of Faith: Justifying God**

Faith's second power or effect may come as a surprise to us. Faith justifies God! That is, "it honors him whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard since it considers him truthful and trustworthy. There is no other honor equal to the estimate of truthfulness and righteousness with which we honor [the one] whom we trust" (p. 350). The reverse is also true, namely, that unfaith dishonors God and does not trust God. "So when the soul firmly trusts God's promises, it regards him as truthful and righteous. Nothing more excellent than this can be ascribed to God" (p. 350).

Such faith, which Luther now defines as trust (honoring God as trustworthy), is finally what obedience means. On the flip side, disobedience does not mean breaking a rule or two but is rather a lack of trust in God's promise and, instead, trust in one's own powers. "On the other hand, what greater rebellion against God, what greater wickedness, what greater contempt of God is there than not believing his promise? For what is this but to make God a liar or to doubt that he is truthful—that is, to ascribe truthfulness to one's self but lying and vanity to God?" (p.350) When it comes to sin, human beings are more than willing to focus on particular violations of a law code (especially when someone else is doing the violating) while ignoring the greater human predicament: our rebellion against God. It is precisely because (especially in sexual matters) we so often lapse into preoccupation with particular "sins," forgetting or denying the pervasive condition of sin, that our liturgy invites us to confess each Sunday that we are "in bondage" or "captive" to

sin and cannot free ourselves. We thus justify God's judgment against sin and admit our own rebellion.

In this section, Luther is playing off an old understanding of justice or righteousness defined as giving "to each his [or her] own," what we still call in English one's "just desserts." In this case, however, he describes how faith gives to God what is God's own, namely truth and righteousness. At the same time, we "own up to" what is our own: falsehood and unrighteousness, that is, rebellion. This results (p. 351) in God glorifying our righteousness by reckoning us righteous—not by anything we have or do but out of his sheer mercy. In one way, Paul's entire argument in Galatians is nothing other than bringing his readers to that insight: that we live not by our works, no matter how closely they may adhere to God's law, but solely by God's grace.

### **The Third Power of Faith: The Joyous Exchange**

At this point, Luther invokes an image that comes originally from Roman marriage law but was often used in the church, especially by two of Luther's favorite theologians: St. Augustine, bishop from North Africa, and Johannes Tauler, a German preacher from the fifteenth century. Roman marriage law made a distinction between property (what someone owns) and possession (what someone has full use of). (This distinction is still reflected in the common saying, "Possession is nine-tenths of the law," which means that if you possess a thing long enough it almost becomes your property.) In marriage, what is the property of the husband becomes the possession of the wife and what is the property of the wife the possession of the husband. Applying this to the metaphor of the marriage of faith, Luther writes:

If [Christ and the soul] are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage ...it follows that everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. Let us compare these and we shall see inestimable benefits. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is a bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his. If he gives her his body and very self, how shall he not give her all that is his? And if he takes the body of the bride, how shall he not take all that is hers?

...By the wedding ring of faith he shares in the sins, death, and pains of hell which are his bride's. As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did all this, and death and hell could not swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel. ...Thus the believing soul by means of the pledge of its faith is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins, secure against death and hell, and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom. (pp.351–352)

In addition to the examples from Paul's letters that Luther gives here, we could add the image from Galatians 3:13-14, where Paul describes how Christ took on the curse of the Law and gave us in exchange the blessing of Abraham. What powerful ways to understand Christ's death and resurrection "for us and for our salvation."

**"In one way, Paul's entire argument in Galatians is nothing other than bringing his readers to that insight: that we live not by our works, no matter how closely they may adhere to God's law, but solely by God's grace."**

## Results of the Marriage of Faith

From these three powers or direct effects of faith come several amazing results. First, Luther writes that

the First Commandment, which says, “You shall worship one God,” is fulfilled by faith alone. Though you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head, you would still not be righteous or worship God or fulfill the First Commandment...Therefore faith alone is the righteousness of a Christian and the fulfilling of all the commandments, for [the one] who fulfills the First Commandment has no difficulty in fulfilling all the rest. (p. 353)

This notion of faith fulfilling all the commandments will be expressed in the *Small Catechism* where the First Commandment’s demand to “fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” is reflected in all the other commandments (“we are to fear and love God”—but we do not). This command is then fulfilled in the Third Article of the Creed, where we confess that we cannot believe by our own efforts but that the Holy Spirit “calls us through the gospel, enlightens us with his gifts, makes us holy and keeps us in the one true faith.”

Second, Luther realizes that such a “marriage” to Christ excludes works as the basis of that relationship. Thus, he writes that

works, being inanimate things, cannot glorify God, although they can, if faith is present, be done to the glory of God. ...This [glorifying God and bring forth works] is done by faith which dwells in the heart and is the source and substance of all our righteousness. Therefore it is a blind and dangerous doctrine which teaches that the commandments must be fulfilled by works. The commandments must be fulfilled before any works can be done. ...(p. 353)

Third, Luther introduces another poignant picture of the results of faith: that we are, in Christ, kings and priests. Christ is king, although his kingdom is not of this world but is a matter of “righteousness, truth, wisdom, peace, salvation” (p. 353) and the like. Christ is priest, although his priesthood does not consist in vestments and rituals but in his intercession for us and in his offering of himself for us. The good news for Luther is that Christ “imparts [these two prerogatives] to and shares them with everyone who believes in him according to the law of the above-mentioned marriage...” (p. 354).

Having called us kings and priests, Luther is quick to define the nature of our kingship and priesthood. Regarding this kingship, he says, “every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that, by virtue of a spiritual power, he [or she] is lord of all things without exception, so that nothing can do him [or her] any harm” (p. 354). Here Luther is not talking about political and economic power, a particularly crazy notion with which church leaders of Luther’s day were afflicted. Instead, he is describing what elsewhere he calls the “theology of the cross,” which he defines not as a theory about why Christ had to die but rather as “the revelation of God under the appearance of the opposite,” that is, finding God where we would never reasonably expect. In this case,

The power of which we speak is spiritual. It rules in the midst of enemies and is powerful in the midst of oppression. This means nothing else than that “power is made perfect in weakness” [2 Corinthians 12:9]...Yes, since faith alone suffices for salvation, I need nothing except faith exercising the power and dominion of its own liberty. Lo, this is the inestimable power and liberty of Christians. (p. 355)

As to our priesthood, Luther does not define it as the congregational rights of the laity to “hire and fire” pastors. (In fact, his definition of this priesthood does away with separate classes of lay and ordained Christians and defines separate offices or callings for public bearers of the gospel and hearers of the Word [see p. 356].) Instead, Luther concentrates on something else entirely: “as priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things” (p. 355). The opposite of this priesthood that comes by faith and serves others is a priesthood that people only use to their own advantage. (This happens in our own day when either pastors or congregants assert their authority and rights for their own advantage, as if God died and left them in charge. Our priesthood calls us to service. Thus, the Reformers’ favorite word for those especially in office as public bearers of the gospel was not pastor but minister, a Latin word that means servant.)

### **A Comment on Preaching**

One way to view the entire Reformation is as a reform of preaching. Even *The 95 Theses* were concerned chiefly with bad preaching by indulgence sellers and the effect on simple believers. Here Luther makes the connection between doctrine and teaching concrete. It is, after all, not words in a book (not in the Bible, to say nothing of words by Luther) but the proclamation of God’s Word that matters. In Paul’s day, this meant railing against those who taught “another gospel” (Galatians 1:6-9). Luther warns here against preaching “the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these would suffice for the conduct of life” (p. 357). Worse yet are those who just preach human laws that have nothing to do with Christ. Similarly, others just play on human emotions. In Luther’s day this meant depicting Christ’s wounds in such gory detail as to make people weep or to make them angry with the Jews. In our day, we are often subjected to these kinds of “sermons,” where interest is in just giving out the facts or preaching rules or whipping up emotions. Part of the reason we have such a hard time talking productively and charitably about ethical issues in our day is that our preaching and teaching do not feed faith, as Luther describes it, but rather hinder it or destroy it altogether. Luther suggests the opposite. Preaching, like the Lord’s Supper, says, “Here is Christ for you.”

Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what [use and fruit may be received]. This is done when that Christian liberty which he bestows is rightly taught and we are told in what way we Christians are all kings and priests and therefore lords of all and may firmly believe that whatever we have done is pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God, as I have already said. (p. 357)

This is, in fact, precisely what Luther is preaching to us here. Would that our preaching and teaching would create and preserve the same faith! The result? “What man [or woman] is there whose heart, upon hearing these things, will not rejoice to its depth, and when receiving such comfort will not grow tender so that [that person] will love Christ as he [or she] never could by means of any laws or works?” (p. 357)

## 4. THE OUTER PERSON (358-77)

“What are you going to do, now that you do not have to do anything?” So one Lutheran teacher summarized the final twenty pages of Luther’s little book. True good works do not arise out of the Law and its demands but out of the freedom of the Gospel and faith. This faith does works, in the words of a later Lutheran theologian published in 1580, “out of a free and merry spirit.” Outside the freedom of faith, there is nothing but hypocrisy or despair—lots of working but no good works. Thus, it is crucial for us not to separate this section of Luther’s argument from the preceding. Similarly, we must not separate our own moral deliberation from the free and unmerited mercy of God in Christ and the faith that that message of mercy creates. Because this way of viewing ethics is strange to many of today’s Christians, we must be careful not to turn even this view into a kind of new law with which to judge others but rather stand with one another and encourage one another to deeper faith in Christ. That faith alone produces the freedom to serve that Luther discusses here.

“Similarly, we must not separate our own moral deliberation from the free and unmerited mercy of God in Christ and the faith that that message of mercy creates.”

### Christian Freedom Does Not Eliminate the Law

Luther begins with an objection to his message that Paul also had to address in Romans 6: “Shall we sin the more that grace may more abound?” Galatians 3:21 and 5:1 also show that this was often on the apostle’s mind: freedom is not against the Law, so to speak. Usually, when Christians hear this misunderstanding of God’s unconditional mercy in Christ, however, they run to the Law and thereby throw the baby out with the baptismal water. “Oh, we weren’t really serious about grace,” they imply. “We still mean that you have to fulfill the Law.” Neither Paul, who talks about how we die in baptism, nor Luther goes down that legalistic path. Instead, Luther remarks, “I answer: not so, you wicked [people], not so. That [misunderstanding] would indeed be proper if we were wholly inner and perfectly spiritual [people]. But such we shall be only at the last day, the day of the resurrection of the dead” (p. 357). In the meantime, to use a phrase Luther employs in other places, we are “at the same time righteous and sinner.” Or, as he puts it here, the Christian is at the same time free (doing no works) and servant (doing all kinds of works).

### Putting the Flesh in Its Place

Luther continues with a general introduction to what he means by good works, focusing here specifically on the “work” Christians do to themselves: putting the old creature to death. The Christian believer, free in Christ and willing to discipline one’s self and to serve the neighbor, encounters a “contrary will in his or her own flesh” (p. 359), or, in the words of a more recent theologian, the old creature may drown in baptism, but it is a good underwater swimmer. This double life of the Christian as “saint and sinner” is described by Paul in Romans 7 and 1 Corinthians 9:27 but also in Galatians 5:24 and 6:14. Christians are in the business of daily “crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires.”

Yet Luther hastens to add that the works of reining in the body are not the means by which we are justified before God. The point of limiting and disciplining ourselves cannot be to earn salvation or get in good (or stay in good) with God. Instead, they are done simply “out of spontaneous love in obedience to God” (p. 359). This provides both a purpose and a limit to such discipline. We only do what helps us and our faith. This he contrasts with works-righteous people, who only think of “the works themselves, and think that if only they have done as many and as great works as are possible, they have done well and have become righteous.” In contrast, the believer does works because he or she is already good in God’s sight; the believer (as believer) never does them in order to become good or righteous.

“...the believer does works because he or she is already good in God’s sight; the believer (as believer) never does them in order to become good or righteous.”

This is such an odd way to think about works, that Luther provides three analogies. First (p. 360), he compares what believers now do by faith to the behavior of Adam and Eve in Paradise. They were created righteous and had no need of works. Still, God gives them works so that they might not be idle. So, too, as believers, we do works simply to please God and not to earn something from them. Second (p. 360f.), Luther uses the analogy of a bishop who does all kinds of works, not to earn his office but precisely because he was first made a bishop. “So the Christian who is consecrated by his [or her] faith does good works, but the works do not make him [or her] holier or more Christian, for that is the work of faith alone.”

It is in connection with this second analogy that Luther states that “Good works do not make a good [person], but a good [person] does good works; evil works do not make a wicked [person], but a wicked [person] does evil works” (p. 361). This he derives from Jesus’ comment about good trees and good fruit in Matthew 7:18, but he could also have pointed to Galatians 5:16-24, where Paul contrasts *works* of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit. Here, too, we should remember that Luther was very critical of the notion that Christians in his day had derived from the ethics of the philosopher Aristotle: that to become a good person you had to do good things. This might work in the world, but Christian faith announced the opposite: Good trees bear good fruit.

A third example was even more down-to-earth. Any trade shows the same relation between what a person is and what he or she does. “A good or a bad house does not make a good or bad builder; but a good or a bad builder makes a good or a bad house” (p. 361). Thus, two works that look exactly alike will be good or bad depending upon the heart out of which it is done. A work done to get right with God, no matter how good, will always finally be evil, and a work done as a result of one’s trust in God for all righteousness and salvation will always be good. What condemns us or makes us alive before God is not our works at all, but rather faith alone. If we look at the surface, the works themselves will look alike, whether done by someone who trusts God or not. Thus, we are often sucked in by the hypocrisy of others. To avoid this, Luther writes that we

must look upon the person and ask how he [or she] is justified. For the person is justified and saved, not by works or laws, but by the Word of God, that is, by the promise of his grace, and by faith, that the glory may remain God’s, who saved us not by works of righteousness which we have done [Titus 3:5], but by virtue of his mercy by the word of his grace when we believed [1 Corinthians 1:21]. (p. 362)

This gives us a perfect way to judge works and the preaching about works. If they are in any way connected with our salvation (before, during, or after), then “they are made necessary and freedom and faith are destroyed; and this addition to them makes them no longer good but truly damnable works. They are not free, and they blaspheme the grace of God since to justify and to save by faith belongs to the grace of God alone” (p. 363). Think of the number of sermons preached in our day that leave that lasting impression with their hearers! Luther continues, saying, “Those work-saints cannot get rid of [this perverse notion] unless faith, its destroyer, comes and rules in their hearts” (p. 363).

Luther indicates that our preaching must contain both law and gospel and must move from law (the knowledge of sin and the death of the old creature) to gospel (the promise of forgiveness and the life of the new creature). To preach only repentance and law “would only amount to wounding and not binding up, smiting and not healing, killing and not making alive, leading down into hell and not bring back again, humbling and not exalting. Therefore we must also preach the word of grace and the promise of forgiveness by which faith is taught and aroused” (p. 364). When we hear him emphasize this repeatedly, we realize that the proper preaching

“Faith effective in love means serving our neighbor without hope of reward from God or the neighbor.”

of words that condemn and forgive stands at the very center of what it means to be justified and freed by faith alone.

### **Serving the Neighbor in Christ**

If, after all of this, a person imagines that what has gone before is a mere prelude and that what really matters is doing works for the neighbor, then that person has not understood just how radical Luther’s statements are and how they judge and condemn all of the subtlest forms of “works righteousness,” where we imagine that our relation to God depends upon us and what we do. Indeed, what Luther now says about good works done for the neighbor is so radical that we can scarcely believe his words.

Like a broken record but in full recognition of our controlling ways, he states first his premise: “A [person] does not live for himself [or herself] alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he [or she] lives also for all [people] on earth; rather, he [or she] lives only for others and not for himself [or herself]” (p. 364). Here the text of the original sermon surfaces (Philippians 2:7). Yet before he goes on to apply this text to our relations to others, Luther again underscores that human beings “need none of these things for [their] righteousness and salvation” (p. 365). In this case, the believer considers “nothing except the need and the advantage of his [or her] neighbor” (p. 365). This leads Luther to cite Galatians 6:2 and 5:6, texts often used by his critics to emphasize works and denigrate faith. Faith effective in love means serving our neighbor without hope of reward from God or the neighbor.

Second, Luther then shows the connection to Philippians 2. In the first four verses of the chapter, Paul encourages Christians to devote all of our works to the welfare of others since, in spiritual terms, they are our surplus from faith. In the next four verses (5-8), Paul cites Christ as an example. Luther’s explanation of this text avoids works righteousness and shows the true origin of righteous works for the neighbor. He begins by describing Christ’s humiliation for us.

Paul means this: Although Christ was filled with the form of God and rich in all good things, so that he needed no work and no suffering to make him righteous and saved (for he had all this eternally), yet he was not puffed up by them and did not exalt himself above us and assume power over us, although he could rightly have done so; but, on the contrary, he so lived, labored, worked, suffered, and died that he might be like other [people] and in fashion and in actions be nothing else than a [human being], just as if he had need of all these things and had nothing of the form of God. But he did all this for our sake, that he might serve us and that all things which he accomplished in this form of a servant might become ours. (p. 366)

Luther then applies this to believers. On the one hand, a Christian is “in the form of God.” “So a Christian, like Christ his [or her] head, is filled and made rich by faith and should be content with this form of God which he [or she] has obtained by faith; only, as I have said, he [or she] should increase this faith until it is made perfect” (p. 366). Thus, Luther adds, Paul says in Galatians 2:20 that “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.” On the other hand,

although [Christians are] thus free from all works, [they] ought in this liberty to empty [themselves], taking upon [themselves] the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of [human beings], be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with [their] neighbor as [they see] the God through Christ has dealt and still deals with [them]. This [they] should do freely, having regard for nothing but divine approval. (p. 366)

It is exactly at this point that English-speaking Lutherans coined a phrase that we should be “*little Christs*” to the neighbor. This is not what Luther wrote. We are simply Christs to the neighbor, a far more radical thing. Speaking in the person of the Christian, Luther writes:

Although I am an unworthy and condemned [person], my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ. (p. 367)

This is the “joyous exchange” part two, if you will. Christ exchanged his righteousness for our sin, so we now are free to do the same for the neighbor, taking on his or her burdens and sins and giving out of the righteousness and forgiveness we ourselves have received as sheer grace and gift. Thus, our “works” are hardly “works” at all but rather the spontaneous, free, and joyful outpouring of the forgiven, faith-filled heart. Luther summarizes this exchange this way:

Just as our neighbor is in need and lacks that in which we abound, so we were in need before God and lacked his mercy. Hence, as our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians. (pp. 367–368)

Luther then explains what he means by “Christian,” stating, “Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is because we believe in him and are Christs to one another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us” (p. 368). What a difference this would make in our ethical deliberations today, if we treated those who differ from us (Luther even mentions enemies!) not in a condescending way (as if we were still masters) but as true servants, emptying ourselves for the sake of our neighbors, protecting the weak, listening for and celebrating Christ among us and in us.

### **Freedom and Good Works: Examples from Scripture**

Luther concludes this section (pp. 368–369) with four examples from Scripture where this balance between freedom and serving could be found. Mary submitted to the Mosaic customs in Luke 2:21-39 not because she needed them for righteousness but in order not to give offense. Paul had his disciple Timothy circumcised so as not to offend the weak in faith (Acts 16:3) but, when confronted with those who despised the liberty of faith and insisted that circumcision was necessary for salvation, did not allow Titus to be circumcised (Galatians 2:3). Christ, too, paid the temple tax not to earn righteousness but to serve others (Matthew 17:34-37). For the same reason, Paul in Romans 13 gave instruction to obey governing authorities: “not that they shall in this way be justified, since they already are righteous through faith, but that in the liberty of the Spirit they shall by so doing serve others and the authorities themselves and obey their will freely and out of love” (p. 369).

Finally, Luther gives an example from his own experience. He criticizes the way that papal pronouncements and other church regulations had been touted as means of gaining or keeping salvation. A person free in faith can still do these things, not for salvation but to show honor due to authorities and to give the neighbor a good example.

**“What a difference this would make in our ethical deliberations today, if we treated those who differ from us (Luther even mentions enemies!) not in a condescending way...but as true servants, emptying ourselves for the sake of our neighbors, protecting the weak, listening for and celebrating Christ among us and in us.”**

This leads Luther to a definition of good work: “Any work that is not done solely for the purpose of keeping the body under control or of serving one’s neighbor, as long as [the neighbor] asks nothing contrary to God, is not good or Christian” (p. 370). Just as Christ put on our human form and clothes us in his righteousness so, we “should ‘put on’ [our] neighbor and so conduct [ourselves] toward [the neighbor] as if [we ourselves] were in the other’s place” (p.371). Thus, we can even place our righteousness (given to us by God) over our neighbor’s and pray to God for their sins “as if they were my very own. That is what Christ did for us. This is true love and the genuine rule of a Christian life” (p. 371). Imagine how this approach to our neighbor would change how we discuss the important issues in sexual ethics, especially where Christians find themselves in disagreement. Luther’s concluding words underscore this point:

We conclude, therefore, that [Christians live] not in [themselves], but in Christ and in [their] neighbor. Otherwise [they are not Christians]. [They live] in Christ through faith, in [their neighbor] through love. By faith [they are] caught up beyond [themselves] into God. By love [they descend] beneath [themselves] into [their] neighbor. (p. 371)

### **Distinguishing the Weak from the Stubborn**

Only in the Latin version does Luther add a lengthy postscript dealing with the problem of the weak in faith, something that Paul, too, had to deal with in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, as well as in Galatians 6:1-10. Some people in Luther’s immediate circle thought that the only way to show they were free was to disobey the customs and ceremonies of the church. Others took the opposite extreme by assuming that their salvation depended on carefully observing all church rules and regulations. Both, Luther thought, were in error by having neglected both the weightier matters of salvation and the true love of neighbor. He continues in one of the most famous passages from the Latin version: “Our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works. Faith redeems, corrects, and preserves our consciences so that we know that righteousness does not consist in works, although works neither can nor ought to be wanting...” (p. 373). Among other proofs for this attitude, Luther quotes Galatians 2:20.

Later Lutherans labeled the distinction Luther is making here the “first” or “civil” use of the law. That is, God uses the law in this world to maintain order and restrain evil. Our rites, regulations, and ceremonies in the church are of this nature. They are not, however, ways to get in good with God.

Luther maps out what he calls a “middle course” between the “unyielding, stubborn ceremonialists,” who prescribe works as a means of justification, and the “simple-minded, ignorant [people], weak in faith...who cannot yet grasp the liberty of faith” (p. 373). These latter we dare not offend. Instead, one must act toward them with “love which would harm no one but would serve all [people]. It is not their fault that they are weak...” (p. 374). In the circumstances that Luther found himself, it was crucial to oppose the “tyrants,” who used church laws as a means of salvation, and yet, for the sake of the weak, “to practice freedom in secret.”

Unlike some Christians of his day and ours, who think that the call to be Christian means becoming spiritual enough to escape the body and its needs, Luther is surprisingly realistic. He writes: “Since we cannot live our lives without ceremonies and works, and the perverse and untrained youth need to be restrained and saved from harm by such bonds; and since each one should keep his body under control by means of such works, there is need that the minister of Christ be far-seeing and faithful” (p. 374). How? By teaching Christians in such a way that “their conscience and faith will not be offended and that there will not spring up in

them a suspicion and a root of bitterness and many will thereby be defiled...that is, that they may not lose faith...and think that they must be justified by works” (p. 375). To explain what he means, Luther offers several images. For example, just as feasts test our temperance (especially for those of us in this day and age who try to stay on diets) and yet we live in the middle of feasts, “so also must [a person] live in the midst of ceremonies, that is, in the midst of dangers” (p. 375). A second example is an architect’s models or blueprints that help in the construction of actual buildings but are put aside when the structure is complete. If a person simply prepared such models and plans but never built anything, people would pity the insanity. The same is true for ceremonies and works. Thus,

we do not despise ceremonies and works, but we set great store by them; but we despise the false estimate placed upon works in order that no one may think that they are true righteousness, as those hypocrites believe who spend and lose their whole lives in zeal for works and never reach that goal for the sake of which the works are to be done...They seem to wish to build, they make their preparations, and yet they never build. (p. 376)


In the final analysis, Luther concludes, there are so many things working against us when it comes to the freedom of faith that it is impossible for human beings to trust God. Human nature and our reason assume that if God commands a work we must be able to fulfill it. This is also the case in the world, where laws, rules, and regulations are all given for us to do. Many teachers, inside and outside of the church, make the same assumption: God’s commands imply our ability to fulfill them. Faced with our actual inability, we are forced to pray to God to do what we cannot: to teach us and write his law of freedom in our hearts and to make us, in the words of John 6:45, *theodidakti*, taught by God. Thus, as Luther instructs us in the *Small Catechism*, we are forced to pray “Hallowed be your name; your kingdom come,” so that God will speak the Word and through the Holy Spirit make us believers, righteous trees that bear good fruit.

## 5. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There are, of course, many other writings of Luther and other reformers, including especially the Lutheran confessions, which may give us some help in our moral deliberation. For example, in the *Augsburg Confession* Philip Melancthon, Luther’s colleague at the University of Wittenberg and the chief drafter of the *Confession*, distinguishes between salvation and matters of this world’s governance. In the *Small* and *Large Catechisms*, Luther writes extensively about God’s good work in creation and how God gives us daily bread for this life. He also discusses concretely how we harm our neighbors in breaking the fifth through tenth commandments. Such teachings, too, are very helpful in our deliberations.

However, “The Freedom of a Christian,” better than most other writings, clears the spiritual and moral air, so to speak. In our deliberations, we dare not confuse faith and works. In our deliberations, we dare not make works the cause or measuring stick for faith. In our deliberations, we must oppose the self-centered legalist without hurting the weak. More than that, Luther’s booklet calls pastors and teachers of the church to return to their essential task: to plant good trees by letting loose the free, unconditional promise of God in Christ. Christian lives are driven not by self-aggrandizing purposes or external, pride-filled decisions but only by God’s freeing Word, that is, by the proclamation of the law that strips us bare and the gospel that clothes us in the righteousness of Christ’s death and resurrection. The gospel is written in the language of God’s unconditional love and should, like any love letter, sweep us off our feet and land us at the wounded feet of Christ.

**“Luther’s booklet calls pastors and teachers of the church to return to their essential task: to plant good trees by letting loose the free, unconditional promise of God in Christ.”**



Then, and only then, does our whole life get turned inside out. Then, our relation to God is free from works, and works end up where we need them the most: to restrain evil in and among us and to serve, truly serve, our neighbor in need. Then, we who are Christ's and whom Christ has made kings and priests (that is, Christs) become Christs to our neighbor, covering their weaknesses and faults with the same mercy God has shown us. In that light and from that perspective, we can discuss these difficult issues of our time in and through Christ.

# Appendix I

## Helpful Resources

The following resources from the task force are available in print or online at [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/resources) Ordering information is included.

*Journey Together Faithfully, ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Part One.* This four-session study aids congregations, members, and others in discussing the ELCA's "Message on Sexuality: Some Common Convictions." For print copies call 800.328.4648 and request item 978-6-0001-6406-5. (\$1.50, plus shipping)

*Journey Together Faithfully, ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Part Two.* This six-session study aids congregations, members, and others in discussing questions about the church and homosexuality. For print copies call 800.328.4648 and request item 978-6-0001-6848-3. (\$1.50, plus shipping)

*Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: A Video Companion Guide.* Available January 1, 2007 through Select Multimedia Resources. To order, visit [www.selectlearning.org](http://www.selectlearning.org) In presentations and conversation Dr. David Tiede and Dr. Timothy J. Wengert, members of the ELCA Task Force on Human Sexuality, provide basic insights into the book of Galatians and Martin Luther's "The Freedom of the Christian" in order to support deliberations about sexuality within this church.

Consult the Web site ([www.elca.org/faithfuljourney](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney)) for additional and updated resources.

### Other ELCA resources:

- *Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues.* A basic resource for discussing issues that Christians face in the context of their faith (1999) For a printed copy, call 800.328.4648 and ask for item 978-6-0001-1197-7. (\$1.00, plus shipping)
- *Talking Together as Christians Cross-Culturally.* For a printed copy, call 800.328.4648 and ask for item 978-6-0002-0162-3. (\$1.00, plus shipping)
- *Selected and Annotated Bibliography on Christianity and Sexuality.* A resource from the Division for Ministry (2001). Call 800.638.3522 for information on print availability.
- *Congregational Hospitality to Gay and Lesbian People.* A report from the ELCA Division for Outreach (1998). Call 800.638.3522 ext. 2647 for information on print availability.
- ELCA News Releases: News articles that relate to the ELCA Studies on Sexuality process. Go to [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/news](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/news)
- Articles from The Lutheran magazine. For a list of articles on both the ELCA Studies on Sexuality as well as articles of general interest on the topics of sexuality, go to [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/thelutheran](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/thelutheran)
- From the Women of the ELCA's series "Listen, God is Calling":
  - Called to Ethical Decision Making: No Easy Answers.
  - Called to Deal with Difficult Issues: A Challenging Ministry.[Note: Both titles are available online at [www.womenoftheelca.org/resources](http://www.womenoftheelca.org/resources) Call 800.638.3522 ext. 2737 for more information.]

# Appendix

# I

### Resources commended for using Galatians:

- A recitation of Galatians by Dr. David Rhoads' is available on the DVD *Dramatic Presentation of the New Testament*. (The DVD also includes portions of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John.) It is available from Select Multimedia Resources. To order, visit [www.selectlearning.org](http://www.selectlearning.org) and click on the category "New Testament."
- Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* in the Hermeneia Series, A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.  
This is the most comprehensive scholarly study available in English of Paul's rhetorical argument in Galatians. This commentary is primarily of interest to specialists who are well trained in Greek and the history of the Hellenistic world.
- James L. Boyce, "The Poetry of the Spirit: Willing and Doing in Galatians 5 and 6," From *Word and World*, vol. 20 (2000), pp. 290–298.  
This fine essay introduces the whole of Galatians as pointing toward the declaration of Christian freedom in Galatians 5:1 and interpreting what it means for the Christian life. "Far from being a digression from Paul's theological discussion of gospel and justification in the opening chapters of Galatians, the ethical consideration in chapters five and six are inextricably bound to the central argument of the letter. Paul maintains a crucial unity between theology and practical ethics." (p. 290). This full issue of *Word and World* deals with Galatians. It is available online in the "Resources for You" section at [www.luthersem.edu](http://www.luthersem.edu)
- Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1519 and 1535," in *Luther's Works*, Volumes 26 and 27 (Jaroslav Pelikan, Editor). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963 and 1964.  
These lectures are still a joy to read, both for their fresh theological conviction and for their scholarly learning. Pastors who are preaching on Galatians will find refreshment in Luther.
- Sam K. Williams, *Galatians* in Abingdon New Testament Commentaries. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.  
This small commentary fits beautifully with this study's "Readers' Guide to Galatians." Sam Williams writes in clear English, and he alerts the reader to important interpretive issues while continuing to be helpful to non-technicians. While recognizing our great distance of time and culture from when the letter was written, he understands that the force of the letter is best grasped by hearing it. "In this commentary," he writes, "I want to try to 'overhear' Galatians as though I were present in of the Galatian house-church assemblies as the letter was being read" (p. 16).

### Sources for Luther's "The Freedom of the Christian":

Translations of Luther's essay (translated from the Latin) can be found (among other places) in:

- *The Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970)
- *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy Lull (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989/2005)
- *Luther's Works* (American Edition, 55 vols. [St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress]) 31: 343-77

# Appendix II

## 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly Resolutions

### Social Statement on Human Sexuality

Assembly Action CA01.06.45

To initiate a process within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to develop a social statement on human sexuality.

### The Definition and Blessing of Committed Same-Gender Relationships

Assembly Action CA01.06.28

To respond to the memorials of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod, the Southeast Michigan Synod, the Upstate New York Synod, the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod, and the Virginia Synod by directing the Division for Ministry and the Division for Church in Society, in consultation with the Conference of Bishops, ELCA seminaries, colleges and universities, and other churchwide units, to implement jointly a churchwide study on homosexuality;

To provide that the process include creation of a study document on homosexuality for use in congregations, synods, and in sponsored hearings and focus groups across this church. This document shall include study of the Lutheran understanding of the Word of God and biblical, theological, scientific, and practical material on homosexuality. The document shall address issues related to blessing committed same-gender relationships, and rostering of approved candidates who are in committed same-gender relationships. This study shall provide for the sharing of information from and among members of this church;

To authorize the presiding bishop and Church Council to approve the parameters and expense budget of this process and identify the revenue source(s) to provide for this study;

To direct that reports on the study process shall be presented to each of the regular meetings of the Church Council, and to synod assemblies beginning in 2002 with response requested. A first edition report shall be brought to the 2003 Churchwide Assembly along with initial or interim recommendations. A final report, complete with action steps for full implementation, shall be presented to the 2005 Churchwide Assembly;

To respect charitably one another as we examine our understandings and practices, speaking the truth in love, practicing the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters” (Luther, Smalcald Articles, III.4); and

To request that the Division for Ministry, in consultation with the Division for Congregational Ministries and the Conference of Bishops, identify and make available materials to assist and support pastors as they provide pastoral care and counseling for persons concerned with these issues.

# Appendix

# II

### The 2001 Churchwide Assembly Actions regarding homosexuality and ministry resulted in the following social policy resolutions adopted by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly:

- 1) CA05.05.17 Sexuality and Church Unity ELCA Studies on Sexuality Recommendation I RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—its members, congregations, synods, churchwide organization, and agencies and institutions—be urged to concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements, recognizing the Godgiven mission and communion that we share as members of the body of Christ.
- 2) CA05.05.18 Sexuality and Pastoral Ministry ELCA Studies on Sexuality Recommendation II RESOLVED, that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America continue to respect the guidance of the 1993 statement of the Conference of Bishops; and be it further RESOLVED, that this church welcome gay and lesbian persons into its life (as stated in Churchwide Assembly resolutions from 1991, 1995, and 1999), and trust pastors and congregations to discern ways to provide faithful pastoral care for all to whom they minister.

## **Ordination of Gay and Lesbian Persons**

Assembly Action CA01.06.36

To respond to the memorials of the Saint Paul Area and Metropolitan Chicago synods by requesting that the Church Council, the Conference of Bishops, and the Division for Ministry create a specific plan and timeline leading to a decision concerning the rostering of homosexual persons who give expression to sexual intimacy only in a relationship that is mutual, chaste, and faithful, including but not limited to:

- 1) changes in “Vision and Expectations”;
- 2) changes in “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline”;
- 3) amendments to the ELCA constitution and bylaws; and
- 4) changes in all other related governing documents.

In the event any of the above mentioned changes require approval of the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, such actions shall be placed before the 2005 Churchwide Assembly for adoption or ratification.

# Glossary

**Abstinence:** refraining from sexual relations.

**Antinomianism:** literally it means without or against (anti) law (nomos); the term is applied to the view, rejected by the Lutheran reformers, that the Christian believer is free from the need for any and all moral laws, obligations, or principles because they are saved by grace and not by moral effort.

**“Apology of the Augsburg Confession”:** a defense or rebuttal of criticism directed at the Augsburg Confession written in 1530-31 by Philip Melancthon.

**Apostolic:** faithful to the good news of God’s love shown in Jesus Christ as witnessed to and passed on by the first apostles as recorded in Holy Scripture.

**Augsburg Confession (1530):** the Lutheran confession of faith written by Philip Melancthon and offered to the Emperor Charles V by political leaders of the Reformation as a summary of central evangelical beliefs taught in their territories.

**Augustine (354-430):** an influential North African theologian whose work focuses on sin and God’s grace; Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk.

**Baptism:** one of the two sacraments in this church; it initiates the baptized into the Body of Christ; in Baptism we die to sin and are reborn in Christ.

**Book of Concord (1580):** contains the Lutheran Confessions, which are the authoritative statements of faith and teachings of the Lutheran church.

**Celibacy:** voluntary abstinence from sexual activity, often bound by vows.

**Chastity:** The state or quality of being morally pure in thought and conduct; commonly used in relation to a person’s sexual activity; the state of abstaining from sexual intercourse.

**Communion of saints:** a participation in holy things, that is, the sacraments, with all Christians who have lived, now live, and will live in the future.

**Continent:** exercising restraint, especially in regards to sexual urges.

**Discernment:** the process of listening for God’s word to us; in this study discernment entails the understanding that while we seek to interpret the scriptures faithfully, our lives are also interpreted as addressed by God’s promises and commands.

**Deliberation:** the process of discussion of all sides of an issue; in this study it entails the understanding of a process of being thoughtful and disciplined when asking about and considering the reasons for belief, action, and policy related to sexuality.

**Ethics:** the word “ethics” is sometimes used as a substitute for “morals;” however, it often is used to designate the activity of critical and disciplined reflection or writing on questions of what is right, good, or fitting for humans to do and to be.

**Evangelical:** used in this study to refer to matters related to the proclamation of good news (gospel) that God has made possible through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**Eucharist:** one of the two sacraments in this church; it nourishes faith in the baptized; also called Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper.

**Faith active in love:** an important biblical expression taken from Galatians 5:6 (“faith working through love”) to emphasize that faith comes first and leads us to love one another and to act accordingly.

# Glossary

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**“Formula of Concord” (1577):** one of the confessional writings included in the Book of Concord.

**Gender:** in relation to sexuality this word refers to the categories of male and female and matters associated with each.

**Gospel:** the good news that God forgives us and accepts us through his grace alone on the basis of faith alone in Jesus Christ.

**Gnosticism:** the name given to a wide variety of religious thought and practice in the Greco-Roman world in the first centuries of the Christian era; a central tenet of Gnosticism was the conviction that salvation was to be found through secret knowledge (gnosis) that would deliver the spirit or soul from its imprisonment in the body or physical order.

**Hermeneutics:** a term applied to the activity of interpretation; it designates especially the action of interpreting or understanding texts, such as the Bible; the term is taken from the Greek name for Hermes who was the interpreter or messenger of the gods.

**Holy Communion:** one of the two sacraments in this church; it nourishes faith in the baptized; also called the Lord's Supper or the *Eucharist*.

**Idolatry:** excessive fear, awe, love, or trust of something other than God; loving or worshiping things of this world instead of God.

**Justification:** to declare righteous; the act of making right or justified (translating the Greek word *dikaiosis*); designates God's action whereby we are pronounced forgiven and placed in a right relationship with God through the work of Christ.

**Justification by grace through faith on account of Christ:** a central doctrine emphasized by Lutherans; belief that our righteousness is freely given by God and received by trust in God rather than achieved through human activity, knowledge, or character. (Taken from the *Augsburg Confession*, art. IV)

**Law:** indicates the total claim of God on human life experienced as command or as demand, experienced as a “you should;” it reveals the righteous will of God and shows humans how they ought to live in order to please God; this will or demand is expressed in many places both outside of scripture as well as in scripture--in scripture the prime examples include the ten commandments and the Sermon on the Mount;

**Law, Two Uses:** Lutherans traditionally talk about God's Law as having two uses: 1) The “civil” use where God uses “Law” in various forms to keep order and restrain evil in society and to promote the civil good; 2) The theological use in which “Law” indicates God's goodness experienced as demand upon us, showing the need for grace by spotlighting our sin and idolatry; A “third” use is also sometimes invoked in which God's commands serve a positive function of showing God's way for Christian action and character as our new possibility in Christ, even while judging us as sinners.

**Law, Third Use:** See Two Uses.

**Law and Gospel:** two closely related terms by which the Lutheran Confessions indicate the two primary categories of command and promise that sum up all Christian teachings and provide a means to interpret the scripture. The law shows our sin and puts to death the old creature; the gospel forgives sin and makes new creature of faith alive. (See Law; See Gospel)

**Legalism:** Trusting in strict and literal adherence to laws, commands, and “shoulds.”

**Luther, Martin (1483-1546):** a German monk and Protestant religious reformer of the 16th century who was a leading figure in the evangelical reform movement now identified with his name, thus the Evangelical *Lutheran* Church.

**Melanchthon, Philip (1497-1560):** A key German theologian of the 16th century and colleague of Martin Luther at Wittenberg University. Melanchthon was the primary author of the *Augsburg Confession* and its Apology. (See above)

**Morals:** having to do with human actions, character, and beliefs related to the good, the right, or the fitting; the word “morals” is often used as a substitute for “ethics.”

**Norms:** when used in matters of moral or ethics, “norms” refer to principles or general standards for judgment and guidance.

**Priesthood of all believers:** the teaching that all baptized believers are equal before God in sin and the need for grace and likewise have the responsibility to pray for and to share the gospel with their neighbors.

**Sex:** generally used in this study to designate actions and practices related to intercourse, genitalia, and the urges or instincts manifest in sexual behavior.

**Sexuality:** generally used in this study to designate the sexual dimension of human life or culture; thus, it is generally reserved for the range of human activity, practices, and character related to the reproductive and gender aspects of being a sexual creature.

**Theology:** comes from the Greek words for deity (theos) and discourse (logos); narrowly understood it concerns the existence and character of the divine, but broadly refers to the entire range of issues concerning human relationship to God.

**Tradition/s:** Generally used to indicate a broad and pervasive set of beliefs, values, knowledge, practices, commitments, judgments and other elements of culture that are shared by a people continuously from generation to generation. In this study the term often refers to either Christian tradition/s as a whole or specifically to the Lutheran tradition/s.

#### *Sources Include:*

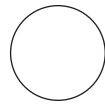
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# THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS- A READING IN 8 SEGMENTS

A resource for

## Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor: Lutherans Talk about Human Sexuality



English, tracks 1 to 8

Spanish, tracks 9 to 16

Tracks correspond to the scripture reading designated for each study session:

- Session 1 - Galatians 1:1–10
- Session 2 - Galatians 1:11—2:10
- Session 3 - Galatians 2:11—3:14
- Session 4 - Galatians 3:15–29
- Session 5 - Galatians 4:1–20
- Session 6 - Galatians 4:21—5:1
- Session 7 - Galatians 5:1–26
- Session 8 - Galatians 6:1–18

These recordings are available for free download at [www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/study](http://www.elca.org/faithfuljourney/study)

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