

**Saying *Yes* to the Gospel:**  
**A Pastoral and Theological Rationale for Welcoming GLBT People**

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Welcome Statement

Welcome to Mount Olivet Lutheran Church! Our church doors are open to all.

Mount Olivet Lutheran Church is a member church of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. We have committed ourselves to offering openness, understanding, justice and healing to God's creation. We are a community of faith rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We value diversity, openness, and honest quest of meaning. We respect all human beings regardless of their citizenship, cultural heritage, sexual orientation, cultural background or gender because they are created in the image of God.

You are welcome regardless of whether you are single, married, divorced, separated or partnered; whether you are straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered; whether you are politically vocal, apolitical or indifferent to politics; whether you own your own home, rent, live with your parents or are homeless; whether you are mentally, physically or not noticeably challenged.

You are welcome to join us to experience the radical love of Jesus and to face the unknown journey of life. We are committed to being a welcoming community of faith ever marveling at the wondrous love of God as seen at the foot of the cross. Therefore, in faithfulness to the Gospel, in reflection of our Lutheran heritage, and in honour of our shared baptismal covenant, we promise to seek ways to enter into shared ministry with all who would seek God here. Based on our understanding of Lutheran theology and the Bible, we wish to extend Christian fellowship to everyone.

You are welcome here.

## INTRODUCTION

What follows is a pastoral and theological rationale for the preceding Welcome Statement of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church. While the statement is broad in scope, the focus of the rationale is the welcoming of persons who are GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual) because it is they whose status and acceptance in society and the church are especially disputed.

This was evident at the 2007 convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada which narrowly defeated a motion brought by the National Church Council which would have allowed each synod of the ELCIC to decide how best to carry out mission in their contexts. The motion specifically mentioned mission in relation to persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. Despite the defeat of the motion the church is nonetheless committed to a motion passed at the end of the 2005 convention which empowered

our church's leaders, congregations, and pastors to seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, rejecting all words and actions hostile to gays and lesbians in our churches and communities, and taking steps to create a more welcoming environment in this Church for gays, lesbians and their families.

How can we create a welcoming environment in this church for GLBT and families? This question should be kept uppermost in reading what follows when we read the following essay.

Let me give a personal note. I did not always see the issue this way. I grew up in a Christian tradition that says homosexuality is a sin. But I also grew up in a church that says those who smoke, drink, dance, and welcome divorced individuals and ordination of women are not biblical Christians. Then I studied scripture and most importantly, encountered many GLBT people whom I consider honest, polite, knowledgeable, and even spiritual. Many of them even taught me significantly in serving the church. I have come a long way to see my own arrogance and assumptions.

There are people out there who said in welcoming GLBT people is the church giving in to society, disdaining the authority of the Bible or revising the traditional Christian faith – it sounds like the rhetoric of the Roman Catholic church toward Lutherans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For one thing, revision (reenvisioning) is the heart of the Christian faith; to say otherwise is to be blind to two thousand years of church history. But we do not revise for the sake of revising. We revise with the Gospel, Christ's love and command to love one another in mind. I for one, respect the Bible deeply and I interpret the Bible out of a deep respect to the life-giving Gospel that requires me to pay attention to scriptural circumstances, theological reasoning, cultural variance and the dignity of all human individuals who are at stake in this matter. The Lutheran tradition respects theological deliberation and responsible scholarship. Martin Luther himself was a professor of the church. Our denominational legacy values intellectual discourses and theological depth. I urge you to read what follows carefully over and over again and see for yourself my love for the Bible, Lutheran Confessions, and Christ's Gospel.

## PART I: HOW TO READ THE BIBLE?

### 1.1 What is Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics is about principles of interpretation and seeking understanding. Hermeneutics is also about life. Life stories, even biblical stories, are a chain of personal or corporate experiences that need to be formed, organized, synthesized, and molded in order to be told, retold, and understood. Without hermeneutics, life stories are just scattered incidents with no meaning, no theme and no direction. Life

without hermeneutics is life without purpose. Hermeneutics is what we humans do – make meaning. Everyone has hermeneutical principles. The question is: Are we aware of our hermeneutical principles and how appropriate they are? Unless we are conscious of our own hermeneutical lenses, we cannot see our own “methods” of reasoning.

## **1.2 Law and Gospel as a Hermeneutical Lens**

A key hermeneutical principle in Lutheranism is the lens called *Law and Gospel*. Through this lens, we come to see that the law convicts us of our sin but the Gospel sets us free.

Law cannot save us, no matter how good the law is or our keeping of it. As Dr. Erwin Buck, Professor of New Testament and former President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, says, “An interpretation of scripture which focuses on the Bible as a deposit of rules for right and wrong living, is missing the point.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, it is the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ that sets us free from trying to win our salvation and through our own performance, nor our own way of living. Christian people, says we are “not under the law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). To live under the law is to die under the law; but to live under grace is life.

## **1.3 The Augsburg Confession as a Hermeneutical Lens**

Another key hermeneutical lens important to Lutherans is the Augsburg Confession (1530) – one of the backbones of Lutheranism. For the issue at hand, two articles of faith are especially pertinent: Article IV (Justification) is the key article of the Lutheran faith. It states that righteousness is not something we earn. It is a gift of God, received by us through faith. Article VII (The Church). States very simply what is needed for the unity of the church. Through reading this essay, you will understand the meanings of these articles of faith better.

### **Article IV (Justification)<sup>2</sup>**

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.

### **Article VII (The Church)**

It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should observe uniformity in all places. It is as Paul says in Eph. 4:4 and 5, “There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

As Lutherans, we put the Gospel front and center, that is, the cross and God's free gift of grace in Christ. When reading the Bible, Lutherans ask: *Where is the Gospel?*

#### **1.4 Why is a Literal Reading of the Bible Misleading?**

The Bible comes to us from a world far removed in time and in a culture from ours. It comes from the culture of the Ancient Near East and the ancient Mediterranean world of 2,000 and 3,000 years ago. That culture included Judaism – Jesus and his original followers were all Jewish – also at varying times the wider world of Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

To read this historical document literally runs the risk of imposing our worldviews onto the written words. To better understand the written text, the church needs to spend time studying the political and social circumstances that formed the context of the writings. But the Bible is not just a historical document; it is also a living book that still speaks. The Bible is not a dictionary with definitions already well-defined in the past. In order for the historical text to be “alive” and give life to the people who read it well beyond the time of the writing, Christians of every time, place and culture need to discern the meaning of the text in light of the context where they are located. God continues to use the text (and other means) to speak new things.

In addition, one will not find words such as “Trinity,” “What is confirmation ministry?” “How to conduct a Eucharist” and so on in the Bible. When reading the Bible, we find pieces of data that are culturally and contextually specific. But these scattered sayings do not help the contemporary church deal with our issues. Our church needs a comprehensive system of thinking or belief derived from the Bible to serve as a guide to deal with complicated issues of our times. The church needs theology.

#### **1.5 The Theology of the Cross as a Hermeneutical Lens**

What is theology? Christian theology can be described as “faith seeking understanding”. Doctrine such as Justification by Faith, for example, is the result of the church's interpretation of Scripture. The work of theology requires human beings like you and me to synthesize various resources in a manner that forms a cohesive understanding. Nobody reads the Bible in a vacuum. Some thing, some theology, some assumption or some one helps give us guidance when we read the Bible. Because of this reason, the Bible and our theology form an intertwining relationship. In the Lutheran church, our principal operative theology is the *theology of the cross*.

Is the cross just a historical incident that Christians have to believe, or can it form a way of seeing that permits Christians to be open to one another? The message of the cross is that God's power is displayed through the powerlessness of Jesus with open arms. Because of this reason, the cross rules out human appetite for performance when it comes to salvation, it also exposes our ignorance whenever the church behaves as if we *own* salvation. It further exposes our ignorance when Christians think salvation is determined by morality and doctrine. Instead, we learn that it is through the cross, Christ offers us a free gift to the whole of creation. This providence of grace rules out the mindset of superiority, let alone exclusivity. The cross leads us to recognize God in the most vulnerable, the weak, the outcast, and those we consider as other. As recipients of God's grace, the church's ultimate mission is to share God's free gift of grace to all.

#### **1.6 Constitution and Doctrines as Hermeneutical Lens**

Welcoming GBLT people is mission. The beginning of this mission is the Gospel, not the constitution

nor doctrines of faith. Constitution and doctrines are the ways the church understands the Gospel reflected in a particular time and in writings. That is why from time to time the church revises its constitution and doctrines. Many life-giving movements such as the ordination of women, and the welcoming of divorced people, and children to the Eucharist all resulted in revising the constitution and doctrines; thus departed from tradition. Doctrines are not the Gospel. To quote the constitution and existing doctrines of a particular time as reasons to maintain the status quo is to say the finite understandings of a bygone era is the eternal standard; thus turning the finite into divine.

Constitution, tradition and doctrines provide the church clues to help us make decisions. Constitutions do not dictate what we do. To be faithful Christians sometimes means disagreeing with certain aspects of tradition: a 16th century Martin Luther couldn't understand why we ordain women; a 21st century Martin Luther can. The Gospel doesn't change, but the context where and how the Gospel is proclaimed changes constantly. The Gospel sets us free, constitution and doctrines cannot.

### **1.7 No Positive Biblical Text to Support GLBT Persons?**

Some sincere Christians point out while there are examples of women in leadership in the Bible, the Bible does not provide the church with a positive example for welcoming GLBT persons. So is this the *end* of the discussion or the *beginning* of discernment? We need to ask: Has the church always followed the content of the Bible? Has the church used the Bible to justify discrimination before? When the church preaches a collective group of people God does not welcome, the horror of the Crusade, Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust alarm us, we proceed with suspicion.

Although ordaining women and welcoming GLBT people do not get the same level of discussion in the Bible, we still want to ask: if examples of women leadership are hinted in the Bible as some people believe it to be, why did it take the church close to two thousand years to accept the ordination of women? The possible answer is: even though the clues are printed in black and white, the culture of the church in that day was such that it did not allow the church to know this answer. Textual evidence is not self-explanatory until the culture of the day allows the church to read it as such. In this perspective, what matters the most is not what is, or is not in the Bible; rather, it is our interpretive lenses and assumptions we use to understand the Bible that matters most. The history of Christianity demonstrates over and over again that it is the church's operative assumptions of the day that prevented the church from seeing the obvious.

What is needed in this situation is experience. When the biblical sayings are at odds with our experience, Christians must ask serious hermeneutical questions. What is common between the two issues is that contemporary Christians read the biblical texts and found that those texts were at odds with their experiences of these target people groups – women then and GLBT now. Experience matters. If we have GLBT friends, classmates, teachers, coworkers, musicians, lawyers, pastors, theologians, etc, we discern our experience with these people. Why do our experiences about them not fit with what the Bible says? For parents who have gay sons and daughters, they have the first hand understanding of the characters of their sons and daughters. Many of them can testify that their children are responsible, loving, creative and spiritual individuals. Deep down in these parents' hearts, they know something is not right when the church speaks horrifying things toward their children. Many of us who have GLBT friends and coworkers are sincere and serious followers of Christ. The meaning of biblical texts cannot be imposed upon them without serious discernment.

## **PART II: WELCOMING GLBT PEOPLE**

### **2.1 Biblical Dimensions**

#### **2.1.1 Revisiting Sodom and Gomorrah**

Why were Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed? Because of homosexuality, right? Wrong! This misconception is largely caused by the so called “Sodomy laws”. When we read the Bible closely, the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah have never been specifically named. Other biblical writers did us a great favor by referring to Sodom and Gomorrah when they made reference of injustice. We were told the reasons for Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction were idolatry (Dt. 32:32), pride, excess of food, unconcern for the poor and needy (Ezk. 16:49), and inhospitality (Mt. 10:15). In the past when the church had no interest in speaking on behalf of GLBT people, Christians were satisfied with vague generalization and have not asked details in scriptural questions. Today, if we read Genesis 19, Judges 19 and other biblical texts closely, biblical scholars show us that there were no chances that the “sexual acts” described qualified as homosexual acts the way we understand them today. The biblical witnesses testified that it was more likely gang rape than equal partners having loving and responsible sexual intercourse. These texts did not speak against committed same-gender relationships of two mature individuals who love each other and care for the wellbeing of each other. Professor Ervin Buck wrote:

One thing is clear. These stories do not speak about a “committed relationship of love freely entered into by two gay or two lesbian partners.” In fact, such an idea would have been incomprehensible in antiquity. Certainly no one had ever heard of homosexual behaviour between equal partners, nor did they have any inkling of such a thing as homosexual orientation.<sup>3</sup>

#### **2.1.2 The Holiness Codes in Leviticus**

Two passages in The Book of Leviticus contain instruction that forbids a man “to lie with a male as with a woman.” (Lev. 18:22; 20:13). Two considerations: The word “abomination” in Hebrew carries strong cultic connotations, i.e. in connection with the worship of other gods; it does not necessarily mean wrongdoing in moral sense. Thus, these verses do not necessarily clear the issue. Second, Leviticus is the prescriptive book for Jewish life, including dietary laws, social life, festivals and customs. The early church when they looked at the book they did not embrace all of the instructions as relevant to Christian life. A literalistic interpretation of these verses without asking how Christians understand Jewish holiness codes is unwarranted. It further complicates the issue when we consider the Bible as a whole, we do not find a cohesive single practice of human sexuality. Some accepted sexual practices contained in the Bible we reject today (e.g. polygamy, sex with slaves, levirate marriage) and what the Bible condemns we do not agree (e.g. celibacy (OT), naming sexual organs, birth control).<sup>4</sup>

#### **2.1.3 Take a Closer Look at Romans 1:26-27**

Most people cite Romans 1:26-27 as the proof text against homosexuality. Paul wrote:

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Note that in this text, Paul describes those individuals who gave up *natural* inclination for the unnatural. Are these the same kind of “homosexuals” whom we know today? Many GLBT can tell you it is their natural inclination to remain GLBT persons. In other words, they have not “given up” something to live a different kind of way. Knowing how society treats GLBT persons, many would change the way they live if it were only that simple. Research shows some people are able to switch their sexuality with therapy. But what about those people who have searched deep in their hearts and beings and concluded that homosexuality is not a choice, but 100% natural for them? Romans 1:26 did not address these natural, responsible, and loving individuals. It is my opinion that Paul had no knowledge of the possibilities of one’s sexual orientation when he wrote in the first century. Paul had specific individuals in mind from his own time. To lump the modern day responsible and loving GLBT people with the same group of people in Paul’s letters speaks to our desire to generalize, and not so much about careful discernment of texts and contexts.

Several verses in the same chapter earlier, Paul wrote, “...for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.” (Rom. 1:21). The individuals whom Paul talked about desired to forget God once and for all. But what about people who happen to be GLBT people who desire to give thanks to God and who are our baptized children, mothers and fathers, grandparents, professors, lawyers, doctors and friends? What about those who are devout Christians who worship God, and desire to serve God in our churches? These days most people don’t come to church anymore (or ask for God’s blessing in their marriages). But when a same-gender couple comes and attends our worship service, is it not a sign for us that these people know God, love God and desire God to be with them throughout their life’s journey? Why should we (or do we, the church have the right to turn them away? One needs to take note that Paul also says, “anyone who loves God is known by him.” (1 Cor. 8:3).

#### **2.1.4 The Misuse of “Sin No More”: John 8:11**

Some people in our church use the so-called “Sin No More” principle to argue against welcoming homosexuals. It is found in the gospel story where an adulterous woman was brought to Jesus. Jesus said those who were sinless be the first to throw the stone. Seeing none, Jesus said to the woman, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (Jn. 8:11). Based on this text, they argue that God welcomes homosexuals *if* they repent (note the condition). Again, we ask: *Where is the Gospel?* Take a closer look at this story. In this Gospel story, Jesus was not teaching us the requirement for forgiveness or setting up the criterion for welcoming. Imagine one month later, the same woman was brought to Jesus for the similar “crime,” would Jesus say something different then? Our understanding of the Gospel does not encourage us to conclude with confidence that Jesus would commend the witnesses to stone this woman to death even if she were a repeated offender.

Through Paul, we learn that it is “in Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.” (Eph. 1:7). Demanding anything else other than faith in Christ who has crucified and resurrected contradicts the reformation faith. While “sin no more” might be a good motto to guide our living, it is far from being a rule from which God uses to exclude.

In addition, putting GLBT people in the same category like pedophiles, bank-robbers, serial killers, and so on is unjust. Equating sexual orientation with adultery is also unwarranted. For people who fear that gay people will corrupt our society and water down morality has no fact to back it up.

Before we know it, these people, like many of us, are God's instruments to bring wholeness to this world. When we examine the writings of Paul in Romans 1, we find he was not interested in developing a criterion so as to give us the mandate to identify who should be "in" or "out". Instead, he pronounced our status as sinners where all people fall short of the glory of God. In Romans 1, Paul paved the way for the subsequent chapters about how we could not save ourselves through our seemingly good behaviours, right doctrines, and morality; and how all people need God's mercy and grace.

**Note:** Jesus' immediate followers consisted of tax-collectors, prostitutes, outcasts and other "unclean" individuals. Some who use "sin no more" as a general ethical rule should realize that there is no convincing biblical record testifying that these individuals stopped being tax-collectors, prostitutes, outcasts or "unclean" after meeting Jesus, or that Jesus stopped being associated with them when they "failed to change." At the entrance of heaven, when straight people point out gays' "lifestyle" to God thinking they themselves have conformed to God's principle, St. Peter who guards the gate shout, "Anyone who has been saved by Jesus? Welcome." Straight people would be surprised to see heaven has a lot more gays (and undeserving people in human standard) than they thought.

### **2.1.5 A Closer Look at 1 Corinthians 6**

Some quote Paul's letter to the Corinthians as a text against GLBT people. Paul said, "Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor. 6:9). Some translations use the word "homosexuals" when it comes to male prostitutes. Again we ask: Where is the Gospel? But before we do that, let's follow the logic of this text. If Paul labeled these people as unqualified for the kingdom of God, then how could one inherit the kingdom of God? The logic would allow one to say: doing the reverse, such as stop doing these things. If one does the opposite, then they shall inherit the kingdom of God. What is the problem? This is not the Gospel! What a blasphemy to suggest one can perform something and live certain way to inherit the kingdom of God as if ethics is the requirement for salvation. If this logic stands, there is no need for Christ. All I need to do to is to say to God, "I haven't been drunk and I didn't steal." Christ suffered and died in vain! The Gospel always maintains that salvation is a free gift from God. There is no two-tier system by which God judges us differently. In this text, despite stating in black and white, Paul was not interested to tell us what to "do" to inherit the kingdom of God. Because by saying so, Paul would contradict his own teaching where he says,

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the results of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph. 2: 8-9)

We learn that the phrase "to inherit the kingdom of God" is a saying, most likely means, "to please God." In the same letter, Paul also taught Corinthians many specific practices that was pleasing to God but we do not follow any longer, such as women should pray with their heads covered (11:13) or men who have long hair is a sign of degrading (11:14). One needs to understand the larger social context of 1 Corinthians. Paul was writing a letter to address a specific congregation that was in crisis. That congregation was so unique in a sense of disorganization that we must read with extreme care when extracting timeless teachings from it.

There is a good chance that Paul's concern was about temple prostitution. Temple prostitution was common in ancient Mediterranean society where people believed that they could be closer to God

by having sex with male priests. There were many male prostitutes who were ready to offer their “religious” service. Recent scholarship also suggests it might have connections with the Jerusalem temple. The Greek word in 1 Cor. 6 is *arsenokoitai* (men-sleepers). This word has very little to do with committed couples having a loving relationship. It has more to do with the male governing upper class in the Hellenistic world enjoying sexual pleasure from young “boys” whom they acquired – it is about status and power.

*(A Brief Summary)* Based on the scholarship of biblical studies, we have reasons to doubt the meanings of those terms ancient biblical writers used such as “unnatural” and “sexual immorality”; and question the unexamined notion that male prostitutes contained in the Bible is equivalent as the responsible, committed same-gender couples we know who are in loving relationships. Based on what we know in antiquity and the New Testament world, the idea of “sexual orientation” possesses a high likelihood of being a foreign concept to the biblical writers. Most biblical writers when they denounced homosexual behaviour, targeted people who have the prestige of status, abused the usage of power, or exercised cult-like practices in mind. If this understanding is correct, then imposing context-specific biblical writings on our responsible GLBT people is to commit injustice in the name of God.

## **2.2 Theological Dimensions: Biblical Vision of a New World**

Christianity is inspired by the biblical vision that there is no more division among God’s creation. In Isaiah, we learn God envisions a new world where “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard that shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them.” (Isa. 11:8). This is the vision of coexistence and equal sharing of power that upsets our usual expectations.

In the New Testament, we learn of the parable of the Good Samaritans, the Prodigal Son, the Rich Ruler, the Vineyard, and the Great Banquet. These stories challenge us to re-examine our notions about who is worthy, and who needs to be excluded; and more than that, these stories teach us how much God is ready to welcome those individuals whom society despises. Jesus’ radical love includes people whom society despised. Jesus’ earthly ministry more often than not, spoke against the status quo.

Some people talk about returning to God’s “original” design. They are confident that homosexuality is not part of this “original” design. I wonder: Are chemicals we use daily such as those contained in shaving cream, hair spray, lipstick, shampoo, plastic bags, pesticide, which are harmful to the environment part of this “original” design? The way we live today depends heavily on mega-size industrialized plants which often are the sources of pollution. We also dump non-recyclable waste on land and ocean, and consume the vast majority of world resources on the expense of the world’s poor. Are these part of God’s “original” design? Who in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is living according to the “original” design? I don’t exactly know what this “original” design entails. But the Gospel transforms us towards a better world, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1-2) and to be transformed by the renewing of minds (Rom. 12:2).

What some of these “original” design folks really try to say is: Penis is made for vagina. These people argue a way of Christian ethics based on the outlooks of human physical bodies. While same-gender affection does not constitute mainstream in terms of human relationship, we still need to ask: Are there other ethical attributes the Bible also value? What about faithfulness, fidelity, endurance,

integrity, loving-kindness, honesty, and responsibility? When the former attribute is at odds with the latter, the talk of “original” design suggests human physicality trump biblical virtues such as faithfulness, fidelity and responsibility. We do not find scriptural support for this understanding. Instead, we find faithfulness is the recurring theme in the two Testaments.

Many years ago there were rumors that said gays were Satan worshippers, psychotic, drunkards, criminals, etc. Today, we understand these notions are not true. These myths are the signs of homophobia. Many GLBT people are our paramedics who save people’s lives, our prosecutors who keep our city streets safe, our medical doctors and nurses who care for the well-beings of patients, our theologians and spirited-filled pastors who trained others to serve God, our beloved sons and daughters who are our great companion and so on. These people make great contributions to the well-being of our society.

### 2.3 What is Sin?

Sin in biblical standpoint is the failure to honour God as God (The First Commandment)! It is substituting the Creator with the others. The Bible also identifies some human behaviour as sinful. This behaviour mainly affects our neighbours on earth and can be dealt with by the enforcement of societal laws. Also, these societal laws are culturally and socially negotiated. Keeping these societal laws helps us live with one another while on earth. These laws do nothing to and cannot restore our relationship with God; the free gift of grace the church calls the Gospel can (Augsburg Article IV).

In our everyday lives, we are governed by the societal laws. Even if these laws were inspired by religious sources like the Ten Commandments, societal laws need further interpretations, implementations, and their meaning is subject to change. That is why we know that people in biblical times could have multiple wives (but not multiple husbands) and have sex with slaves. It seemed to be an issue of power over people rather than an issue about sexuality.

If one entertains the idea that the Bible teaches us adultery as a sin, we need to ask: What was adultery in biblical times? Who committed adultery? In biblical times even with Moses’ laws as the backbone, adultery was understood as the act of taking someone’s wife (in times of the Hebrew Bible, wives were understood as properties of men). King David was guilty of adultery only when he tried to take Uriah’s wife and tried to kill Uriah in the process. If the woman were a virgin, David’s reputation would not have been tainted. In those times men could have as many virgins as lawful wives as they pleased (it was *not* adultery according to the Hebrew Bible). King Solomon, who had the reputation of being the wisest man who ever lived and a man after God’s heart, has more wives than most contemporary men ever have; and it seems to have God’s permission. In our times, it is morally offensive to have more than one wife (and against the law). Surprisingly, not a single ancient prophet condemned such practices. That is why contemporary Christians simply cannot quote Moses’ laws such as the Ten Commandments *without* asking how ancient Israelites understood them? For people who believe that homosexual behaviour is an “abomination to the Lord,” they need to ask: Why was homosexuality an “abomination to the Lord” while polygamy, sex with slaves and treating women as property were not? Was it a major oversight on God’s part or does God not have a problem living with whatever sexual ethics society lawfully decides?

Sexuality in itself is not necessarily sinful. I suspect there are irresponsible contemporary homosexuals who might commit sinful acts just as some irresponsible heterosexuals might commit

some sinful acts. Irresponsible sexual practices are not limited to only one particular group. Moreover, we are talking about sexual orientation – something that someone is born with.

In Lutheranism, we maintain we are both saints and sinners – Lutherans love paradox. It is an illusion to think that we can live sinless lives while on earth. “Saints and sinners” means there is not a single moment when we are not sinners and there is not a single moment where we are not saints. One needs to meditate Paul’s words seriously, “anyone who loves God is known by him.” (1 Cor. 8:3). Whoever professes faith in Christ, God loves them *all*.

## **PART III: BRINGING IT HOME: IN CONGREGATIONS AND THE WIDER CHURCH**

### **3.1 *Solid Ground* or Shaky Ground**

Recently, there is a Lutheran movement within the ELCIC called *Solid Ground*. These people, lay and ordained, believe the Gospel compels them to speak out against full inclusion of GLBT. They threaten to leave the ELCIC if the church allows same-gender blessing. In doing so, these people make sexuality a central witness in which Christianity stands or falls. This self-understanding of the Gospel is not solid but shaky. Based on the Augsburg Confession, Lutheran theology and the Bible, the only “solid ground” the church stands on is Jesus Christ who died and rose from the death. There is no other “historical witness” God desires the church to defend other than the cross of Christ. To do otherwise confuses human traditions with God’s saving grace.

*Solid Ground* folks might think that they are the only ones who have integrity over the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions; and they think that others are just drifting away from its traditional confessional stance. However, by their unwillingness to discern the ongoing revelation of God through vigorous theological and sociological research and conduct cooperative discussion within the ELCIC, *Solid Ground* has neglected the very “traditional” spirit of the hermeneutical principles Martin Luther used to defend the heart of the Gospel.

My argument up to this point is that welcoming committed and responsible GLBT people is the call of the Gospel. The salvation question (absolution to sin) is answered through baptism and faith in Christ rooted in the mercy of God. If GLBT people have faith in the risen Christ, the church has no business in asking them to “do more” in order to be fully welcome. God’s promise of salvation to all through Christ invites us to extend true hospitality to all GLBT people who desire to worship Christ. Sexual orientation as we understand today is not a sin. *Solid Ground* folks disagree. But we differ on the matter of theological understanding in relations to mission to GLBT people, not the foundational convictions of the essence of faith, e.g. God. The issue at hand is a matter of pastoral care and discernment concerning how best the church should include people who are different. Some people’s threat of leaving the church mistakenly makes human sexuality the center of Christian faith. It has no scriptural base to support. There is no biblical passage that makes human sexuality the determining factor whether one is in or out of God’s saving grace other than professing faith in Jesus. *Solid Ground* folks have turned heterosexual orientation into a “gospel” which in the end does not give life.

In the last two conventions (2005 and 2007), motions that concern same-gender blessings were defeated by narrow margins (especially in 2007). That means a significant number (close to half) of Lutherans were disappointed. Yet, no proponents of these motions that I know of left the church. The threat to leave the church is not a genuine spirit of the Gospel who calls Christians to discern mission

for others as one community. Such a threat finds its root in anxiousness. It spreads fear to others so that people cannot think theologically the issue at hand.

### **3.2 Understanding Human Sexuality**

Sociologist and psychologists are helping us to better understand the complexity of human sexuality. The more we understand it, the more we are amazed by it. In the past, homophobia prevented us from having an objective mind. Homosexuals were treated as half-human, psychotic, criminals and they were most likely to be punished by death and other horrible treatments (such as the Holocaust). No wonder many did not “come out.” Today, with the advancement of human rights, many North American cities are beginning to ensure the rights and protection of GLBT people. It is this kind of favourable environment that allows us to know more about human sexuality, including the scientific studying of GLBT behaviours. Our knowledge of human sexuality is still in its infancy. But we learn that human sexuality is not determined by the physical body. Having a penis or vagina does not dictate how one expresses one’s sexuality. Our sexuality resides inside our brains, souls, and minds.

Only a few would change their physical body or sexual practices just for fun. Most GLBT people struggle to fight prejudices against them. We come to know human sexuality not as a certain act behind closed doors, but as an expression of one’s deep spiritual core. Some borderline homosexuals might be able to change their sexual orientation with therapy, many GLBT can tell us to stay true to their deepest self with integrity is to remain GLBT. These are honest spirit-filled individuals, not those biblical writers condemned.

### **3.3 Double Message No More**

Let me give you an imaginary scenario:

Imagine Jane was baptized in the church, given a baptismal candle and as the pastor I applied oil on her tiny forehead, said, "Jane, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." Over the years, Jane participated in Sunday school, was confirmed, and learned that Christ loves her no matter what. The pastor told Jane there is nothing that can take away Christ's promise to her. As a young adult, Jane then teaches Sunday school, sings in the choir, and serves the church in many capacities. Everyone in the church, young and old, loves Jane. Jane loves Jesus. Jane grew up in the church and sees church very much part of her life. But in mid-20s Jane finds out she is attracted to the same gender. After a long struggle Jane concludes that it is 100% natural for her to love her partner Paula. The church does not know what to do with them. And the church says to Jane, “We don't want you to teach Sunday school anymore. We don't want you to have a “bad” influence on our kids. Anytime you come to church, we will keep reminding you how much God is not pleased with you. We welcome gays.”

Jane was turned away by the church she grew up with in the language of welcome. As a pastor and theologian, I just cannot see myself teaching my people this kind of practice. We cannot say welcome on the one hand and “crucify” the people whom we just welcomed on the other. If this is what we mean by hospitality and welcoming, we need another kind. The church must stop giving out double messages in the name of Christ.

Welcoming GLBT people is a human rights issue. Despite being major contributors to the goodness of society and church, these people are continually labeled, bullied, excluded and even persecuted. Homophobia still rules many people's minds.

### **3.4 What does the Church Bless?**

My purpose in this essay is not addressing same-sex marriage. But let me touch upon this matter in brief. When a couple comes forward, the church blesses their commitment to care for each other for life. The church blesses endurance, commitment, faithfulness, fidelity, loving-kindness, forgiveness, etc. The essence of marriage is faithfulness, and so is the Christian life.

The church has no interest to bless sin. But there are substantial differences between the homosexual activities recorded in the Bible and the GLBT people whom we talk about today. Contemporary GLBT people who are responsible, honest, and desire God in their lives, God does not condemn them. The church's ultimate mission is not about saving marriage. One cannot find such mission anywhere in the Bible. Rather, God's ultimate mission is to reconcile God's creation through the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. While the meanings of marriage are constantly changing, the redeeming love of God through faith in Christ remains.

### **3.5 CONCLUSION: IT'S TIME TO ACT**

The issue of same-gender marriage will not go away until justice is done. But in the meantime, let us focus on welcoming GLBT people. Let us put words into action. Let's us tell the world Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in North Vancouver welcomes GLBT people. Let us make a bold statement of welcome and exercise true hospitality to whoever comes through our doors. Let us join a growing list of Gospel-filled churches which have already extended a welcome to GLBT people by becoming a *Reconciling in Christ* congregation. The *Reconciling in Christ* (RIC) program is a Lutheran movement to extend intentional hospitality to GLBT people. They have a website publishing all churches, synods and organizations that are members. Not all GLBT desire marriage nor want to be part of a church. We are talking about a small group of people within the GLBT community who desire God to be part of their lives. When they come, is it not a sign to us that God has worked in their hearts? For these people to show up at our doors, there is no convincing theological rationale not to treat them equally as one of God's redeemed children who deserve to be welcomed just like everyone else. With Christ's example of inclusion, I have no doubt that this is the right thing to do. We welcome because of the Gospel.

**Reference:**

<sup>1</sup> Ervin Buck, *Studies on Homosexuality and the Church*. ELCIC document, 37.

<sup>2</sup> “The Augsburg Confession,” Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 30-32.

<sup>3</sup> Buck, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Wink, “Homosexuality and the Bible,” in Walter Wink, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 43.