



## ONE LITTLE WORD SUBDUES HIM

*Sarah Hinlicky Wilson*

Those of you in the ELCA who have been doing your denominational duty by working through the third installment of the sexuality study may have noticed that one of the members of the task force was your new LF editor. I am a member no more; upon taking up this editorship, I opted to withdraw. Given the already fragile nature of trust in such a venture, it seemed that a media rat like myself wouldn't do anybody any good. Someone else was found to replace my demographic ("young, conservative, female, clergy" appear to be the four major requirements) and she will probably do a much better job than I did.

I don't have a whole lot to say about the experience of being on the task force or about the study itself. Karl Donfried's article in this issue does a nice job of addressing some of the problems in it. Other criticisms I've read have by and large missed the point. Most of the comments I've heard in conversation have missed the point, too. So it seems like a useful exercise to consider what the point of the study was supposed to be, and why criticisms of it have misfired.

The problem, in brief, is that nobody actually wants the end product of this third study—a social statement. What is wanted instead, I infer, is a clear statement of *personal* sexual morality, maybe something like Visions and Expectations, but for laity too, not just clergy. Perhaps, as our culture crashes around our heads, a clear guide to personal morality for the laity is the most urgently needed thing. But the third sexuality study intends to pave the way toward a *social* statement: an account of the place of sexuality in culture, market, and law, what we Lutherans think about it, and how we're going to act on those convictions on an institutional level. A social statement is an *advocacy* document, not a *disciplinary* document. Personal morality takes

place within the context of larger social patterns, so a social statement is to illuminate the latter, pointing the way toward structural reform, rather than give specific pointers on the former.

The fact that ELCA members by and large do not grasp what a social statement is for was demonstrated again at the churchwide assembly this summer, when the task force was charged with proposing a discipline policy for homosexual clergy. There is apparently some perception that the task force is a standing committee ready to deal with any and every sex-related question that arises. Rebecca Larson of the Church and Society unit acknowledged the disconnect in a recent email to the clergy: "Because ELCA social statements are not documents of policy implementation, the response of the task force to the assembly action will

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be addressed in a separate recommendation" from the social statement itself. Since this is the case, it's a good question why the task force is taking on the disciplinary recommendation at all. In any event, you can bet that the job the task force was originally convened to do for

the third phase of the sexuality study—produce a social statement—isn't going to get half the attention of the polity issue it's been asked to address.

And no surprise. A social statement is not a terribly exciting thing. The forthcoming social statement on sexuality might manage to provoke some controversy, but mostly, I expect, it will provoke indifference. Which is just as well. After my short time on the task force—with, let me say, perfectly nice and decent people, who were (as was I myself) by the very nature of the beast engaged in that most Pelagian of exercises, good Christians doing the best they can, which every Lutheran ought to know is a recipe for rich and abundant sin—I can conclude only that the process is

really rather preposterous. Two dozen people slotted to fill particular demographics were charged with examining the social structure of our culture and how human sexuality fits into it blessedly or sinfully so as to produce a

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study for some ten thousand-plus congregations to consider in preparation for a social statement summarizing the denomination's basic stance on the issues only for the purpose of guiding the official advocacy of ELCA-affiliated organizations but otherwise binding on nobody and all in the space of two or three meetings a year for three years despite the fact that every single issue addressed in the current study and eventual statement is a matter of enormous and contentious debate among scholars and pollsters. Maybe the question is not whether our social statement on sexuality will be any good, but whether there is any point to producing these social statements at all, whatever the topic.

Anyway, go ahead and criticize the sexuality study; but criticize it for what it is, not for what it isn't.

However, what distresses me more than any denominational study is the waste of energy it engenders—not so much from the task force itself as from the clergy and laity who react (and usually object) to it. It's really not worth it. It's just too silly to be taken seriously. What deserves our much greater attention is a fact that emerged after the first two studies: we Lutherans don't know our Scriptures.

It is absolutely futile to try to produce a social statement on sexuality—or to revise our polity in a contentious area—as long as we as a church are massively failing in what, according to our confessions, is half of the church's duty: teaching the word of God. If our

church body is making bad decisions, the problem is not hidden agendas or secret cabals in Chicago or even earnest efforts by well-meaning Christians, but basic biblical ignorance. (The reflections on Galatians integrated into the third sexuality study were an attempt to address this lacuna—too little too late, though I still think the impulse was honorable.) The problem has now been recognized, and promptly institutionalized, in the “Book of Faith” push for a good Lutheran hermeneutic. Of course, you can't have any kind of hermeneutic at all, good or bad, if you're not reading.

The situation, ironically, is much like our dear forebear Martin Luther's. The clergy promote their causes (righteous and unrighteous alike) instead of proclaiming the word of God in truth and purity; the laity are left in wretched ignorance of their own Scriptures. (My advance apologies

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to the laity reading this who are not wretchedly ignorant—but have the grace to admit you are in the minority.) Since history has already repeated itself in this regard, let us repeat its solutions as well and place the Scriptures back in the hands of Christians. Here's what I'd suggest.

(1) *Stop using Sunday School curricula.* The people who teach your children need to be competent in the Christian faith already—they shouldn't be using curricula as a crutch. Kids don't need curricula anyway; they get enough programming in school as it is. All children need, from ages three to ten, are Bibles and crayons. So teach your teachers to be comfortable in their own Scriptures. Find age-appropriate Bible translations. *The Beginner's Bible* is great for very small children. I've used the NIRV *Adventure Bible for Young Readers* with third and fourth graders, who by the end of the year could listen and read along in Genesis and Exodus for twenty-five minutes, boredom- and

fidget-free. Just read the Bible, talk about the stories, illustrate them. Have the kids memorize verses and give them prizes. If need be, use the money you would've spent on the curriculum to pay your Sunday school teachers. There is hardly a more valuable ministry, and ministers of the gospel should be paid for their labors. And at the end of class, send the Bibles home with your kids, exhorting the parents to read the Scriptures with their family.

(2) *Stop teaching theme-based adult classes.* It's the social statement problem writ small. Pastors and leaders who are passionate about a subject do their own synthesis of the biblical faith. But what they then teach is the end result of their own study process. It is much better to teach Christian adults their own Scriptures so well that *they* can start thinking through problems scripturally on their own. Let debates about the issues arise naturally and spontaneously over your Thrivent doughnuts. Let rival action groups arise in your church, wherein members argue over who has the better scriptural warrant for their position. God grant this kind of controversy to our lukewarm Laodiceas!

(3) *Stop using the lectionary.* Not forever. But take time off from it, especially in the green seasons. A three-year lectionary is certainly an improvement over a one-year lectionary, and both are improvements over preachers conveniently picking their favorites and avoiding the rest. But greater improve-

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ment still would come from augmenting the lectionary—which still limits, still omits, and still treats the Old Testament like a vast proof-text for the New—with continuous preaching through books. Let your people find out what it feels like to race through Judges in five weeks. Try reading John

straight through instead of in snippets strewn across the synoptics. Spend a Sunday on Jude! Instead of complaining about fundamentalistic novels, take two months to preach on Revelation. Blast right through Israel's kings, from Saul to the Babylonian captivity. In fact, try preaching on the Old Testament alone, even without readings from the four gospels. If we believe as strongly as Luther did that Christ was all over the Old Testament, then we need have no fears about neglecting the gospel in doing so. (See James Mauney's article, "Four Surprises," for more on this.) If you've preached through the lectionary cycle seven or ten times, you're ready for a change.

(4) *Stop using the NRSV.* It's just not that great of a translation. It's accurate, mostly, but it's terse and awkward. (Can you imagine Linus saying, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news...")? Use a translation that will startle you and your parishioners to hear an old favorite in a new

way. I've become a fan of the CEV myself. Usually, when some critical theological issue is at stake, it makes the wrong choice. But people understand it, and I can work with that. It even makes the psalms sound like they mean something instead of being flowery phrases chanted dutifully and uncomprehendingly. It doesn't do any good to be literarily or theologically correct if no one knows what you're being correct about.

(5) *Preach on the Catechism.* The Bible is long and intimidating, but the Catechism is the Bible in short and accessible form. If your people aren't ready just yet for the plunge into big chunks of Scripture, take some weeks to prepare them. For those confirmed in a Lutheran church, the Catechism is also familiar, and nothing will build your parishioners' confidence like the discovery that they already know something. (You can visit [www.lutheranforum.org](http://www.lutheranforum.org) to find Catechism preaching series materials.)

In short, tackle the problem from the right direction. The failure to make good decisions at churchwide assemblies, the misuse of language in the new hymnal, the abandonment of trinitarian invocations, the watered-down polity: these are not simply quixotic impositions from the top down. They're an endemic failure in our church as a whole to do what the church is supposed to do. Avoid the temptation to invest more energy fighting the battles of denominational politics than in giving your flock the means of grace. The devil has learned to be less obvious in America these days. He doesn't go in much for the Hitler or the Borgia pope or the Sauron types anymore. He's found the righteous anger of Christians against Christians to be far more effective. You want him to stop? You know what to do. One little word subdues him. #

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