Public and Private, Strong and Weak
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I. MORE JOY IN THE WORLD THAN THE CHURCH

In recent months hope has been surging through the world in a wonderfully disarming way. After terrible disappointments in China earlier last year, freedom seemed to break out in Eastern Europe in the course of a few weeks. Momentarily, even world leaders had a sense that they were not completely “in charge” of history. Now in the Soviet Union itself and in South Africa signs of long awaited changes scramble our perceptions and redefine our agendas. In Central America surprising events may signal new possibilities for change or reconciliation.

In sharp contrast to all of this is the stalemate in so many of the churches in America about the sexual issues, from abortion and homosexuality to inclusive language about God. First one issue then another comes to the fore. In all of these debates the sides seem rather static, the positions and arguments well worn, with each side trying to induce the indifferent middle to think that the other position represents the real danger.¹

My sense is that most of those in the middle are weary of discussing all these issues, but they are confronted with them again and again by the deep passions that lead proponents and opponents to keep them before the church wherever they can—from resolutions at conventions to demands for study and action, from articles and letters in church publications to powerful symbolic acts.

Currently, several of the Protestant denominations are deeply divided about homosexuality—specifically the ordination of openly gay and lesbian persons. This article argues that while biblical commands may not settle complex moral issues

¹Liberals seem recently to have gained new public support in the area of abortion, and candidates for public office suddenly run as advocates of a woman’s right to choose. This may be a temporary phenomenon or a more permanent trend depending upon which side is judged to pose the greater threat in the months ahead—those advocating access to abortion or those who would greatly restrict it or outlaw it completely.

like homosexuality, nevertheless, certain theological themes in the Bible and in Christian tradition often provide better clues for Christians discussing these issues than the terms which have regularly been used in secular, public discussion.²

Such change of language will be greeted with suspicion both by the strongest partisans of gay rights in the church and by the strongest defenders of “traditional Christian morality.” But most of us sense that we must now, in the churches, find our own ways to talk to each other about these issues if they are not to bring even more division to an already fragmented Christian movement.
II. “PUBLIC” AND “PRIVATE”

Is it all right for an ordained person to be sexually active as a gay man or lesbian if one’s activity is discreet—that is to say, done in such a private way that it does not become an issue for the congregation or the church leaders? A number of denominations, including those Lutheran bodies making up the newly-formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), have been saying this for some years, not so much in explicit policy as through a screening process that did not probe private lives too deeply.

This policy seemed enlightened at the time and did give a certain pastoral leeway to bishops to look at the circumstances of particular candidates. It also allowed some regional variation on this issue, which is generally deplored but probably quite necessary in any large American denomination. If it kept gay and lesbian clergy in the closet, it also allowed a good number of them to function in the church. Such a policy was probably a great burden and stress to some, but not terribly difficult for others.

Now suddenly this policy is under attack from several directions at once, from those who regard homosexual activity as wrong—particularly wrong for church leaders—and from those who speak on behalf of many gay and lesbian persons. In the ELCA the current revisions of policy were triggered by the announcement by three seminarians, who had been approved for ordination, that they were gay men who did not intend to keep this a secret.

This led to a firestorm in the church in which many persons wondered how a church policy could have been so lax or miscast as to allow such persons to make their way through seminary and be approved for ordination. Very conservative people were shocked at the notion of openly homosexual pastors; more moderate people wondered at the wisdom or effectiveness of the church policy. Many bishops rushed in to say that they had been misunderstood, and new guidelines

This article owes a great deal to what is perhaps the most original book in Christian theology and ethics in the 1980s: Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Construction of Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981). He chided the mainline churches for too easy acceptance of the liberal agenda of the secular society with its questionable goals and with little power in its terminology to motivate church members to change. In some ways the debate about the ordination of openly gay and lesbian persons is the latest skirmish in the “Thirty Years War” (1960-1990) in American churches between traditionalists and progressives. There may be stronger reasons for change than the liberal argument that such ordinations are a simple matter of justice, and stronger reasons for caution than the simple repulsion to the whole idea expressed by many conservative people in the church.

for candidates for ordination were produced in which each seminary student at an early stage of study had to answer whether she or he intended to live by the church’s standard of limiting sexual activity to marriage.

In all of this the great inadequacy of terms like “public” and “private” to distinguish right and wrong sexual behavior has become increasingly apparent. Those advocating the rights of gays and lesbians, including their right to ordination as openly gay persons, have dismissed with great anger the notion that the church should encourage people to stay “in the closet” or to abstain from sexual activity altogether. Building on the experience of gay and lesbian groups in the last few decades, they have rejected discretion as hypocritical and celibacy as unrealistic and unhealthy.
More conservative church members were genuinely shocked at the gap between the position of advocates for gays and lesbians and their own continuing convictions that homosexuality—whether inclination or behavior—was wrong, condemned by the Bible, and not to be encouraged by the church. How could such persons function as leaders in the Christian community? Thus in strange alliance with those calling for sexual justice, they also wanted this question of behavior to be public and not kept private. They did not want to be surprised.

The bishops and other ELCA officials also came to the conclusion that what persons did in private was so politically explosive that explicit guidelines were needed about the sexual expectations of candidates for ordained ministry. The new policy seemed to suggest that clergy could not function credibly in public unless the church had confidence that their behavior in private would not be an embarrassment to the church.

All of this now means that the ELCA, like many other churches, must develop a more explicit set of teachings about sexual conduct than had been formulated in the last twenty years. This is an opportunity, to be sure, but a difficult one, given the great diversity in that church and the real differences about how a sexual ethic comes to be formed.

At least in one important respect the old policy of discretion had an unacknowledged danger that is now exposed. What we do privately (perhaps even secretly) cannot finally be separated or compartmentalized from the rest of our life. There is a potentially devastating effect on the character of a person who acts in a different way privately than publicly over a long period. It is not only a dangerous situation psychologically (here those on the sexual left seem absolutely correct), but it is also too large a blank check to write to any person to say, “Whatever you do in private is not a problem for your profession.”

Some sort of policy was no doubt necessary in the midst of great anger and confusion in this newly-formed church body. But the particular strategy adopted galvanized the sexual left to action without particularly placating the sexual right. It also had the odd effect of asking about sexual conduct in such a way that it was an even more crucial criterion for being a candidate for ordination in the ELCA than confessional subscription (which continued often not even to be mentioned until final approval interviews at the end of seminary).

In this connection it is important to reflect that in many parts of the United States it is still difficult for a woman to be called as a pastor, and that the vast majority of congregations would never consider a black or Hispanic candidate. It is also the case that persons who are divorced may not be acceptable in many communities. One outstanding candidate that I know was recently told by a synod that he would not be acceptable because he enjoyed social dancing. Given these realities, it is difficult to see how it could be imagined that, except in some very unusual communities, there would be broad support for the ordination of openly gay and lesbian persons.

Still there are great dangers in the current crisis that forces these debates into the open and compels church bodies to formulate more detailed and explicit policies. They may find it hard to discover a rallying point for unity, and, given the depth of difference, schism is a real possibility. Church bodies will also be tempted to overformulate their codes of pastoral conduct, producing long, unattractive lists of unacceptable behavior that will do little to draw anyone with any vitality toward a calling so surrounded with dangers.

But there is also the question of how much we can bear to know about the personal lives of our pastors. If there is a danger when sexual matters are left to discretion and privacy that destructive consequences may follow, there is also a danger in knowing too much about them. The difficulty is not only one of potentially misleading gossip and summary judgment from
parishioners (although that has scarcely vanished in many places), but also one of whether most congreational members want to think too much about the sexual lives of their pastors.

There is something divisive and off-putting for many persons in knowing too much about the person in whom they will confide or from whom they will receive the sacraments. They want to believe that he or she can be trusted, but they may well want to be spared the details of personal life, both its joys and its problems. I suspect some of the deep negative response to the proposals to approve the ordination of openly gay and lesbian persons comes not simply from moral disapproval, but also from not wanting to know too much. Although this attitude may seem unfair, I suspect many of the same persons would not be too happy about ordaining openly heterosexual persons either. It will be difficult for one who leads with a sexual agenda of any sort easily to be accepted as pastor or priest in most Christian communities now existing in the United States.

III. THE “STRONG” AND THE “WEAK”

Given the difficulties and confusions just noted in sorting out issues of the sexual conduct of clergy in terms of the concepts “private” and “public,” is there an alternative? Traditionalists would turn to the Bible for specific advice on sexual conduct. This suggestion is so appropriate that it ought not to be dismissed lightly. Yet there are grave problems in moving directly from the Bible to detailed rules for conduct in this area, just as the church has discovered through the centuries that it is difficult to move directly from the Bible to the solution of complex political or economic questions.

Another strategy would look less to the Bible and the Christian tradition and

5Congregations may well leave the ELCA because of dissatisfaction over policy decision on this issue. These may include both congregations that want a more traditional sexual ethic and those who are appalled by too traditional and rigid a sexual code or by disciplinary action enforcing church guidelines. But the far greater danger would be what might be called “non-separating congregationalism.” It isn’t necessary formally to separate from a denomination to leave it. In a variety of ways a congregation can simply de-emphasize its connection with the denomination. This process is already well underway in the ELCA, spurred along by other issues than disagreements about sexual ethics.

6However clever and courageous the efforts of leaders may be in formulating policies or guidelines, the rationale they offer and the terminology they use are minefields. It is hard to find the right contemporary terms to suggest a responsible sexual ethic. If policy calls for celibacy for non-married pastors, for example, this is both understandable and amusing. A term that most Protestants have not employed positively for a number of decades now suddenly emerges as a description of the life to be lived by single male or female pastors.

more to the political realities within a given denomination. “What will the traffic bear?” seems to many to be the crucial factor. If the membership of a particular church will tolerate openly gay and lesbian clergy without too much division or disunity, let them be ordained. If the church will not accept them, or if the price of a vote in favor of such ordinations is too high because of too many who dissent, then the church must wait for a clearer signal of their acceptability.

It is prudent to count votes, especially since a number of miscalculations have already been made on that score by various parties in several denominations that are wrestling with this issue. Still I want to suggest an alternative approach to begin to think about this question. Even when we do not find detailed guidelines in Scripture for the ethical problems that confront us, we
may find there language more helpful in the discussion of responsible strategy than is available from such general terms as “public” and “private.”

In several of his letters, Paul settles some kinds of questions by making a distinction between the strong and the weak. In a typical admonition he writes: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves...” (Rom 15:1).

This is an ethic of mutual responsibility and self-restraint according to which actions are judged not simply in terms of their rightness or wrongness. Although, as the many lists in his letters show, Paul is not reluctant to make such judgments, the problem with such lists is that they are always a threat to the central Pauline concept of Christian liberty. The concepts of strong and weak call for a responding ethic that judges actions in terms of their effect on the neighbor. So Paul tells those in Corinth who celebrate their liberty, “Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow becomes a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Cor 8:9).

I do not want to suggest that current sexual issues can be sorted out any more definitively with this pair of concepts than with those of “public” and “private.” However, a fresh consideration of these and other biblical virtues might lead to a more complex and helpful strategy for any church’s wrestling with these issues than that provided by a referendum between change and tradition, in which church leaders nervously count the votes to see on which side their losses will be greater.

If in this debate in the church our thinking were to be guided by such a principle, it would remind us to be slow to formulate laws or guidelines as the answer to the problem. Some structure is necessary in the church, and compromise guidelines sometimes have to be adopted—as the early church saw at the Council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15. But such law—which becomes just as much canon law for Lutherans as for any other church—stands in real tension with the norm of Christian liberty, a norm that is always suspect in America where it seems true weakness not to “settle things.”

Who are the weak in the current debate about ordaining gay and lesbian persons? In the most obvious sense it is the community of gay and lesbian persons. No one can easily listen to stories of their struggles both in society and specifically in the church and not be greatly moved by the rejection and even violence that they have had to experience. No one can be aware of the devastating effect of AIDS and not see that there is special need for compassion and forbearance just now. No fair person can fail to see that much of their experience is an indictment of the pastoral failures of the church.

Thus for the rest of the church to assert itself, to stretch and challenge its expectations and ways of doing things for the sake of brothers and sisters in need, would seem to be a classic case of those who are strong being moved and even restraining their judgments for the sake of those who are weak. Many who joined in the recent Lutheran ordinations of practicing homosexuals in San Francisco wanted to do it for just these reasons, to reach out to brothers and sisters in hope at a time of special crisis for them.

The current situation, however, calls for a complex strategy because this is not the only group of “the weak” within the church. A second group who deserve forbearance and support are many of the very conservative persons in the church who are so deeply troubled by homosexuality and shocked by what seems to them to be the apparent complicity of the church
Many of these persons have been carefully taught by the church through decades of life that homosexuality was wrong, and about as spectacularly wrong as any sin could be. So they are understandably angry at what seems to be a reversal in the church’s teaching. Few pastors have taken the time to work patiently with them in teaching the continuing difficulty of deriving a detailed Christian ethic directly from the Bible. It is important that church leaders continue to hear these persons clearly. They are fully part of the body of Christ and crucial for any adequate airing of these issues. It is important also to see that much of their anger is not just homophobia—as true as that judgment may be in part; it is also a kind of loyalty to what they have been taught by the church, and to what they sense has been forgotten by some current church leaders. Wise strategy will hear both the voices of gays and lesbians and of conservative Christians and will create space for their concerns to be heard with charity and with time for the complexity of the issues they raise to be addressed. But it has seemed to me in the midst of the recent intense crisis in California Lutheranism about this issue, that these church leaders are themselves in a vulnerable position.

We think of bishops and other national church officials as those who have power in the church. In many ways this is correct, of course. But when the church finds itself deeply divided, their ministry of unity becomes very difficult to carry out. It is possible that our leaders, who have to find ways to hold an angry, frightened, and divided church together, are in this instance also among the weak.

7I do not mean to suggest that all conservative persons are to be seen as “weak” in this sense. Some of them are strong and aggressive and have been looking for an occasion for a fight for a long time. Some are also incurably naive, as in the case of Lutherans living in the Bay Area of Northern California who still seem shocked in 1990 that there actually exist gay and lesbian persons.

8In the case of Lutherans, this is partly an indictment of the laziness of many Lutheran pastors who have been willing to “fit into” the fundamentalism and moralism of many local communities, without taking the time to teach the proper distinction between law and gospel or, by the example of how little Luther was inclined to develop a directly biblical politics, to warn today against the development of a simplistic biblical sexual ethic.

9In the recent California Lutheran debates, it has seemed ironic that many of those who generally argue for a high understanding of the office of bishop have wanted the bishop to refrain from interfering with an unauthorized ordination and to take no disciplinary action in light of it. On the other hand, many who generally take quite a low view of the office of bishop have insisted that the bishop “stop the ordination,” as if Lutheran bishops had some sort of police powers. This is only the most recent evidence that American Lutherans have not yet made up their minds just what they want their bishops to be or to do.

We ought to pray for them in the heavy burdens that they bear for us and, more importantly, criticize their actions only in a way that shows that we understand how difficult always is the task of holding the church together in times of real crisis.

If, in the discussion of this issue in all the denominations that are now confronting it, a strategy could be found that heard both the voices of gay and lesbian persons with their supporters and the voices of more conservative Christians with their genuine concerns, then those who are strong—if there is anyone to exert strength on this issue—would be bearing with two groups whose needs cry out to us and whose pain suggests that we ought to speak carefully, curbing our sharp tongues and analytic insights for the sake of greater understanding of what is
happening to the church.

At the same time we must support our leaders, both in their struggle to maintain the unity of the church and in their efforts to create space in which such discussion can take place. Perhaps none of us feels especially strong when it comes to sorting out the proper sexual ethic of Christianity in these confusing times. Nevertheless, the pain of division in the church cries out to us to curb our disinclination so that each of us in our appropriate locations might do what we can to preserve liberty, forbearance, and unity in the church.

10It seems to be a sign of how little has been accomplished ecumenically that we are not at all inclined to try to resolve this issue together. That seems true, at least, for such near neighbors as Lutherans, Episcopalians, the Reformed Churches, and Methodists, all of whom have made very good progress in ecumenical dialogue and all of whom confront the same dilemma in regard to this issue. Roman Catholic input would also be helpful, although on such a question as this the great distance that remains between the churches of the Reformation and the Roman Church is especially evident.