

# Serving Two Masters – Pastor David Glesne

## **Serving Two Masters**

by Pastor David N. Glesne

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is currently engaged in a two-phased study on sexuality. The first phase calls for a study of homosexuality with specific reference to the blessing of same-sex unions and the ordination, consecration, and commissioning of people in committed same-sex unions. The second phase calls for the development of a social statement on sexuality.

In its study of homosexuality, the churches of the ELCA have been invited and encouraged to participate in the process of developing a social statement. They are strongly being urged to undertake local discussions and to respond with their thoughts and evaluations. To aid local churches in their discussions, the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality has provided a study guide entitled *Journey Together Faithfully, Part Two: The Church and Homosexuality*. This response is one Lutheran pastor's critical reflection on the study guide.

In the study guide, the aim of the Task Force is to be balanced and fair in providing examples of the differing views and positions held within the ELCA on this controversial issue. The same would be the aim of the companion background paper, "Background Essay on Biblical Texts," which gives an account of "how different scholars studying the same texts, using comparable methods, can come to different conclusions." The study guide endeavors to level the playing field and present arguments fairly on both sides of the issue. As much as is humanly possible, to a greater or lesser degree, I think the Task Force's work approaches their goal.

It is hard to imagine, however, how the study guide will help its readers and the church at large reach reasoned conclusions regarding the morality of homosexual behavior, the blessing of same-sex unions, and the ordination of practicing homosexuals. Indeed, there is significant reason to predict that it may cause even greater confusion and bewilderment in people's minds. Let me explain.

I think it is fair and accurate to say that many people in the ELCA are deeply concerned about the matter of homosexuality, the issues of same-sex unions, and the ordination of practicing homosexuals in their church. I think it is also fair and accurate to say many are confused and don't know where they stand on the issue. Their heart is telling them one thing. Their head is telling them another. They are confused and want to know what the Scriptures say about two main questions: "Is homosexuality contrary to the will of God?" and "What should be the church's attitude toward the homosexual?" They are confused because they thought they knew what the Bible says about homosexuality but are now being told that understanding may not be correct. They are sincerely looking to the church for help in clarifying their own views and figuring out what God thinks about all this. Unfortunately, the study guide may be of little help in clarifying people's views.

To be fair, it must be acknowledged that helping people clarify their views is not the stated aim or purpose of the study guide – and a piece of writing must always be evaluated on how well it accomplishes its aim and purpose. As stated above, the aim is to even-handedly present different views and positions and I have acknowledged that the Task Force has quite ably met that goal.

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And so they are to be commended. Maybe the best one can say about the guide is that it is an unfortunate document. It is unfortunate not because it did not accomplish its goal. It is unfortunate because it provides little or no help to the great numbers of people in the ELCA who are looking for clarity in how they and their church come to conclusions about truth.

In the ELCA today, we are being confronted by a change in methodology, that is, a change in how one arrives at truth. With specific regard to homosexuality, we are being confronted with a new way of arriving at the rightness or wrongness of same-sex behavior and the related questions of ordination and same-sex blessings. It is this change in methodology, an issue that runs through the entire study guide that I want to address here. I do so because it is unlikely to be seen and understood by those who do not have the requisite background to evaluate the change.

The methodological confusion comes into view at the beginning of the study guide in “Session One: Our Identity.” The guide states that,

Luther and the other reformers insisted that the Bible alone is the authority for the church’s teaching. For them the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture helped to ensure that the central message of the gospel, rather than an outside authority such as the pope, would govern our understanding of the Bible.

So the study guide begins by affirming the Reformation conviction of *Sola Scriptura* and denies any human authority as being authoritative for the church’s teaching. In lifting up *Sola Scriptura* the guide reminds

us that the Lutheran conviction was – and still is so confessed – that the words of the Bible are essentially the effort of God to help us understand our experiences. It was Luther’s view that the authority of the Bible comes from God’s initiative. Scripture is understood as God’s revelation to us. It is God’s means of Grace. It is God’s Word to us. It is God’s gift to us. For Luther and the Reformers the way one arrived at truth in both faith and life was to submit to the ultimate authority of Scripture.

But after initially lifting up *Sola Scriptura*, the study guide goes on and overlays the Reformation principle with equivocal formula. Terms are used that are the same in name but questionable in reality. The guide continues to affirm the authoritative nature of God’s Word in terms that confessional Lutherans would use but it becomes increasingly clear that it does not mean them in the historic Lutheran sense. There is a different understanding of biblical authority at play in the guide. There is a different methodology at work.

The change in methodology is seen most clearly in the section “The Bible and Experience.” This section begins by stating that the ways we understand the Bible are influenced by our experiences. Likewise, our understanding of the Bible influences how we understand our experiences. So far so good. Well said. But in the next paragraph there is a subtle shift. It is almost imperceptible but the shift moves one from one side of the Continental Divide to the other.

This paragraph speaks of our *experience* of new life in baptism being God’s affirmation of us through the forgiveness of sins. It speaks of our *experience* of God’s grace in Christ being the center of the Bible and the key to its interpretation. It speaks of our

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*experience* of justification by grace through faith as that which guides our attempts to understand God's Word. It then adds that our life's *experiences* in general will shape our understanding of the Bible. In this paragraph human *experience* becomes the key to the interpretation of the Bible. The section ends by putting forth the formula to be followed:

“Our understanding of a biblical text will be a product of the interaction of our experiences, the words in the Bible, and the Holy Spirit working in and through our study of those words.”

With the introduction of this formula, how one arrives at truth changes. In making human experience the key to the interpretation of the Bible, a rival authority to *Sola Scriptura* is in fact set up. Human experience or reason becomes an alternative authority to the Scriptures. From within each new historical context, my human experience becomes the interpretative key for understanding the Scripture.

The lessons of history teach us what happens when alternative sources of authority are brought along side Scripture. The Roman Church and Orthodox Catholics tie the knot of ultimate authority for faith at the place of qualified men (Tradition, the Pope, or the seven Universal Church Councils) opining on the meaning and reliability of the words of Scripture, i.e. interpreting the Scriptures for us. When you have two authorities – Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church – interacting with each other as in the Roman Catholic view, when push comes to shove you can't have two ultimate authorities and the teaching authority comes out on top.

“Liberal” Protestant theologians and their 21<sup>st</sup> Century children tie the knot of ultimate

authority for faith at the place of reason, at the latest findings and hypothesis of science, as mused upon by learned professors. When you have the two authorities of Scripture and reason interacting with each other, when they clash, reason most often comes out on top. Setting up human experience as an alternative authority is simply a variation of reason.

The study guide moves on from there and while speaking the language of the preeminence of biblical authority, it suggests that it is in the interplay between Scripture, tradition, reason and experience in the given context that we are to seek to work faithfully at the task of biblical interpretation. The study document moves authority from *Sola Scriptura* to Scripture and human experience. Is there really any question in light of history that when this methodology is followed, when these two conflict, when push comes to shove, which one in time will come out on top?

It is a small step to move from one side of the Continental Divide to the other. But the direction established by doing so is totally changed. Eventually, one ends up as far apart as the Pacific Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

On the *Sola Scriptura* side of the Authority Divide, Church tradition is seen as important. It is valued for the help it provides in understanding what Scripture teaches. It is acknowledged that we are not the first people who have read the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning the Spirit has been active in the Church, doing the work he was sent to do, guiding God's people into an understanding of revealed truth. The history of the Church's work to understand the Bible becomes a commentary on the Bible, which we cannot ignore or despise without

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dishonoring the Holy Spirit. What the Bible says about the Spirit's work in the Church is taken seriously and so much is learned from the book of Church history. But this Church history book is not made a separate authority apart from the Scriptures. Since pope and church councils have been known to err, like every commentary on the Bible, the book of Church history must itself be tested and, where necessary, corrected by the Scriptures, which it seeks to expound. Scripture stands over tradition and judges the human teachings of men.

On this side of the Divide, reason is seen as important. The best of scholarship is embraced as it uses God-given reason in the study of science and Scripture, all the while looking to Scripture to tell us whether reason is right in what it thinks on subjects with which Scripture deals. The proper task of reason is to act as servant of the written Word, seeking in dependence on the Spirit to interpret Scripture scripturally, to correlate its teaching, and to discern its application to all parts of life. Because of human prejudice, sinfulness and pride, however, it is understood that reason is not competent to tell us whether Scripture is right in what it says. Scripture then stands over reason as the final arbiter of truth, affirming reason when it is right and correcting it where it is mistaken.

On this side of the Divide, human experience also is embraced as important and valuable. We experience joys and sorrows in this world. We listen to human experience – our own and that of others – and are drawn into the stories of loneliness, alienation, pain and hurt that people experience in a broken, fallen world. This listening moves us to be people of compassion and patience. We also experience God's grace in Christ, the new life of forgiveness of sins, the power of the

Holy Spirit for substantial healings of our brokenness. But human experience can never be self-validating or self-authenticating. Our experiences as male and female, as members of a social class, as rural or urban dwellers, as those who have known suffering or suffered prejudice, as church members are never self-defining. Because of sinfulness, pride, and prejudice, it is understood that human experience also cannot tell us whether Scripture is right in what it says. The hope-filled words of the Bible are essentially the effort of God to help us understand our experiences. Scripture then stands over human experience helping us make sense of our lives.

On this side of the Authority Divide, then, the principle of *Sola Scriptura* sees Scripture as the final authority and arbiter of truth. It is an authority that comes from God's initiative. While it affirms and greatly benefits from the insights of tradition, human reason and human experience, God's message to us in Scripture stands as the Authority over all alternative human authorities.

On the other side of the Divide, the methodology in coming to conclusions of truth changes. As in the study guide, on this side, the authority of God's Word is affirmed but the journeying together faithfully is described as interplay between Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, a faithful journey together where Scripture becomes a dialogue partner with the others. It is to be a journey, which supposes that we all have started at the same place and that disagreements come only over principles of biblical interpretation. It is to be a journey on which the key is our interpretation of a few selected texts purportedly having to do with homosexuality. As we make this journey together through the study guide, we may find interesting the explanations of

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differing views and arguments, but at the same time feel ourselves entering into a low-land fog where one interpretation is juxtaposed against another, where the revisionist scholar I have up my sleeve says the opposite of what the traditional scholar you have up your sleeve says. We may feel ourselves sinking into a bog of quick sand in which one persons' experience is pitted against another person's experience.

Once *Sola Scriptura* has knowingly or unknowingly been nudged to the other side of the Divide, history becomes our witness over and over again, that if given the chance, alternative authorities on this side eventually will and do rise up and stand over Scripture. The study guide at one and the same time affirms the authority of Scripture and posits an alternative authority of human experience. The revisionist interpretations of the biblical texts which are presented throughout the document and the companion background essay on biblical texts, in fact, have as their goal, to frame theology in light of experience. This alternative authority is an authority that comes from man's initiative. Then the attempt is made to combine them in a formula, and we are commended to regard Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience as interacting coordinate authorities, none in reality being set finally above the others. But the formula is unworkable. You cannot serve two masters. What happens when they clash? There seems to be no other way of making sense of the formula than to suppose that it conceals an intention of accepting all that Scripture and tradition and reason and experience are held to agree upon, but of appealing to the arbitration of human experience when they differ. If so, then of course, human experience is the ultimate authority all along. Neither Scripture nor tradition is to be followed further than experience and reason approve.

In the sixth and final session, the study guide ends with a section entitled "The Nature of the Disagreement Among Us." It states that we not only disagree on what practices the church should follow for same-sex blessings and ordination, we also disagree on the nature of the question. Is the disagreement about moral judgments or core doctrine? The study document states that the disagreement about moral judgments is not over the authority of the Bible, but over how we interpret and apply certain texts in today's world. Central matters of faith are not at stake here, it is claimed, and so same-sex blessings and ordination are not issues that can define or divide the church. With regard to core doctrine, the document states that there are those who see these issues as striking at the foundation of biblical authority and church teaching on which the church's core doctrine rests. Such a revision would divide the church and undermine its mission.

The study guide would have us believe that we in the ELCA are all starting at the same place with regard to Biblical authority and that the differences among us, therefore, are not over the authority of the Bible, but merely over differing interpretations of the biblical texts and how they are to be applied in today's world. I would beg to differ. There is the much deeper issue of the change in methodology, the change in how we arrive at truth. The Great Divide in this debate is the authority of Scripture. We are not all starting at the same place and as a result we end up in different places. On the one side of the Authority Divide are those who stand with Luther and the Reformers on the principle of *Sola Scriptura*. It is Scripture alone and nothing besides that is our final authority. On the other side of the Divide it is Scripture and human reason and experience. For those who stand on this

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side, when push comes to shove, more often than not, human experience emerges as the final authority.

The question of “Where do we rest our faith?” is always a critical one. As the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard said, “Anyone who sews has first to tie a knot in the thread somewhere.” Only in tying one’s knot somewhere can you keep your work from unraveling. The Lutheran conviction has always been to tie the knot of authority in the Holy Scriptures, period! The only way to make sense of what the suggested formula in the sexual study document is commending to the church is to see that the knot of authority is now to be tied at the place of human experience and reason.

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