

Why the Lutheran National Assembly Is Wrong
Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 13-7:5

Throughout the summer we've been looking at the Parables of Jesus. A parable is a teaching moment.

Jesus would see a farmer sowing seed and he would point to the scene and tell his disciples, "The kingdom of heaven is like that."

Today I am going to break into our parable series and seize a teaching moment. A week ago the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America had its national assembly in Minneapolis. They voted to strike down a policy that required celibacy of gay clergy. The change allows those in committed same-gender relationships to serve as pastors of congregations that want them.

This decision is significant for a number of reasons.

First, the Evangelical Lutheran Church is a large denomination with 4.7 million members, so this impacts many people.

Twenty-four percent of Minnesotans identify themselves as Lutheran. There are 1,183 ELC churches in our state.

The decision has caused a rift in the Lutheran church.

Conservative Bible believing Lutherans are devastated.

Some Lutheran pastors are heart broken and church members are wondering if they can now stay in the church that has been their spiritual home all their lives.

I confess to personal sadness.

I have enormous respect for the Lutheran church.

In my study at home I have a bust of Martin Luther whom I regard as one of the greatest Christian leaders of all time.

My wife Gretchen was raised in the Lutheran church and became a Christian as a teenager through hearing the Lutheran liturgy.

I know that many of you also have Lutheran roots and you are troubled by this development.

This issue has become very personal for many of us.

We may be gay or have gay children, siblings or friends.

We see how they struggle. We want to support them. But we can't do that by changing or ignoring the teaching of scripture.

While the Evangelical Lutheran church is the largest American denomination to take this position it is not the only one.

The United Church of Christ allowed the ordination of an openly gay man and openly lesbian woman back in the 1970's.

The Episcopal Church consecrated the first openly gay bishop in 2003.

Individual churches belonging to the American Baptist denomination have appointed openly gay ministers.

This is part of a worldwide trend.

When our family was in Scotland in June we worshiped with a Church of Scotland congregation. They are Presbyterians tracing their roots back to John Knox. Their General Assembly had just approved the appointment of an openly gay minister in the Presbytery of Aberdeen.

That denomination ordered their churches not to talk about the subject. I find that extraordinary.

It seems essential that Christians must discuss such a major change from traditional church practice.

That is what I want to do today.

I want to begin by saying that everyone is welcome in this church.

We are all sinners in need of God's grace.

We have a Savior with wide arms who bids us to come to him and I am very glad that people of every sexual orientation call Autumn Ridge their church home.

Having said that I believe that the Lutheran National Assembly made a wrong decision.

It does not honor the teaching of scriptures on which Lutherans have historically stood.

Therefore, it is not kind to those with a homosexual orientation.

I believe the Lutheran National Assembly got it wrong for three reasons.

First they failed to recognize **IT IS NOT A MATTER OF HOMOSEXUALITY BUT PURITY.**

The issues of this debate become much clearer when we stop thinking in sexual subgroups and instead see the big picture.

I think it is helpful if we stop talking just about homosexuals, as if they are a special class of people, and instead talk about human beings made in the image of God.

We then ask, "What Is God's calling on our life?"

After all we know God made us for a purpose.

He is a loving Father who wants the best for us.

He would never say or do anything that was not for our eternal well-being.

When we look at the Bible in this light the answer is clear.

God calls all of us to sexual purity.

That is the thrust of Paul's words to the Corinthian church. Corinth was a city that celebrated sexual freedom.

The town was dominated by a flat topped rock on which was built the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, whose service gave rise to the city's proverbial immorality.

Addressing the congregation in Corinth Paul has a very serious warning. He writes, **"Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."** (1 Corinthians 6:9 & 10)

Please notice that homosexuals are included in the same list with heterosexuals. Along with them are those who get drunk and are greedy.

In other words this is a description of fallen humanity, of you and me. Paul's point is that the Church of Jesus Christ are a people from every possible background whom God has called to live in a new way.

We are not to be sexually immoral but sexually pure.

Now if a certain activity keeps us out of God's kingdom we would want to avoid it. That's why the church doesn't advocate adultery because it disqualifies us from God's kingdom. For the same reason the church condemns greediness, or drunkenness, or pride.

So why should we make an exception of homosexuality when God's word is so clear. Homosexuality is just one sin among many. It is no worse than the others on the list. All of them can keep us out of the kingdom of God.

Now here is a very important point. If doing these things once is wrong they do not become right by doing them multiple times.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church wants to allow those in "committed same gender relationships" to serve as pastors of congregations. But sinning over the long term is certainly not an improvement on sinning in the short term. For example God tells us not to be greedy. We can't give the excuse, "But I am in a long term greedy relationship." Whatever our particular temptation is God has called us to purity.

That may seem to be an impossibly high standard but the wonderful truth is that when the Spirit of God is at work in our lives, God transforms us and Paul is able to say to these Corinthians: **"That is what some of you were (sexually immoral, adulterers, homosexual offenders, thieves, drunkards, slanderers.) But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."** (1 Corinthians 6: 11)

At Autumn Ridge we make the same joyful confession.
We were like that before we came to Christ.
As heterosexuals we acted immorally.
As homosexuals we acted immorally.
We got drunk. We slandered. We swindled.
But God has forgiven us and changed us.

We have become a new creation.

Recently we have heard about the government's program called Cash for Clunkers. God has a similar one.

It is called "Christ for Clunkers."

It is part of God's spiritual stimulus program.

He offers to trade us in for a new state of the art model.

It is a limited time offer but we can act on it today.

And it is an offer made to all of us irrespective of our sexual orientation.

God's word to homosexuals is exactly the same as it is to heterosexuals.

It is to **"Keep yourself pure." (1 Timothy 5:22)**

Perhaps at this point it is helpful to answer some of the objections that are raised to this argument that God calls all of us to a life of purity.

Objection 1: But heterosexuals can get married, homosexuals can't.

But not all heterosexuals do get married.

There are about 92 million single adults in the United States according to the most recent census data and most of them are heterosexual.

About 42 percent of the adult population in America are single.

That compares to about 4 percent who are homosexual.

There are many heterosexuals who never have the opportunity to marry and they too are called by God to a life of celibacy.

I mention these statistics to illustrate that scripture does not unfairly single out homosexuals, who therefore deserve an easier path.

There is not one commandment for homosexuals and another for heterosexuals. It is the same for everybody.

Those in favor of gay ordination often point out that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality.

He didn't need to. Instead, he calls all of us to a life of purity.

In this Corinthian letter Paul talks about the gift of singleness.

For some of us this is a gift we may not want but as Christians we believe that God is sovereign in our lives.

We have discovered that true happiness is found not in following our own desires but God's desires. Here is God's desire:

"The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord." (1 Corinthians 6:13)

That is why Paul adds, **"Flee from sexual immorality." (v 18)**

That's directed at all of us, single and married.

Sexual temptation does not stop when you get married.

That is why God also called married people to faithfulness and purity.

Objection 2: But homosexuals are made that way.

The answer is we don't know what causes homosexuality whether it is nature or nurture.

Whether there is a genetic component or it is a matter of choice.

What we can say with certainty is that we live in a fallen world and all of us, without exception, have imperfections that we carry with us through life.

We can also say that there is no sin in having a homosexual tendency.

We cannot help the way we feel but we can help the way we act.

Again let's go back to looking at the big picture.

The single heterosexual person will face sexual temptation and so will the married heterosexual person.

The single homosexual person will also face temptation of a different nature.

By the grace of God all those temptations need to be resisted.

When we do so, we bring glory to God and we become more like the Lord Jesus Christ.

The problem with excluding one group of sinners from the teaching of scripture is that we do not give the Holy Spirit a chance to work in that group.

The grace of God cannot be seen. And that is a tragedy.

And so in this church, when single heterosexuals who are living together come to us for counsel we say, "God wants something better for you. He wants you to live in purity until that time when you are united in the covenant of marriage."

And all of us whether heterosexual or homosexual must listen to the teaching of scripture which says, **"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us . . . but among you there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity . . . because these are improper with God's holy people."** (Ephesians 5:1-3)

Now we do not expect unbelievers to live by this standard.

Why should they? They don't believe in God or accept the Bible as God's truth. But Christians are different.

We do believe the Bible is God's word and it is there for our protection and so it is not unreasonable to ask those who claim to be Christians to live by Christ's standards.

According to *Christianity Today* 58 percent of gay adults say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

If that commitment is real, they will want to live for Jesus.

Second, I think the Lutheran National Assembly got it wrong because they forgot **IT IS NOT A MATTER OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION BUT OF SELF-CONTROL.**

The Evangelical Lutheran Church reached its conclusion after eight years of study and deliberation.

I am certain that during that time the question was asked, "What is God's will in this matter?"

God's will about our sexuality is very clear in scripture.

Listen again to Paul, **"It is God's will that you should be sanctified:** (Paul then explains what sanctification looks like) **that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen who do not know God . . . for God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life."** (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8)

Where does this self-control come from?

It comes from understanding who owns our body.

Here is Paul again. He was a single man who certainly understood the power of sexual desire.

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

It is because the Holy Spirit of God is within us that we can live by God's standards, which would be impossibly high without his help. Paul writes to Titus, the pastor of the church on the Greek island of Crete and says, **"Encourage the young men to be self-controlled."** (Titus 2:6)

Self-control starts in the mind which needs to be renewed by Christ and so Peter writes,

"Prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'be holy, because I am holy'." (1 Peter 1:13-16)

Sexual desire is one of the most powerful feelings in the world.

It cannot be mastered without divine help but that assistance is available. Paul writes to

Timothy, **"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline."** (2 Timothy 1:7)

Homosexual inclinations are no more powerful than heterosexual ones and they both need to be given over to God.

Now at this point we perhaps need to talk about whether God will remove or change homosexual orientation.

I have a very dear friend who was a spiritual mentor to me when I was an undergraduate.

He is a homosexual.

As a Christian he knew God called him to sexual purity.

He prayed again and again for God to take away his desires.

God chose not to change him just as he chose not to remove Paul's thorn in the flesh.

As a pastor I have come across homosexuals who have been wonderfully delivered but I would say they are in the minority.

For most of them this will be a struggle for the rest of their life. In this they are no different from other Christians who face their own particular temptations.

For example I have known alcoholics who when they came to Christ had their desire for alcohol immediately removed and they have never wanted to drink again. But as many of those in our Celebrate Recovery program can testify, that is not typical. Most need to depend daily on the grace of God and on the encouragement of other believers to remain sober.

It is important for us to remember the promise of 1st Corinthians 10 which says, **"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. (Homosexuality is not a unique temptation.) And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."** (1 Corinthians 10:13)

I mentioned earlier that I am glad we have homosexuals in this congregation. They are non-practicing homosexuals who are depending each day on the grace of God. Some of them are single, others are married. We need to support them and encourage them and applaud them for their victories.

The history of the church is filled with men and women who by temperament are homosexual but by choice are living for God's glory.

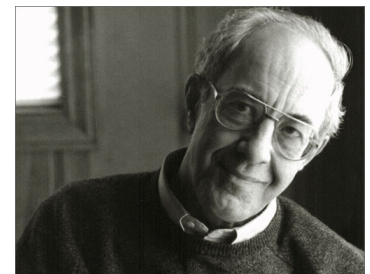
The poet W. H. Auden was a homosexual Christian. He tells us something important about ministering to homosexuals in the church. He pointed out that the vocation of celibacy needs to be worked out in community.



Auden wrote, "If it weren't for other people, I don't think I would make it. For me to live faithfully before God as a sexually abstaining homosexual Christian must be to trust that God in Christ can meet me in my loneliness, not simply with God's own love but with God's love mediated through the human faces and arms of my fellow believers."

We are grateful that organizations like Exodus International provide a supportive network of encouragement to gay Christians. (ExodusInternational.org)

Henri Nouwen, the popular author on spirituality, was also a celibate gay man. He wrote of his lifelong struggle in one of his last journal entries before his recent death. "I have an inner wound that is so easily touched and starts beating again . . . I don't think this wound – this immense need for affection and this immense fear of rejection – would ever go away."



The third reason I disagree with the Lutheran National Assembly in

their decision to allow practicing homosexuals to serve as pastors is because they fail to recognize that leadership is not a **MATTER OF EQUALITY BUT OF SPIRITUAL STANDARDS.**

It appears that behind this decision is the thinking that everyone is entitled to be a pastor but that is not the case.

Scripture makes it clear that there are spiritual qualifications for leadership among God's people.

We see this in the Old Testament when the Levites were set apart as priests.

There were a whole list of qualifications and requirements for the way they were to serve God. That practice continues in the New Testament.

For example in Acts there was a need to institute the office of deacon in order to help with daily food distribution for the poor.

The apostles told the people, **"Brothers choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom." (Acts 6:3)**

The congregation of that church in Jerusalem had the freedom to choose candidates for leadership within certain guidelines.

The men had to be wise and Spirit filled.

As the New Testament church develops the qualities for leadership are refined further.

So we find Paul writing to Timothy and giving the qualifications for leaders of the church of Jesus Christ.

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer (that word means elder and it is also used interchangeably with pastor), he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. He must not be a recent convert . . . he must also have a good reputation with outsiders." (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

It is incredibly important that a church holds its leaders to these standards or the congregation will suffer.

As a church we are incredibly blessed by the caliber of our elders. They are not perfect but they strive to meet these biblical goals.

I have seen firsthand what happens in churches where anyone is allowed to serve as a pastor, elder or deacon.

You finish up with a carnal and unspiritual fellowship.

Now I am certain that the Lutheran church would not allow a heterosexual man living with his girlfriend to serve as a pastor. Nor should they allow a gay man living with his partner to hold that sacred office.

Remember the issue is not homosexuality or heterosexuality.
It is purity.

So can a homosexual be a pastor?

Yes, if they are living a celibate holy life.

It is no different from a single heterosexual.

They need to be a non practicing heterosexual who meets the qualifications of an overseer.

The fact that we did not meet these standards once does not mean that we are forever disqualified.

Paul himself had been a murderer but when he became a Christian his whole life changed and he became an apostle of the church.

Our own fellowship is filled with leaders who have sinful pasts but who glory in the forgiveness of God that has made it possible for us to now live in a way that honors Christ.

Every congregation should be concerned about the spiritual caliber of their leaders.

The way it works at Autumn Ridge is that the Board of Elders hold the pastors accountable and the congregation hold the Elders accountable and together we hold each other accountable.

There is no perfect church because there are no perfect people. But that is very different from allowing sin to run unchecked. That is what was happening in Corinth and that is why Paul writes this first letter that we read part of today.

The seventh chapter of First Corinthians is important in this debate because it addresses the definition of marriage.

Paul begins by saying it is fine to remain single because that will allow us to devote ourselves more completely to the work of Christ. But he realizes that calling is not for everyone and goes on to say, **"Each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband."** (1 Corinthians 7:2)

That is the definition of Christian marriage.

It is not one man and multiple women.

It is not two men or two women.

From the very beginning God has decreed that, **"A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh."** (Genesis 2:24)

Two men or two women living together cannot be married in the biblical sense of the word.

Society may use that term but scripture does not.

The reason is that scripture teaches that marriage is a spiritual institution.

It is a covenant between a man and a woman that is a physical picture of Christ's passion for his bride, the church.

Paul explains this to the Ephesians when he writes:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.” (Ephesians 5:25-28)

Did you notice how Paul moves back and forth between talking about marriage and the church? One represents the other.

Those of us who are married need to regularly check our relationship against this very high standard.

It starts with a commitment to be faithful until one of us dies and it is backed up by the willingness to lay down our life for the other as Christ laid down his life for the church.

So perhaps you are wondering what is Autumn Ridge’s position on homosexuality. We want to follow the example of Jesus.

He invites sinners of every description to come to him.

So we open our arms to heterosexuals and homosexuals and transgender people and liars and haters, murderers and gossipers. All of us are sinners in need of salvation.

When we come to the cross of Christ he takes us as we are.

But he loves us far too much to leave us that way.

If we are a liar he wants to fill us with his truth.

If we are a thief he wants to impart his honesty.

If we are lustful he wants to give us his purity.

And out of this motley crew of sinners saved by grace he raises up individuals to lead his church as elders, pastors, and teachers.



Frederick Faber was a non-practicing homosexual.

He was a gifted poet and wrote a marvelous hymn that speaks of the glory of the gospel. The first verse goes like this.

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy like the wideness of the sea,
 There’s a kindness in his justice which is more than liberty.
 There is welcome for the sinner and more graces for the good
 There is mercy with the Savior, there is healing in his blood.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of our sexuality.
Used as you intended, it is beautiful and brings us joy.
Misused in a selfish and sinful manner it brings us into bondage and prevents us having a right relationship with others and with you.

We thank you that you have given us books like Proverbs to warn us that our sexuality can be a trap and a snare. You have given us other books like the Song of Solomon to help us to appreciate and experience the exquisiteness of marital intimacy.

We take this gift of our sexuality and give it back to you.
We ask that you would help us to be pure.
Forgive us for lustful thoughts and immoral practices.
We thank you that your Holy Spirit can release us from sexual bondage and set us free to enjoy you.

We pray for organizations like Exodus International as they minister to homosexuals and point them to freedom in Christ.

We pray for the Evangelical Lutheran Church, especially those congregations that are wondering how to respond to this decision. Grant them your courage and wisdom.

We pray that our church will be a place where we feel safe to ask for help with our sexual struggles whether those come from a heterosexual or homosexual orientation.
May this be a place of healing for every kind of sin.

We praise you that Jesus went to the cross and rose again that we can be forgiven and washed and sanctified and that whatever our past we can be a new creature in Christ.
We thank you that you are the God of the second chance and the one hundred and second chance.

Teach us not to presume on your grace and to minimize the teaching of your word. Help us to lift up one another when we have fallen and to encourage each other in our walk of faith. Amen