

THREE THINGS THAT COULD SPLIT THE CHURCH

by Dan Hooper ■ July 31, 2007

Everyone involved in the discussion of human sexuality and homosexuality worries, at least some, about whether this could “split the church.” Certainly the threats within the Anglican communion, coming from Archbishop Peter Akinola in Nigeria, seem to give credence to this view: homosexuality will do to the church what slavery did to it 150 years ago. the implied argument from conservatives: *for the good of the whole church*, homosexuals should stop pushing themselves and their agenda.

But how well grounded is that fear of a major church implosion, and therefore how responsible is that advice to LGBT people to sit down and be quiet?

As I have said about Pope Ratzinger I, I am glad that Peter Akinola is not my boss. Thank God, Jesus Christ is my boss, and he had a far different “take” on the issue of unity. “Remain in my love,” he said. “By this will all know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Taken as a whole, down through the centuries, many powerful people who were not Jesus’ disciples were running the church named after him. The lack of love for one another was palpable in almost every one of twenty centuries.

Martin Luther is not/was not our boss, either, nor Philip Melanchthon. Yet these Reformers argued, in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII:

Our churches also teach that one holy church is to continue forever. The church is the assembly of the saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Conspicuous by its absence from this list of two conditions is human sexuality – whether than consist of marriage and divorce and re-marriage, homosexuality, prostitution or procreation, masturbation or pornography. In fact, the list of two conditions doesn’t even mention human sin, although the Augsburg Confession and other Lutheran confession and foundational documents do. But the simply point is this: for the unity of the church we need to agree on the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. How, then, can disagreements about homosexuality, same-sex marriage, affirmations of welcome to LGBT people, the ordination of women, or concordats of agreement with another church body, be blamed for the split-up of the church.

The Church is already split. And it is to our shame, not for causing its dis-integration in the year 1054 A.D. or 1530 A.D. or any other moment of crisis. It is to our shame for choosing up sides to participate and continue old arguments with our fellow Christians that we don’t need to. Some years ago, Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx explained that the Reformation disagreement about the Lord’s Supper (Holy Communion, the Eucharist, whatever name) that drove a wedge in Western Christendom (already split from the Eastern Church) over terms like “consubstantiation,” were now useless and should be dropped. His argument was that the 16th century dispute was grounded in Aristotelean philosophy which has long since become meaningless.

The shame on contemporary Christians is that we feel we have to defend the honor of past generations over misunderstandings, concepts and ideas that are no longer compelling or pertinent. future generations of Christians may look back on the 20th–21st century arguments about homosexuality and

shake their heads in amazement that people got their shorts in a knot over concepts about human sexuality that are no longer intellectually viable.

Splits in the church are still real, however, even if people who should know better actively try to maintain them or deepen them even on sinking grounds. In the meantime everything from “non-denominational” Christians to neo-pagans to atheists have a long laugh at our disunity. Why, given this reality of mixed-up faith or total faithlessness, should we want to maintain or deepen splits *over anything*? We have the Gospel. We have the sacraments. What is the problem with us?

Nonetheless, I started by considering some honest questions that people who worry about the sexuality wars frequently ask. “Will homosexuality split the church?” “Will the ordination of sexually-active homosexuals split the church? Will the blessing of two men or two women before the Altar of God split the church?”

Here I want to propose three things that can split the church (whether at the local congregational level, or at a national churchbody level or worldwide communion level). Let’s take these one at a time.

1. People just “walk.” Fed up with what they find distasteful, unacceptable, heretical or apostate, they leave the church. The sheep split up the sheepfold by taking some of the sheep away. (It’s ironic that Jesus seems not to have been concerned with this in his ministry, even though Sadducees and Pharisees were at each other’s throats, Zealots were amassing weapons and Essenes were running to the desert to get away from it all, and Jesus’ own message was both winning and losing followers. No, Jesus was more concerned that there were *other sheep* out there whom he desired to bring into his fold. His love for the other sheep was not grounded in a simplistic understanding of human nature and human experience. *He knew and understood controversy. He stepped into arguments and prodded people to think deeply, question ideas, and reconsider their cherished beliefs.* No, Jesus was concerned for the *other sheep* because they were outside the fold.

I think of those who are alienated, turned off, or bored with the controversy within the sheepfold. today that would cover so much of pagan North America and ex-Christian Europe. Religion has lost its meaning for millions because Christians, while busy trying to split hairs if not split the church, have let deep faith and true spirituality evaporate from the church’s ministry. We ought to be ashamed that something as glorious as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is communicated, shared and lived *so poorly* that people are no longer drawn to the church.

Recently I heard a startling statistic that the vast majority of Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod congregations last year had either zero or only one Baptism. What? And they are struggling over who will control their churchbody? People out there in the world are drawn to Jesus, but not drawn to the church. And the bumper sticker sums it up nicely, “Jesus SAVE ME from your followers.”

Now, when it comes to a specific “worry” such as the place of homosexuals at the table of the Lord — the presence and participation of “out” and proud LGBT Lutherans or Methodists or Christians — people could just “walk.” There is a whole little band of ELCA Lutheran congregations right now associating in the Word Alone organization who appear ready to just walk. their newsletters are so *testy* that it is hard to know what they really value deeply. It is easier to discern what they find appalling or disgusting. For them, homosexuals rank right up there with the Episcopal Church.

“Conservative” Christians can just walk away from what they consider to be a flawed or “apostate” churchbody. They can easily rant about what’s wrong with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America, for example. Even I have done that. But I have never left the ELCA even when it has left me. Even after being pushed off the Clergy Roster (officially by reason of a technicality: I had not received a letter of call for three years after having resigned the previous call) I never left the ELCA. I joined and began to worship in an ELCA church (RIC to be sure) the very next week after my forced resignation from my pulpit.

Speaking for those of us who are lesbian/gay, bisexual or transgender, we are not the ones splitting the church *if we are the ones who remain loyal* even in the face of ridicule, rejection, horror or dire threats. We are not the church splitters, but the “best little boys and girls in the church.” We are still playing the organ, singing in the choir, helping out with the youth group, teaching the children (about God and Jesus, not sex). We are the ones who are still putting money in offering envelopes, taking care of our elders, and remember the (ELCA) church in our wills, too. We are loyal, even if we should have every right to walk. No, we are not splitting the church.

Should we feel responsibility if others walk from the church because they believe it to be apostate? Or more to the point, can we be blamed by others for splitting the church merely because we have stayed and made the church such an uncomfortable place for others that they have felt compelled to walk away?

Well, they have other alternatives. The biggest thing that comes to mind is, they could talk to us, even if in their pious ignorance the conversation begins with something like, “How *dare* you. . .?” They could invite us to talk to them, to tell our stories, to share our faith, to weep openly about the pain many of us have suffered. The main thing is that we talk, honestly and openly. Not through opposing newsletters and web sites slung at each other’s feet, but real conversation.

I know this seems impossible, but it’s really only hard. For one thing, we have the Holy Spirit who, Jesus promised us, will guide us into all the truth. That is a matter of faith, my friends. It’s in the Bible and we don’t doubt the authority of the Bible any more than the next guy. It says that the Holy Spirit will guide us into all the truth. I suspect that won’t happen, of course, if we won’t talk to one another, avoid one another, take shots at one another through expensive mailings to every congregation in the church criticizing each other. We have to actually talk, and therefore, to listen.

Some years ago I jotted this note: “The shortest distance between two points of view is the truth.” By which I mean, if you want to get somewhere, tell the truth. Speak the truth. Listen for the truth. Be authentic. Bare your soul. Confess your faith to one another. Or as Emily Eastwood once described, bring pictures of your children and share them. Get talking.

The Bible is indeed full of this advice. One of my favorites is from St. Paul (also no stranger to controversy but hardly one you could blame for splitting the church): “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” -- 1 Thessalonians 2:8.

Let’s be open on this, okay? If all Christians share in the faith that Jesus Christ is Lord — if we all call the same Jesus Lord and Savior, and if we all espouse our hope in the prayer of Richard of Chichester, a 13th century bishop, O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother, may I know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly and follow thee more nearly, day by day – then why should any Christian either blame anyone else for, or threaten to, split the church. Yes, we have disagreements. But disagreements in faith are just that *in* faith. If we doubt or disdain one another’s faith, we are willfully trying to demonize the other in order to make it more acceptable to reject the other.

Scripture also counsels us to discern the spirits. Jesus reminds us to “judge not, lest you be judged.” The measure you get is the measure you give. These are pithy reminders of how we ought to treat one another in this great community of the followers of Jesus. Even more sharply said, “If when you are bringing your gift to the altar you remember that your brother has something against you, go first and make peace with your brother.”

But the disdain and rejection begins something like this. I love Jesus, and I know Jesus loves me. You don’t agree with me; so therefore Jesus can’t love you and you can’t love Jesus. If you need help with the illogic of this, I suggest calling your local college philosophy, logic or even mathematics department and have them explain it to you. It seems sensible but it is nonsense. Or, as St. Paul says, “What, are you the only ones to whom the Gospel has been preached?”

Clearly, in the sexuality wars we don’t all disagree about the meaning of everything in the scripture, or the applicability of many passages to Christians today. But as Bishop Paul Egerton suggests as one of the seven rules of Biblical interpretation, let the clear passages of Scripture cast their light on the unclear passages of Scripture. If we let the Gospel shed light on us all, it will expose our faulty logic, our lack of love, or our mistakes in ecclesiology for what they are. And it will show us how to have unity.

2. Expulsion. — In this second possible reason that might split the church, let us say, the churchbody kicks out its dissidents, either one or two at a time or *en masse*. It kicks out either individuals or pastors, or congregations. It summarily says, “I have no need of you.”

Of course, that doesn’t often happen, where the larger church would admit to such a line of action. More likely it will expel people for open and notorious trouble-making, for un-Christian behavior, or for false doctrine— things like that.

We remember that the reason why homosexuals were burned as “faggots” (little sticks) at the stake by the medieval church, is that the church first declared them heretics and then, in cahoots with the civil authorities condemned them to die for their heresy – their belief that their actions were not sinful. There’s some genuine circular reasoning in that, but it would take too much space to explain it thoroughly. But it sure saved the religious authorities from having to indelicately say “I have no need of you.”

Martin Luther himself was condemned by the Vatican for heresy, not for insubordination. Yet when we read the record, it becomes clear that the brazen manner in which he questioned authority, repeatedly, *loudly*, in print, all across Europe, was his chief offense. He became so offensive to the church that virtually everything he said about Gospel, grace, redemption, justification, Scripture, sacraments, and the power of the keys *became* a condemnable offense. In his generation the church did split *because of two simple things*: (1) Luther refused to back down or recant his strongly-held beliefs if they could not be refuted by means of Holy Scripture, and (2) they kicked him out.

Scenario Two is a real danger. Fortunately, Archbishop Peter Akinola does not have the authority to kick out Bishop Eugene Robinson, but Akinola can make the situation ugly under Scenario One (he and his churchbody could just walk.)

I am not worried about the Anglican Communion splitting because of Scenario Two, however, I am worried about the Evangelical Church in America splitting this way. So far, the ELCA's tactic has been zero tolerance of homosexual pastors and homosexual-sympathetic congregations on procedural grounds.

In 1990, St. Francis and First United Lutheran Churches in San Francisco, on the clear advice of Martin Luther himself, realized that they had the authority to call and ordain pastors to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. They were put on trial and expelled from the ELCA not for false doctrine or un-Christian behavior or open and notorious trouble-making. They were expelled for violating a single rule in the Constitution and Bylaws of the ELCA: they called to ministry three candidates who were not on the Clergy Roster of the ELCA or eligible for call and ordination to that Roster. They broke a rule.

It remains unclear if the ELCA learned any lesson from that. The two congregations continue to flourish. They continue to send in their benevolence dollars to the Synod (and the Synod continues to cash their checks!). My own congregation, Hollywood Lutheran Church, was also subject to discipline in 2004 for breaking the same rule by extending a Letter of Call to me. the discipline was a scolding on the part of the Bishop. The congregation is still in good standing in the Synod, and the Synod still cashes our benevolence checks, too.

Later, individual Bishops simply went after individual lesbian and gay pastors who dared to come out: Rev. Ross Merkel, who still continues to serve St. Paul's Lutheran in Oakland, California. Rev. Paul Johnson, once an Assistant to the Bishop in ___ Synod. Most recently, Rev. Bradley Schmeling who continues to serve St. John's Lutheran Church in Atlanta, Georgia, was summarily expelled July 2, 2007 by a rigid Committee on Appeals that apparently takes pride in the fact that it did not talk face to face with *anyone* before reaching its blunt and final decision.

All these expulsions *could* result in splitting the church. But I don't think so. Institutionally, no real split is visible yet, since the actual congregational expulsions stopped after St. Francis and First United. Picking off qualified and gifted pastors, one at a time, does not constitute "splitting the church" however, and their martyrdom (witness) has not stirred a real call to arms against the larger church, largely because the majority of these pastors *do not go away*, but continue to serve with dedication and faith, either in the places where they had been called or in new settings under new calls. And these pastors continue to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments which contributes to the unity, not the disunity of the church.

3. Some people get the message. this is perhaps the most dangerous Scenario of the three, and it could *really* split the church *again*. In fact, it *has split the church at other times in church history*. The split happens when some Christians finally grasp and understand the message of Jesus Christ and his unconditional love for all humanity, his saving sacrifice upon the cross, and his determination that his followers should also take up their crosses and follow in his footsteps. Some Christians, Lutherans included, see that grace is the defining quality of Christian life and discipleship, just as theologian Carl Braaten has argued, that justification by grace through faith is the article of faith by which the church stands or falls. Or splits.

But some Christians see that the Gospel the way we see it is just too controversial, too inclusive, too subversive, too dangerous for their tastes. In the hearts, they begin to steer the message they have

received in another direction. I am reminded of St. Stephen's cry, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do." (Acts 7:51)

This is a dangerous charge; it got Stephen killed. And I do not level it lightly against anyone. But not everyone gets the Gospel, even for a fleeting moment. (I am mindful of Paul's warnings about "a different Gospel." Some Christians really believe they are called to plant the Kingdom of God on earth, and put a hedge around its vineyards and maintain the gate in its walls, and defend its towers and its bylaws and its rosters, with all their heart and mind and soul and strength. These people may have inadvertently forgotten the message of Holy Scripture (which they protect and honor, placed on a solid pedestal in the midst of the fortress below the towers inside the gates they defend so fiercely. What message do they forget? Or what message did they never really "get" in the first place? "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight." It almost seems self-evident that the people who want to fight the most fiercely to defend Jesus and the institutional church, the Bible and the bylaws, believe that Jesus' kingdom *is* of this world, and they must fight.

Being somewhat "liberal,"—there, I've said the word out loud!—I tend to see the words "kingdom" and "world" as metaphors. Kingdom and world are a state of mind, a spiritual reality, not a place in time or a geo-positioning quadrant. But the people who fight so hard to establish the Kingdom of Jesus *on Earth* usually do not think of the words "Kingdom" and "world" metaphorically but literally, so it is very important to them to defend the towers and the bulwarks against the infidels—against those *other Christians* (or not-really-Christians) who are comfortable with metaphor and who know there are millions of ways to metaphorically take up one's "cross" and "follow."

The people who *do* get the message of the Gospel are keenly interested in telling the Gospel because the Gospels tell us that's what we are sent to do. When we are busy telling the Gospel, we simply don't have time to build walls and moats, bulwarks and bylaws to keep out anybody. In fact, we become almost obsessed with the "other sheep." who are out there, and we take our mission literally even if we take "sheep" metaphorically. If we are following Jesus, we are to be out there seeking the lost sheep, sweeping for the lost coin, opening the gate and welcoming home the lost child. *Not* shutting the gates, raising alarms, defending the constitution of the church, or expelling other children.

Do these differences of approach threaten to "split the church"? Yes, *they always do*. We are *always* in danger of watching our fellowship in the Lord dis-integrate because we have different understandings of mission and ministry, differing takes on the urgency of the Gospel.

It is important to remember, as we continue to offer dialogue to any and all in the church who will talk with and listen to us, that on a list of important things to argue about and tussle over, sexuality really isn't anywhere near the top of the list. Lo and behold, those of us who have been part of this movement for many years—to build up the church, to identify reconciling congregations, to launch ministries, to call qualified pastors and church professionals to follow Jesus—seldom if ever talk about sex. What we do talk about however, amongst ourselves, is relationships. Relationships with Lutherans, with other Christians, with people who have given up on the church, with people who have never truly heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and with anybody at all who just doesn't get it yet. We're not going away. We're not splitting the church. We are not giving up. Not backing down, not recanting. And we're still writing and sending our benevolence checks.

