

AlbertMohler.com

The Church That Cannot Make Up Its Mind

The famous Dr. Seuss once told the story of a “young man from Zoad, who came to two signs in the fork of the road.” Forced to choose between two directions, the indecisive Zoad simply decided to go both directions at once. As Dr. Seuss explained, “that’s how the Zoad who would not take a chance went to no place at all with a split in his pants.”

Friday, January 14, 2005

The famous Dr. Seuss once told the story of a “young man from Zoad, who came to two signs in the fork of the road.” Forced to choose between two directions, the indecisive Zoad simply decided to go both directions at once. As Dr. Seuss explained, “that’s how the Zoad who would not take a chance went to no place at all with a split in his pants.”

That little parable comes to mind with Thursday’s release of the long-awaited report on human sexuality conducted by an official task force of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA].

The “Task Force for Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Studies on Sexuality” was commissioned by the denomination in 2001 and charged to bring a full report on controversial issues related to homosexuality so that the church could consider the issue in 2005. In August, the report will be considered by the ELCA’s “churchwide assembly” which will convene in Orlando, Florida.

Like most mainline Protestant denominations, the ELCA has been torn by controversy over issues related to human sexuality. Forces pushing for the blessing of same-gender relationships and the acceptance of openly homosexual clergy have been pushing the issue through local and regional levels of the church. At the same time, powerful forces have defended the church’s current policy and discipline which excludes practicing homosexuals from service as ordained ministers and “rostered leaders.” The church also bans same-sex blessing ceremonies as rites recognized by the denomination.

The denomination had been eagerly awaiting the release of this report, but the document itself is likely to please no one. Rather than settling the issue one way or the other, this report is a classic demonstration of the bureaucratic mind at work, couching its language in the voice of compromise and toleration while offering no conclusive answer to the most basic questions at stake.

In a letter attached to the report, the task force described itself as “humbled by the assignment from the 2001 ELCA Churchwide Assembly to serve as stewards of the controversial task of offering recommendations to this church related to blessing committed same-sex relationships and ordaining, consecrating, or commissioning people in such committed relationships.”

At the outset, the task force stated its conviction that “gay, lesbian, and heterosexual Christians all belong to Christ’s church through baptism.” The document went on to “affirm the welcome of this church to gay and lesbian people” as stated in previously adopted resolutions.

In one sense, this task force faced an impossible task. Mainline Protestant denominations—those historic churches now on the left of the American religious spectrum—face the very real prospect of schism over issues of sexuality. In reality, the issues related to sex—especially homosexuality—have become all-important catalysts for revealing the far deeper divide in these churches over basic issues of doctrine, biblical authority, confession, and ecclesiology.

Acknowledging the level of conflict in the denomination, the task force stated: “It has become clear to the task force

that the disagreement over these issues before the church is deep, pervasive, multi-faceted, and multi-layered. This church is not of one mind.” Accordingly, the task force’s first recommendation was that the church “concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of our disagreements.”

This language is similar to that found in most documents presented by special committees charged with the assignment of bringing peace to divided denominations. The “Windsor Report” recently produced by a body of the Church of England took basically the same approach in the aftermath of the Episcopal Church USA’s consecration of a self-avowed practicing homosexual as a bishop of the church.

The language notwithstanding, Lutherans are going to have a hard time standing together in a church that is headed in two different directions. On the question of blessing same-sex unions, the task force recognized that the denomination “currently has no legislated policy.” After reviewing the various arguments presented by both sides of this controversy, “the task force declines to recommend any change.”

In essence, the task force sent the question of the blessing of same-sex relationships back to the local church, where, “pastors and congregations can and should be trusted by this church to exercise the wisdom of discretion in their ministry to same-sex couples and their natural and congregational families.”

This amounts to a local option for ELCA churches and pastors. By suggesting that the ELCA adopt no policy on the issue, the task force avoided taking sides in the conflict.

At the same time, the task force did describe the blessing of same-sex relationships as “quite distinct from and in no way equivalent to marriage.” In 1996, the church had adopted a statement defining marriage as “a lifelong covenant of faithfulness between a man and a woman.” On this point, the task force recommended no change in the policy or in the church’s 1993 statement to the same effect adopted by its Conference of Bishops.

Under this section of the report, the task force got to the most important question at stake—but offered no answer. “Many people have asked for a simple answer to the question: Does the Bible say that sexual activity between two people of the same sex is always a sin? This question is near the heart of the division of opinion in our church because Christians who are faithful to God’s Word give different answers. Among other responses that could be mentioned, some say the teaching of the Bible is clear and condemns such activities as sinful, while some say that the verses in the Bible usually cited do not apply to a love relationship between two consenting adults in a committed relationship. In this matter the ELCA needs to continue in prayerful study of Scripture with one another.”

The equivocation in this statement is the inevitable result of a perspective that puts those who accept the Bible’s clear teaching as authoritative on the same par with those who openly revise the text and suggest that the Bible actually says nothing about homosexuality between consenting adults in committed relationships.

But if that statement represented a quantum effort at equivocation, the task force’s third recommendation raises such efforts to the level of art.

After acknowledging that Christians, “in good conscience,” hold different interpretations of Scripture with regard to homosexuality, the task force said it had considered several different ways of dealing with a divided church. Some argued that the current ban on homosexual clergy should simply be affirmed, while others wanted to remove any reference to homosexuality from the church’s policies and expectations. Still others recommended that the ELCA should “create a space” for different churches in different regions to adopt whatever policy they may choose, “without fear of discipline or rejection.”

In the end, the task force took that third option, and devised a policy that is no policy at all. The report recommends that the ELCA should “continue under the standards regarding sexual conduct for rostered leaders” as previously set forth in its governing documents, but that, “as a pastoral response to the deep divisions among us, this church may choose to refrain from disciplining those who in good conscience, and for the sake of outreach, ministry, and the commitment to continuing dialogue, call or approve partnered gay or lesbian candidates whom they believe to be otherwise in compliance with [the church's expectations] and to refrain from disciplining those rostered people so approved and called.”

Doubtless, some other churches and denominations have tacitly adopted such a stance concerning their laws and governing principles. Nevertheless, this recommendation represents a virtually unprecedented effort to lead a denomination explicitly to admit that it will maintain its policy while looking the other way when the policy is directly and intentionally violated.

Is this a policy of integrity? Where is the integrity in proposing that the church maintain its policy while allowing the policy to be violated, disregarded, and subverted?

This proposed “solution,” if adopted, is certain to produce nothing but frustration and a deepening spirit of compromise in the church.

A spokesperson for the Lutheran Alliance—a group pushing for the full acceptance of homosexual ministers and same-sex relationships—went to the heart of the matter. “Essentially, the Task Force is recommending a new policy that allows for the violation of the pre-existing policy The Lutheran Alliance agrees that we do have to find ways to live together faithfully in the Church. However, the arbitrary enforcement of the current policy as allowed by the Task Force recommendations does not lead to personal or institutional integrity. A new policy of selectively ignoring an old policy is not a good policy.”

The only unity this report is likely to produce is a common acceptance from both sides that “selectively ignoring” the established policy lacks integrity.

As the task force presented the rationale for its recommendations, it returned to the theme of biblical authority. “Though there are differences among task force members regarding the interpretation of the Bible for the present circumstances, all accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.”

That statement may look good in a report, but it simply cannot stand as a logical or truthful description of the church’s reality. Those advocating for the acceptance of homosexual ministers and the blessing of same-sex relationships must be fully aware that every single reference to homosexuality in the Bible condemns homosexual practices in every form. The challenge of presenting that biblical truth with genuine Christian compassion has never been easy, but a claim that all parties in this debate “accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life” is both dishonest and unhelpful.

Martin Luther’s most glorious moment must certainly have come as he stood with resolution at the Diet of Worms and declared before the emperor and assorted princes—both ecclesiastical and secular—“Here I stand, I can do none other—God help me.”

Regrettably, this ELCA task force took as its model, not Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, but Dr. Seuss’s Zoad at the fork in the road. Like the proverbial Zoad, this report will go no place at all—with a split in its pants.

