



celibate; we are dating, or we have children who are dating and we may be quite scared about what we hear about teenagers and sexual activity. Our own parents may be widowed and dating. And even our little kids are discovering the beauty and feelings of their bodies and asking us uncomfortable but entirely natural questions about sex.

So, what do Galatians and Luther's "The Freedom of the Christian" have to do with sex? What kind of wisdom can they offer to our experience of turbulence?

### ***Where Christian Ethics Begins: Paul, Luther and the Lutheran Tradition***

Well, Luther and Paul both seek to create a framework for Christian faith and ethics that goes beyond a complete rejection of laws or simple moralisms and legal or religious codes. In Luther's "Freedom of a Christian" and Paul's letter to the Galatians, we find at least four key parallels concerning our ethical deliberation and theirs about sensitive issues: First, each seeks to address the ethical deliberations of baptized Christians as they engaged the pressing issues in turbulent times. Second, each employs an "evangelical ethic" or evangelical approach to ethical questions which asserts that one's foundational Christian identity is rooted in the promises of God and thus one is prepared to move into ethical deliberation. Third, both Paul and Luther claim that the Law of love is the most fundamental ethical principle rather than insisting only on strict adherence to religious moral laws. And lastly, they each claim that this freedom in Christ calls us to service and care for the neighbor's good to a greater depth than any "religion of the law" ever could. Paul writes, in Galatians 5:14: "The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" And Luther writes that obedience to God, which we usually only equate with following laws, is defined *first* as believing God's promises and *second* as loving service to the neighbor.

In our case, in creating together a Church statement on Human Sexuality, we may ask what Paul and Luther would propose as a starting place for Christian ethics – especially concerning matters of human sexuality. Lucky for us, Paul and Luther, and our Lutheran tradition, are clear on where ethics need to begin.

### ***We are Free in Christ to Love and Serve our Neighbor***

Lutheran ethics begins not with a set of legal codes, but first with the baptismal font. Before we ask what we must and can do in response to a wonderful and frightening world, we must remember who we are.

This is the foundation for Christian ethics that we are offered by Paul, Luther, key Lutheran theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and even the current study on human sexuality by the Task Force on Human Sexuality: *We have to first understand our identity before we can begin to delve into ethics*. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wants them to reclaim their foundation and Christian identity in the gospel rather than lapse so quickly into defining themselves and the Christian community through legal codes and practices alone. As discussed yesterday, Luther summarizes his treatise *The Freedom of the Christian* in two theses: "A Christian is a Perfectly Free Lord of All, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Luther states that these two theses are the key to understanding the entirety of Christian Life in the world, the entirety of Christian Ethics. In other words, as you have heard on previous days here at Churchwide Assembly, one must claim one’s identity in Christ which gives both a radical freedom and yet with this comes responsibility to act in loving service to others. *We are Free in Christ **and** we are called to love and serve our Neighbor*

My mother who was an 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher schooled me on the importance of memorization work. Luther states, in his introductory letter to Pope Leo X, that these two theses are the key to understanding the *entirety* of Christian Life in the world. But since these are a little long, and it would be difficult to check 5,000 people off on their memory work today, let’s shorten it up a bit and, yes, I am going to ask you to do memory work. So, please repeat after me: **Free in Christ** (repeat) **to Love and Serve the Neighbor** (repeat). (Repeat) (Excellent.)

Lutheran theologian and ethicist Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote while imprisoned by the Nazis, also said that Christian ethics begins and ends with Christian identity, not a set of infallible legal codes. Before a Christian can enter into ethical deliberation, one must center one’s being completely on Christ or we will be led astray by other persuasive bids for our affiliation and devotion. Then, Bonhoeffer writes, a Christian will delve into the world’s issues fully, willing to entertain the complexities of the situation because one is not fearful of losing one’s center.

Even current sociological understandings of human sexuality urge us to remember that we are all sexual creatures and our sexuality is an integral part of who we are from birth. *Human sexuality* is foundationally about our identity, who we *are* in terms of our sexuality, while ethical deliberations regarding sexual actions or behaviors discuss *what we do* with that sexuality. The current study on human sexuality follows the lead of our tradition and urges us to first understand our identity as fellow Christians, united at the baptismal font through the promises and grace of God. We do not begin ethics in moral codes or principles but rather we begin our engagement with our world through knowing ourselves as radically free and empowered through the love of God and this invigorates our desire to love and serve the neighbor.

### ***Free in Christ and United in Baptism***

A colleague of mine shared a story in which her mother had sent a poster-sized picture to her office after she was appointed to her first big University job. The picture showed her at 5 years old, on her family farm in Oregon, holding a baby pig. Underneath, her mother had written “remember where you came from.” This is something like what Paul is saying in Galatians when he calls on the church to remember that they have been freed in Christ and are no longer slaves to the law and no longer divided from one another. Whoever was an enemy before, divided by gender, religious, race or class lines, is now united in the gospel. Paul is making a radical claim – that we share a fundamental common identity with one another that unites us to all other Christians. This is why the current study on human sexuality encourages the use of a bowl of water and scripture as



An evangelical approach to ethics also holds in tension, as Luther and Paul did, contemporary knowledge and contemporary questions with what has been thought and believed in the past. It acknowledges previous Lutheran church teachings about sexuality as prime sources even while recognizing that the Lutheran church teachings have sometimes been limited or even damaging and so asks about the need for reform. In all of this, the point is to construct for today a relevant, healthy understanding of sexuality where “health” is understood as cultivating a growing love and concern for God, neighbor and self.

A Lutheran evangelical approach helps us see that we don’t need to pretend that we can be perfectly moral or that getting sexuality “right” is fully possible. Luther’s own moral advice indicates that one must be creative in response to complex issues in the world. He did not urge Christians to disregard biblical or Christian precedents, but employed a moral reasoning that preserves Christian principles, yet attends to the concrete realities of one’s neighbor and is creative in moral guidance. Luther uses this anchored yet flexible approach to address the situation of human brokenness with frankness and creativity, rather than appealing only to Scripture’s commands or applying some list of moral prescriptions. On the other hand, it is central to Christian views on human sexuality that this good dimension of who we are must be ordered so that human individuals and human society can flourish. We must create a statement and standards together because of our common identity, call, and because we are interconnected – an individual member has an effect on the whole body and each is necessary.

This approach can suggest for us the importance of being deeply formed in the common convictions of the church while being creative in the face of the immense complexity of situations in our contemporary context. The evangelical approach outlined in the study, grounded in Paul and Luther, urges us to begin by centering our common, unifying identity in the promises of God, seeking to serve and love the neighbor and through evaluating current issues regarding human sexuality through an evangelical approach. This evangelical ethical framework for deliberation as a church body asks that we closely examine personal and societal sexual practice beginning with scripture and then considering the complexity of the issue through church tradition and theology, reason and knowledge and experience.

Like Luther and Paul, we ultimately are called to ask: what serves the law of love (Galatians 5:14) Or, in terms of this study and current church deliberation, how can we as sexual beings best understand what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves and thus fulfill God’s law of love?"

- 1. In terms of this study and current church deliberation, how can we as sexual beings best understand what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves and thus fulfill God’s law of love?***
- 2. What would a social statement on human sexuality look like if it were shaped by God’s promises, our common identity, and our call to love and serve the neighbor?***

Please take some time individually and as a group to discuss the following questions:

- 1. In terms of this study and current church deliberation, how can we as sexual beings best understand what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves and thus fulfill God's law of love?*
- 2. What would a social statement on human sexuality look like if it were shaped by God's promises, our common identity, and our call to love and serve the neighbor?*

Please share together your initial responses to this question and please follow-up these conversations by submitting these ideas also with the Task Force on Human Sexuality by participating in and responding in writing to the current study on human sexuality: *Free in Christ to Serve the Neighbor*.