



A Background Paper for “Seeking Understanding: Some Issues in Biblical Interpretation Regarding Women and Justice”

I. Introduction

This background paper explores how the Bible¹ can be engaged fruitfully and with theological integrity as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) responds to the mandate of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly to draft a social statement on women and justice in church and society. It uses resources already produced by the ELCA during The Book of Faith Initiative (2007-2012) and is informed by the ELCA’s understanding of the Word of God as found in Chapter Two of its constitution. (The ELCA Constitution can be found at http://download.ELCA.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CBCR_2013_November.pdf.) It is intended to be a resource for the leaders using the study resource of "Seeking Understanding" and for those who want to delve more deeply into the topic.

[Note to readers: Dr. Erik Heen wrote this paper as a presentation for the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ to inform their ongoing conversations and discernment. The task force members decided to share it with the wider church and use it as the basis for a study resource because it posed critical questions and offered valuable material that enriched their understanding greatly. They invite you into the conversation so that you might also participate in the social statement discernment process. It has been slightly revised and reformatted to serve as the primary background document for the accompanying study resource of the same title.]

II. The role of Scripture and the task

The social statement on women and justice in church and society will be deeply informed by the ELCA’s understanding of Scripture. It will, at the same time, also incorporate a variety of different resources. This raises the question of *how* we might best be open to the way God will engage us through the Bible. The objectives of the background paper are to explore ways in which:

- (a) the Bible may be engaged profitably,
- (b) the Bible is not the only appropriate resource for deliberations in the study process,
- (c) the history of biblical interpretation concerning the role and status of women in the church, home and larger society has been problematic.

¹ Scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible (NRSV), copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

ELCA constitutional language

A careful engagement with Scripture is mandated by the ELCA Constitution. It states in Section 2.03:

This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.

Note that Section 2.03 of the constitution does not say that Scripture is to norm *all* the ELCA’s thinking about *all* things, but that Scripture is to norm **its** (that is, the ELCA’s) “proclamation, faith, and life.” One can understand the three areas “proclamation, faith, and life” in the following ways:

“**Proclamation**” has to do with what (a) pastors of the church preach and (b) all the baptized witness to others of their faith. So, for example, how is it that the Bible’s understanding of human sin and God’s commitment to overcome it is to inform our understanding of the proclamation of the gospel? Here, for instance, the ELCA’s understanding that the Word of God engages as both law (that reveals our sin) and gospel (that overcomes it) is central, as elsewhere articulated in the constitution (2.02b).

“**Faith**” suggests that the Bible has some things to say about how we are made righteous before God by the grace of Christ (“justification”), as well as how we understand the word of God as encountered in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

“**Life**” points to our common life in the ELCA. Here the Bible is pulled into such questions as: “Is the office of Word and Sacrament ministry open to women?” “To gay and lesbian individuals?” “Are we to have bishops?” “What about deacons (or diaconal ministers)?” “And if so, what are the functions of each.” And so on.

Here is the first question of importance that must be dealt with: *How much of our work in the area of “Women and Justice” falls outside this rather limited range of topics directly related to the ELCA’s “proclamation, faith, and life?”* Throughout the women and justice social statement process, we will need to ask the question, “When should Scripture inform our work (perhaps when we are thinking through issues of women and justice within the context the of ELCA or wider ecumenical church), and when is the Bible *not* the appropriate text to guide us (perhaps when our vision is, in a sense, larger than the church context)?” For example, one might ask, “How does the Bible inform us about our obligation to our neighbor in dire need,

specifically those who are women but also are Jewish, or Muslim, or Hindu or unchurched?” “Does ‘women and justice’ mandate evangelical outreach?” “If so, what exactly does this mean?” This perspective also raises another important question, “When do other sources of information become more appropriate guides in our deliberations than the Bible?”

Two kingdoms (God's two governing strategies)

The Lutheran theological tradition recognizes the importance of struggling with what is traditionally called the “two kingdoms” doctrine. (It is more accurately described as two different governing strategies for the world rather than as a static “kingdom.”) The *kingdom on the right* is understood in terms of God’s activity through the means of grace to effect human recognition of its sinfulness and the divine work that is the justification by grace through faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. According to the ELCA’s constitution, the Bible norms the church’s thought about God’s activity in this sphere. In other words, the kingdom on the right deals with uniquely “church stuff.”

The other governing strategy, *the kingdom on the left*, is the sphere of God’s activity concerning everything else not specific to the gospel of Jesus Christ. God is active beyond the specific means of grace of the church, as creator, sustainer and judge. God is a just God and works, in a variety of ways, through governments, laws, political and popular movements and many other means to effect that justice.

God, in other words, is *larger* than the church, cares more deeply about humanity than those who are graced by the gift of faith in the kingdom of the right, and works through this larger humanity to effect the healing of creation itself. To understand and work within God's governing strategy here (the kingdom on the left) the revelation of God as represented in the canonical texts of the Bible is not the primary “means of grace” through which God is active. So, the Lutheran theological tradition itself puts the question to the Women and Justice Task Force: One in Christ and to all who participate in the social statement process: “*When is the Bible helpful in our task, and when is it not the appropriate ‘go to’ source?*”

This observation, in turn, raises the question of the *purpose* of the social statement. Are we (a) opening ourselves up to the inscripturated word of God (the written canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. See ELCA Constitution 2.02) so that we might help the church norm “its proclamation, faith, and life” in the cluster of concerns that fall under the rubric women and justice? Or (b) are we tasked to create a social statement about women and justice

for an audience that is much larger than the ELCA and its ecumenical partners? If so, then the Bible may not be particularly helpful in this task. In fact, we might misuse the Bible if we try to make it articulate God’s activity in this other sphere – God’s strategic work in the social order.

In short: As Christians, the Bible may inform our thinking about the issues surrounding women and justice in a variety of ways, but it may not (outside of the ELCA specific policy issues) be as helpful as we might at first glance think.

What follows is a meditation on how the ELCA’s four-fold understanding of Scripture as presented through the Book of Faith Initiative might inform the social statement work. The intent is to help us see the fourfold way of being open to God’s engagement of the church through Scripture on the matters related to women and justice in church and society. Here the study limits its examples to the New Testament.

III. Devotional use (Approach 1)

Diane Jacobson’s article, “Some helpful ways to read the Bible,” begins by describing the devotional use of Scripture. Of the four approaches to Scripture, this is the one many people think of when they think of Bible reading. Here the image that comes to mind is of individuals sitting with the Bible, opening up themselves to God’s Word by focused concentration on selected verses of text. But the devotional reading of Scripture may also be done not only by solitary individuals but also in a corporate setting. It is this “corporate” setting that is the focus of this paper.

In thinking through what one might call the “corporate” dimensions of the devotional use of the Bible, my thinking here expands the notion of a devotional reading beyond what Jacobson described by exploring the topics of “thematic study,” the “sedes doctrinae,” and the particular importance of Matthew 22:35-40.

Thematic study

What is a “thematic” Bible study? Individuals and church bodies legitimately have questions about a variety of real-life concerns, e.g., divorce, marriage, homosexuality, swearing oaths, the afterlife, and what constitutes “Justice for Women.” Because the Bible is to “norm” all thinking about the “life” of the church, one common procedure of seeking answers to such questions is to gather all the biblical texts one might think speak to these issues, which then become the pool from which one tries to establish what the Bible says about “X” topic, whatever

“X” might be. In doing so, snippets of text – the technical term here is “pericope” from the Greek that means “to cut around” – are lifted out of their literary and theological context in order to make claims about what the Bible says about “X.” Once this “biblical view” on whatever topic is established, then one – if one is to be devoutly obedient to the Word of God – places oneself under this recovered doctrine. Or so the theory goes.

There are problems with this approach, though it has a long history in many areas of the church. In the modern era, such Bible study has a tendency to approach the Bible as a “storehouse” of facts from which one can construct biblical truth in an almost scientific manner about a variety of topics. The Evangelical Right often operates in this way – sometimes called the inductive method of Bible study – and has recovered an anthropology where men are dominant in the church and family and women are subordinate. This very method also led many in the church to support the practice of slavery in North America because it is clearly part of the social system of both the Old and the New Testament worlds.

Sedes doctrinae (seats of doctrine)

Another possible extension of the devotional reading is found in a related tradition in the church (including the Lutheran) to see clear statements of doctrine expressed in isolated biblical pericopes. Classically, these pericopes are understood to be “sedes doctrinae” – “seats of the doctrine.” More popularly, this is known as the “proof text” method.

As any close and frequent reader of the Bible knows, there is expressed in it a diversity of views on many matters. So, for example, there are Old Testament texts that think the institution of kingship was a good thing; there are also texts that are highly critical of innovation as threatening Israel’s long history of shared governance. Though such diversity may be a good thing as one weighs various options, when it is a matter of life or death – when it concerns one’s salvation – then such ambiguity in the biblical witness becomes threatening to faith. In the area of those things that are necessary to know for our salvation, it is important to have clarity about what the Bible reveals. In the Lutheran tradition, for example, the Bible’s clear statements regarding justification are thought to provide the center or intent (“scopus”) of the Word of God when it comes to our salvation.

So, for example, you find in Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” In the Lutheran theological tradition this is a clear sedes doctrinae regarding justification. Unclear (or even contrary biblical

expressions, such as James 2:24 “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone,” are to be interpreted in the light of Ephesians 2:8 and not the other way around.

When you hear in Lutheran circles the claim that the “Bible interprets itself,” this is what the slogan means: the clear statements of the Bible – the *sedes doctrinae* – interpret its many unclear statements.² The “clear statement of doctrine” understood in this way, though it worked well to protect the doctrine of justification among Lutherans, led to problems in other areas of church life. For example, the *sedes doctrinae* for the role of women in the life of the church have – traditionally – been such texts as:

1 Timothy 2:12 – “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”

1 Corinthians 14:33-34 – “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints,³⁴ women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.”

The *sedes doctrinae* approach may have worked well for “justification” and less well for understanding the role of women, where traditionally a series of texts that seem to prohibit women’s full participation in the church were long held to be the “clear statements” on this topic. Such texts still underlie the official position, for example, of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Greek Orthodox Church regarding the role of women in the church.

One way of looking at the work that led up to the ordination of women a generation ago in the predecessor churches of the ELCA is that the *sedes doctrinae* moved from 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 to another important Pauline text: Galatians 3:27-28:

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

This suggests that aspects of our work in the social statement process may have already been done for us, specifically in the careful thinking through of biblical texts that led to the decision to ordain women in some Lutheran churches in North America in the 1970s and hence to open the

way for the full participation of women in the life of the church. Perhaps the best thing we can do is renew our knowledge of what has already been done in this area.

One practical question this line of thought raises is: “How are we to deal with the continued re-presentation of the traditional proof-texts regarding the role of women in the church?” This is especially the question in light of the ongoing waves of backlash against the gains in justice women have achieved in the last generation in North America, both in the church and outside of it. Is it as simple as reminding the ELCA what work it has already done in this area? Or, are we pushing further? If so, how much further?

Matthew 22:35-40

One further point here – which is really just a question: Could Matthew 22:35-40 be a “seat of the doctrine” when thinking through how best to respond to biblical commands in general?³ This is a saying that has dominical authority – that is, it stems from Jesus:

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him [Jesus] a question, to test him. 36 “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”³⁷ He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang *all the law* and the prophets.”

If this is a statement of a general principle of biblical interpretation, then the operative ethical question becomes, not “What does the Bible say about women?” But “How best can I love my

²Luther could basically say that, because the Bible clearly teaches justification by grace – in fact that is really the point of it all, then all biblical statements that seem to the contrary are, at best, penultimate – that is, such are trumped by the gospel understood in terms of justification.

³In his “Reflections on the ELCA Churchwide Assembly and the Bible,” available in the September 2009 on-line *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* (www.ELCA.org/jle/), Tim Wengert notes: “As we know, Jesus recited two commandments: love God above all else and one’s neighbor as one’s self. As Luther pointed out in his interpretation of Galatians, when Paul in both Galatians and Romans mentions only love of neighbor, it is not because he meant both commandments, as the church father Jerome had argued. Instead, Luther stated, Paul realized that the command to love God with all one’s heart, mind, soul, etc. is indeed fulfilled for us through justification by grace through faith on account of Christ alone. As a result, Christians are free by faith to serve the neighbor. What we often forget in Jesus’ answer to the question of commandments is the next phrase, ‘on these depend the law and the prophets.’ The word in Greek is literally ‘hang.’ The debate over sexuality in the ELCA in some ways ‘hangs’ on these words of Jesus. The ELCA with its decisions at the churchwide assembly is now stating that in this passage Jesus gave us a key to understand the Scriptures, that is, a lens through which we may interpret every other command in Scripture. Every command in Scripture must be focused by this question: ‘How does following this commandment enhance love for God and neighbor?’ By asking this question of every other scriptural command, one remains truly faithful to Scripture.”

neighbor?” – especially women, who continue to be discriminated against in a variety of ways – in the context of the 21st century?

IV. Literary (Approach 2)

The devotional approach is quite content in lifting biblical texts out of their literary contexts so they may serve as proof-texts in doctrinal constructions. The literary approach, actually, stands aghast at such a procedure. In fact, the major methodological claim of a literary reading is that a text must be understood in terms of the literary and theological context of the book in which it is embedded. Here the literary approach stands in *opposition* to the proof-text method.

A literary reading is also referred to as a “narrative” reading of biblical texts, which is a fancy name for “story.” So, as a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, so too do the narrative texts of the Bible. This means that, if the Gospel of Mark, for example, is approached as “story,” then one immediately sees that there is, actually, movement – development if you will – in the narrative. Where a book begins is not where it ends. A text, then, is to be understood not as a “pericope,” isolated from its function in the story in which it is embedded.

So, for instance, when we hear in Mark 8:30 the narrator of the Gospel inform us that Jesus: “sternly ordered them [his disciples] *not to tell anyone about him*,” a literary critic will try to make sense of this statement in terms of the narrative of Mark. Why did Jesus, at this point in the story, want his disciples to remain quiet about his ministry? A narrative critic will not, in other words, lift this text out of its context and use it as a proof-text of something that transcends the story world of Mark. This text – “[Jesus] sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him” – would not be a very good slogan for the ELCA’s unit for Congregational and Synodical Mission! That is a silly way of simply saying that the meaning of the verse lies elsewhere – in the on-going, narrative construction (in Mark) of Jesus’ messianic character.

One of the insights of this approach is that the theology of Mark (or Luke or John), for example, cannot be divorced from the dynamic movements of narrative as it moves forward. The theology of the Gospels, in other words, is a narrative theology that does not lend itself easily to proof-texting. In fact, the theology is created as the story moves forward.

Also, in a literary reading, in addition to relating individual parts to the storied whole, one is asked to suspend one’s disbelief in what God can or cannot do in order to enter

sympathetically into the world of the narrative. So, in a literary reading, for example, if one is to understand a miracle in a Gospel story, one does not ask the question “Did it happen?” – a historical inquiry, but rather “How does this miracle intend to move the story and the theology of the Gospel forward?” For many of us, this means that we need to “creep” out of our own 21st century North American “skin” to “creep into” the very different world of the narrative as it is presented in the biblical text. If you remember your high school English classes, you probably have a feel for how this method works.

Three foci of interest

Traditionally there are three foci to the literary analysis of texts:

Setting: Here the question is, “How does the setting of a scene inscribe meaning to what happens?” So, for example, Jesus’ Last Supper occurs during the Jewish celebration of Passover. A narrative critic will ask, “How does our knowledge of this Passover setting inform our understanding of the theology of the Lord’s Supper?” In antiquity, the “setting” of all stories includes very different understandings of the relationship between men and women than exist in 21st century North America.

Plot: Here, for example, a narrative critic will try to discern how the conflict of Jesus with the religious and political authorities in the Gospels suggests a particular understanding of the incarnation – one that is in tension with the values of both Jewish leadership as well as the Roman government. Or, a narrative critic will ponder the question, “What does it mean that Jesus’ ministry ends on the cross – an ending that is reversed in the resurrection?” “How does Mark handle dramatic irony (where the intended meaning of actions is the reverse of their surface presentation)?” And so on. One might ask here, “How do women characters affect the plot of the Gospels’ narratives?” Interestingly, the opponents of Jesus seem to be mainly men.

Characterization: The third focus of narrative criticism is characterization. Here, for example, a literary critic will ask, “How do the characters in the story illustrate insight (or misunderstanding) of Jesus’ ministry?” “How are they like (or different from) the reader of the story?” It is this third category, characterization, that may be particularly important to the work of the ELCA in the women-and-justice process. Here there is ample room to develop some *narrative* understanding of the importance of women in the life of the early church – a recovery that seems to put a question mark next to the traditional *sedes doctrinae* of such texts as 1 Corinthians 14 or 2 Timothy 2. The characterization of women in the New Testament indicates

their importance to its “narrative” theology. Simply stated: “Without the women in the New Testament, there is no story.” And if there is no story, there is no Gospel. One could consider these important women (this is the tip of the iceberg):

1. Mary, mother of Jesus
2. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist.
3. Anna (the prophet; Luke 2:36)
3. Women patrons (e.g., Luke 8:1-3)
4. The Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:24-29), who teaches Jesus about his role beyond Israel.
5. Women important to Paul’s apostolic ministry (Romans 16)
6. Role of women as insightful as to the ministry of Jesus and his identity as messiah
 - a. Samaritan woman (John 4)
 - b. Mary (John 11:2; 12:3; 20:16, 18)
7. Witnesses to the resurrection (Mark 16:5)

So, here’s a series of questions:

- Is the Bible’s respect for women’s theological significance as revealed by a literary reading of the New Testament helpful in our task?
- Do such “close readings” of the stories of early Christianity work against the abstractions of the *sedes doctrinae* method?
- Does the *sedes doctrinae* method work better as one thinks through questions having to do with the “faith” and “proclamation” issues of the church and is less suited to the issues that deal with the “life” of the church?

V. Historical reading (Approach 3)

As a literary reading is in some tension with the devotional reading, a literary reading is also in some tension with a *historical* reading of the New Testament. That is because, while a literary reading is interested in a close reading of the text as it presents itself to us, a historical reading is interested in the historical reality that lies behind the text. In historical readings, the Bible becomes a window to the historical events that gave rise to those texts.

Much of the academic study of biblical texts for the last couple hundred years – really since the Enlightenment and the rise of modern critical historical methods – has been engaged in

this project. The most famous of this kind of research is tied up with the recovery of the “historical Jesus.” Who is the Jesus of history? What is that figure’s relationship to the Gospel accounts of him?

There are two aspects of this kind of work that may help us. The first has to do with the recovery of the historical importance of women to the life of the early church. This moves beyond the New Testament’s presentation of women *characters* as important to the early New Testament story, to a reconstruction of their actual historical roles. For instance, one might think historically about the importance to the early Christian mission of the women Paul identifies in Romans 16, including the Apostle Junia (16:7). A great deal of work has been done in this area in the last generation, spurred on by feminist New Testament scholars.

A second aspect of this historical-critical work that might be helpful to us has to do with the application of methods arising out of the social sciences – anthropology and sociology in particular – to recover the cultural dynamics of antiquity that were very different than those that structure our modern world. What becomes evident, very quickly, if one attends to the cultural contexts of the origin of Christianity is how different the social world of antiquity was than is ours. With such a recovery, one is forced to ask the questions:

- (1) “How is it that biblical texts functioned within their original communication situation?” and
- (2) “How are these same texts to function in our very different social and political world?”

So, for example, in North America, we have expressed in our Declaration of Independence the notion that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all men are created equal*.” Ironically, this “self-evident” truth of the 18th century was, of course, originally restricted to free men. But even if one accepts such a limitation (that only free men are thought to be created equal) no such “truth” was self-evident to those in antiquity. If you made the claim in antiquity that all people are created equal, the ancients would simply have laughed at you. This is worth exploring.

Patron/client relationships in antiquity

Those working in the area of the social-scientific interpretation of the New Testament, speak of the ancient Mediterranean culture as one based in the patron/client relationship. Again, strikingly, in antiquity there was no notion of the equality of individuals. Patronage (and its reverse, clientage) was the name of the game. Patronage is defined as “a system of reciprocal

relationships of (supposed) mutual benefit among people of unequal power.” The critical factor here is that relationships in antiquity were between people of “unequal” power. The dominant person in the relationship is called the “patron,” and the subordinate person in the relationship is called the “client.” The archetypal relationship in the ancient world that symbolized this social bond was that between master and slave. The master had all power; the slave had none. This relationship defined, however, not only that between master and slave, but nearly all relationships in antiquity. So, for example, in the relationship between a husband and a wife, the man was understood to be the dominant patron, and the wife was the subordinate client.

Another way of talking about this patron/client social system is to note that it is also based on the reciprocity of honor and shame. This is a zero-sum game, where the increased prestige/honor of the patron comes at the expense of the client. What is insidious about this social system is that “honor,” a basis of the actual identity of the ancient patron, always comes at someone else’s expense. *Nearly all relationships in ancient Mediterranean culture had this power differential hard-wired into it.*

The Mafia: a modern-day analogy

If you want a modern-day analogy of a social world constructed on descending chains of patron/client relationships, think of the Mafia. The “don” (short for “dominus” or “lord”) is the “high patron,” below him stand his “clients” – his lieutenants. These “clients” in turn become patrons to clients below them; and on it goes. The ever-present threat of violence enforces this system of descending chains of patronage. There is no way out – no social alternative in a community where the “mafia” runs the show. It is into such a social system – which has the ever-present reality of the egregious abuse of patronal power – that Christianity emerged.

One way of thinking about how Christianity reacts to this system is that it puts an “X” through it all. The church, in fact, becomes an alternative social reality to that structured by the patronal dynamics of the outside world. So, for example, Jesus can say that in the kingdom of God, “The last become first and the first become last” – that is, this system of patronage is inverted. And an inversion of such a system is not just a reversal of who now has power, but something altogether new. It is the inversion of Mafia-like hierarchy into a new kind of egalitarianism based on mutual esteem and true service of neighbor.

So, for instance, in the case of Paul, one’s baptism means the “death” of the self that had been socialized into such a world and the birth of something new, where one’s worth, one’s

sense of self, does not come at another’s expense. Indeed, one shares, deeply, the very identity of Christ, crucified and risen. To quote a text mentioned before, a text that many New Testament scholars think is a portion of a baptismal liturgy, we hear Paul sing in Galatians 3:27-28:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.²⁸

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are *one in Christ* Jesus.

It is this verse of Scripture that provides the subtitle of the work of the social statement task force: “Women and Justice: *One in Christ*.” One could legitimately claim that there are more examples in the New Testament of early Christians trying to live out of this new egalitarian reality than there are examples of women relegated to the status of subordinate clients to men in patronal roles.

You can, of course, find examples of patriarchy in the New Testament – all people in antiquity were, after all, deeply socialized into such “self-evident” truths, and they do exert themselves in various ways even in Scripture. But there are plenty of examples in early Christianity where the ideal is something closer to the Declaration of Independence, “We hold this (post-baptismal) truth to be self-evident, that all people are *re-created* equal, through the death and the resurrection of Christ.” This is the anthropology of the early church. It was, of course, radical for its time.

VI. Theological readings (Approach 4)

In addition to the devotional, literary and historical reading of biblical texts, the ELCA’s Book of Faith Initiative also suggests a self-reflective Lutheran “theological” reading. Since we are Lutherans, and ELCA Lutherans at that, whatever readings we recover from the Bible should be guided by our own confessional tradition. (For other Lutherans denominations, much of this may look different.) For an ELCA Lutheran, what does an engagement of the Bible shaped by our confessional heritage look like?

First of all, note that in Section 2.04 of our ELCA Constitution we are guided by the ecumenical creedal tradition of the church: for example, the Nicene and Apostles’ creeds. So, our biblical interpretations should not run against the orthodox understanding of the trinitarian nature of God, or the two-natures of Christ, that Christ is truly human as well as truly divine. Similarly, because of the constitution’s adherence to The Augsburg Confession (a 16th century Lutheran

confessional document), the work of the social statement should not interpret the Bible so that it would impinge upon the Lutheran understanding of justification or of the Lutheran understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.

One area that might prove somewhat tension-filled for us is reflected in how Chapter Two (Section 2.01) of the constitution begins: “This Church confesses the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” naming the individuated persons of the Trinity in what has become non-inclusive language in the course of time. The appropriate concern for inclusive language, mandated at all levels of civil society, is in play here. Much of this muddy theological territory has been explored through the ELCA’s own process of creating a new worship book – the Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) that strives for gender-inclusive language. Still, this lies at the heart of the issue of “women and justice” within the church for many people. It will need to be thought through anew in this context.

Another precedent in the ELCA in the area of the theological reading of the Bible encounters us in the Book of Faith materials, where Mark Alan Powell (who teaches at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Columbus, Ohio), articulated five “Lutheran Lenses.” These can be found with slight annotation as a downloadable “bookmark.”⁴

- Law and gospel
- What shows forth Christ
- Scripture interprets Scripture
- The plain meaning of the text
- Public interpretation

This list could be supplemented with two additions:

1. Two kingdoms (traditionally) or God’s two governing strategies as discussed above
2. Theology of the cross, which is related closely to talking about “law and gospel.”

1. Law and gospel/theology of the cross

One way of talking about the law, in Lutheran understanding, is to say that the law of God “reveals our sin.” If this is true, it is odd that we Lutherans, who have a very realistic understanding of the deep sinfulness of human beings, forget this basic theological insight when we open the Bible, where we expect God to speak to us, directly, as people without sin. Here,

⁴http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof_new/logos/Five_Lutheran_Lenses.pdf?v=1

perhaps, our Americanism and its commitment to the same philosophy that underlies the Declaration of Independence does not serve us well. The notion, applied to the Bible, that “We hold these truths to be self-evident” is in tension with the law/gospel theological tradition we have in Lutheranism. In the realm of theology, the notion that “we hold these truths to be ‘self-evident’ might be a “false friend.” What might appear to us as “self-evident” might actually be the work of the devil. That is, we might be so “in bondage to sin” that what we think is righteous before God is something of the opposite, as the Apostle Paul discovered. Should we not have our guard up as to how our sinfulness might distort God’s engagement of us through the Bible? Perhaps it is not so much that – as the popular saying goes – “the Bible says what it means and means what it says,” as “the Bible says what it means and means what it means.” Our task, then, is to discover what the Bible not only “says” but “means” concerning the topic “women and justice in church and society.”

2. What shows forth Christ

At the very center of the Bible is Christ, crucified and risen. If this is the case, then it suggests that we need to have a clear understanding of who Christ is. Is Christ a revelation of the God of judgment, or is Christ a revelation of the tender-heartedness and mercy of God? Or both? How does the grace of God in Christ relate to God’s desire for justice? There is some tension here as well.

3. Scripture interprets Scripture

We’ve already spent some time on this, both in terms of its resource as well as its unfortunate historical application of the proof-text method of recovering the biblical understanding of women. Is there a clear statement regarding women in the Bible? The predecessor bodies of the ELCA – American Lutheran Church (ALC)/Lutheran Church in America (LCA)/Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) – decision to ordain women in the 1970s suggests that Galatians 3:27-28 is a critically important text.

4. The plain meaning of the text

In Mark Powell’s commentary of this point,⁵ he does not say that the Bible delivers *our* sense of the plain meaning of the text, but rather that of the “original readers.” We should respect the plain sense of the original readers and try to understand it on its own terms as a first step in

Bible interpretation. The plain sense of the original readers may be something very different from our understanding of the plain sense of a biblical text. It also may be something that the contemporary church needs to engage in in a different way, as was the case with the eventual rejection of slavery in the 19th century.

5. Public interpretation

I think what Powell is getting at here is that we Lutherans always need to enlarge our interpretive table so that we listen to others. This may be his own desire, rather than something that is specifically grounded in the Lutheran tradition. The ELCA, however, has participated in the ecumenical movement to the extent its constitutional commitments make possible. The bottom line here is that the ELCA participates in “public theology” by engaging the thorny problems confronting North American culture and speaks to them as a particular Lutheran community of faith. This is precisely what the ELCA’s social statements do.

VII. An invitation into conversation

We end where we began. The critical questions here become:

- “What is the focus of this process?”
- “What are the biblical texts that should norm our discussion?”
- “Do we move beyond the “proof-text” method to rich incorporation of these four approaches to biblical texts?” What insights will that bring?
- “To what extent is the Bible the ‘go-to’ text in our deliberations when we are considering questions of women and justice that go beyond the ELCA or larger ecumenical church context?”

The social statement on women and justice in church and society will be deeply informed by the ELCA’s understanding of Scripture. It is imperative that our conversations about women and justice are grounded in the appropriate use of Scripture. This paper has invited you into this conversation.

⁵Mark Allan Powell, “How Can Lutheran Insights Open Up the Bible?” in *Opening the Book of Faith: Lutheran Insights for Bible Study*, ed. Diane Jacobson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 37.