

“LOCAL OPTION” IN FIRST-CENTURY CHRISTIANITY AND THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

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This essay was composed at the request of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to assist the church in considering the matter of the blessing of same-sex relationships.

At the Eastern Synod's June 2004 assembly the body voted by a sizeable majority to "*petition the ELCIC National Church Council to initiate a study of the theological, ecclesiological, and pastoral implications of authorizing a parish-based local option to perform same-sex blessings and bring appropriate recommendations to the 2005 ELCIC National Convention.*"

Putting this petition in context necessitates the clear admission that issues surrounding the inclusion of same-sex persons into full fellowship of the people of God (including same-sex blessings, marriages and ordination) has polarized our church in exceedingly painful ways. On both sides opinions have been sharply delineated with no apparent road to resolution between the two camps. A sizeable third group seeks to find a healing way through a minefield that threatens the church's unity. At the outset I feel compelled to affirm my own position in order to keep the difficult dialogue as honest as possible. I stand among those who work for full inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) believers without prior requirements or conditions based on their sexual orientation.

For me, the current difficulties faced by us in these debates give us also cause for celebration. On the one hand, I applaud the current efforts of our GLBT brothers and sisters to insist that we face the debate openly rather than hide behind the destructive defence of silence and denial; on the other hand, this particular debate has forced us to examine with utmost seriousness the very fundamentals of our faith—our understanding of God's Gospel of radical grace, the role of Scripture and its interpretation and just what we mean when we speak of the unity and catholicity of the church. Personally, I am grateful to Bishop Schultz for asking me to participate in this dialogue via submission of this brief paper. To that task I turn now.

One suggestion put forward to permit both time and local contexts to create an atmosphere that might stem the tendency to schism has been called "local option." Such an approach would allow for a diversity of practice regarding "*same-sex blessings*" in the individual congregations. A form of this has existed in the United Church of Canada since the controversial 1989 statement on human sexuality, and similar action has prevailed in semi-official ways over whether to call a woman pastor or not. I support the "local option" model on three bases: 1) I believe that this approach embodies a respect engendered by the practice of grace rather than

law; 2) it challenges us to trust that the Spirit still guides the church; and 3) it mirrors the reality that has characterized the history of Christianity from the beginning.

I turn to the third point by an examination of how "local option" played itself out at two historical watersheds in the history of the communities that claimed to follow Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament highlights in numerous places the radical move to welcome Gentiles into the faith community without prior requirements or conditions. Given that our churches today are virtually Gentile-only, this dispute comes across to most of us as the proverbial "tempest in a teapot." However, at the time it was as threatening, indeed more threatening, of the new movement's very life than today's same-sex strife within our churches. The Jesus Movement's communities in the early decades after the crucifixion-resurrection were overwhelmingly Jewish in thinking and practice. The early followers of Jesus were Jews committed to their heritage, one Jewish renewal movement among many. Jesus did not abolish Torah but affirmed and fulfilled it. Yet, in less than a generation, some of these "Jesus Jews" began to announce the "Good News" to Gentiles, so much so that the new convert Saul/Paul of Tarsus felt that God, through an appearance of the Risen Christ, had mandated him to bring in the Gentiles without expecting of them the practice of Torah legislation, chiefly circumcision and kosher eating practices (cf. Gal. 1:11- 17a; 1 Cor. 15:1- 11; Phil. 3:1- 9). Paul's mission, via direct revelation through the Risen Jesus, crashed in upon the lifestyle of the mother community in Jerusalem represented by the leadership of two giants, Cephas/Peter and Jacob/James, the brother of Jesus himself.

Paul's clash with these two leaders and their representatives was engaged at two crisis points. The first involved Paul's meeting with the community's leaders in Jerusalem. We have two conflicting accounts of the agreement hammered out by the conflicting parties: Paul's testimony (Gal. 2:1- 10) and the account in Acts, written almost two generations later (15:1- 29).

Precedence should be given to Paul's account not only because it was contemporaneous with the events but also because the apostle's description is first-hand, conveying an aura of authenticity. To be sure, Paul recounted the events with his own interpretive agenda, but this does not undercut his bare-bones portrayal of what transpired. Above all, Paul was determined to authenticate his apostleship independently of the Jerusalem leaders by claiming a mandate via direct experience of the Risen Christ (Gal. 1:1), a mandate exemplified as a mission to the Gentiles (1:15- 16). Gentiles received the invitation to enter the faith community without any Torah-based requirement. Crisis erupted around the figure of Titus, a Gentile whom Paul had brought to Christ without the additional Mosaic requirement of circumcision. However, important members of the faith communities were scandalized by this break with the traditional faith, so much so that Paul felt constrained to defend himself face-to-face with Jerusalem's Jesus Movement. Although Paul claimed that direct revelation compelled the Jerusalem visit, it seems likely that he was under a great deal of pressure to explain his radical break with the existing Christ tradition as practiced in most Near Eastern Christ communities, especially Jerusalem. So Barnabas, Titus and Paul met with some of "those who were apostles before him" (1:17), namely, Peter, John and James "the Lord's brother," men who were "acknowledged leaders" and "pillars." In his letter Paul claimed not to be unduly impressed by their status, but his behaviour indicates otherwise, given that he took much time to make a lengthy trip and enlist the support of

the major community of Antioch (Barnabas) to help plead his case. Reading between the lines, one perceives that the Jerusalem leadership was impressed enough with Paul, Barnabas and the Gentile convert Titus to frame a covenant of fraternal co-existence with Paul's mode of Gentile inclusion. However, it is also clear that the covenant involved the pragmatics of "local option." Two mission strategies were sanctioned: Peter received appointment to spearhead the mission to non-Jesus Jews whereas Paul took up the mandate to bring in the Gentiles. Thus, Gentiles could come in without Torah obligations as a pre-requisite, whereas Jewish entries were expected to sustain full Torah compliance. The only condition laid upon Paul, which he accepted quite willingly, was a commitment to raise a collection for the Jerusalem church among his Gentile communities (2:1- 10).

The story of this so-called Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, though reflecting upon the same conflict in the earlier Pauline letter, puts forward a different conclusion. In this account harmony was restored upon the witness of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, but James declared that such unity included some of the purity and kosher laws (Acts 15:5- 21). Even with this different reporting and a rather tortured harmonization, diversity as "local option" remained a part of the theological agenda of church unity in the Book of Acts.

Of course, agreements on diversity and "local option" have historically experienced unravelling in practice. After the Jerusalem accord (Gal. 2), the realities of daily living, eating and worshipping in the community generated explosive conflict. Especially difficult was the Jewish-Gentile mix in many of the house churches, like those of Rome and Antioch. What was to be done in the common, shared meals when Jesus Jews and Jesus Gentiles sat down and broke bread together? Paul was furious over this battle in Antioch. He believed that the form of meal involved the freedom and choice sanctioned in his Jerusalem trip. Peter found himself torn in Antioch in the midst of believers there. Among Gentiles he felt free to abandon kosher, but according to Paul, Peter capitulated to a pro-James party that was insisting on kosher in meals including both Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul was livid, complaining bitterly. Barnabas broke with Paul and sided with Peter, whereas Paul seemed to accept his losses and extended his mission in a wider orbit to a more Gentile-dominated world. Nonetheless, he encountered again and again "local option" stresses elsewhere. Issues of what to eat and not to eat confronted him personally in Corinth (1 Cor. 8:1- 13), where he cautioned believers who had the freedom to eat anything to remain sensitive to kosher-following community members. In anticipation of his Roman visit he spent the bulk of the letter defending his understanding of the Gospel in its Jewish-Gentile dialectic, even to the point of writing specifically about whether to eat clean or unclean food (Rom. 14:1- 12).

Given the predominantly European and Gentile origin of our churches, issues of kosher and circumcision come across as inconsequential; yet these conflicts defined the heart and being of the early communities. Issues around food and circumcision were foundational to following Jesus and proclaiming the Gospel. So deep were the passions in opposing camps that God's people strove mightily to encourage healing by underwriting (by extending "the right hand of fellowship," Gal. 2:9) "local option" through respecting the social and religious contexts of that mix of believers which, by very Gospel definition, included on a fully equal basis (Gal. 3:28) "Jews by birth" and "Gentile sinners" (Gal. 2:15, that is, followers of Jesus who did not observe

Jewish regulations). In spite of recurring clashes on these issues, believers and their leaders continued to seek effective local practices to make it work.¹

A lack of uniformity characterized the Protestant revolts as well. Wittenberg stood out as a poignant, even a schismatic, example of "local option" over against the established Latin Church which was undergoing a serious implosion in the sixteenth century. Efforts to halt division and disintegration failed. Individual political units opted for passionate and divisive versions of the Gospel, whether Lutheran principedoms (Electoral Saxony), whole nations (the British monarchy and parliament) or city states (Geneva, Zurich, Strasbourg). Early Lutheranism posited a particular notion of the core Gospel to assert and structure "local options" over against the ecclesiastical establishment of the epoch. At the same time, Protestant rebel leaders such as Luther, Melancthon, Martin Bucer, Katharina Zell, Thomas Cranmer, Elizabeth Tudor, Jeanne d'Albert, Philip of Hesse, Henri of Navarre sought to find occasions and structures to heal divisions through means allowing diversity. Sometimes they succeeded; more often they failed, but their efforts are instructive. For example, for a brief period Reformation Strasbourg welcomed a wide diversity of Protestant opinion, and Queen Bona Sforza of Poland prodded her husband to allow Catholics, Protestants, Eastern Orthodox, Anabaptists, Unitarian Socinians and Jews to live together in peace.²

Limits of space compel me to focus on the particular example of the early Lutheran exercise of "local option." We find it within our Lutheran Confessions as well as in the pastoral advice Luther offered from time to time. The *Augsburg Confession* (Art. XIV) states: "It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call."³ In a strife-ridden context in which bishops were refusing to acknowledge the

¹ Beyond the Scriptures cited in the text above, we have classic studies of these issues emerging in the last generations of Pauline scholarship. Just a few of these are: Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (1976); Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul* (1998); Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Diversity* (1994); Dieter Georgi, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem* (1992); Robert Jewett, *Romans* (1987); Raymond E. Brown, *Antioch and Rome* (1983); Richard Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (1997); and related articles in Richard Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics* (2000).

² For detailed information on such matters, note the relevant sections in Diarmaid MacCulloch's *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490- 1700* (2003), as well as Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation, I- III* (1973- 1977); Elsie Anne McKee, *Katharina Schütz Zell: The Life and Thought of a Sixteenth-Century Reformer* (1999); Lorna Jane Abray, *The People's Reformation* (1985); Robert C. Walton, *Zwingli's Theocracy* (1967); William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (1967); Nancy Lyman Roelker, *Queen of Navarre: Jeanne d'Albert, 1528- 1572* (1968); and Henry Heller, *The Conquest of Poverty* (1986).

³In the *Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. by T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 36).

validity of Luther-supporting clergy, this terse statement affirmed regularity and order in a call process. Caught in the vise of the growing need for reform pastors and the establishment church's refusal to ordain the same, the believers who gathered around the Luther forces opted to give their understanding of the Gospel preference over episcopal authority. Trenchant commentary along these lines emerged in Melancthon's treatment of Art. XIV in his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*. Luther affirmed the same in the heat of pastoral and immediate local needs. In 1522 the town of Leisnig in Electoral Saxony adopted the Reformation and, by so doing, faced organizational issues, including the need to call a pastor. Luther justified this rebellious "local option" by advising the congregation to call its own pastor on the following basis: after asserting that God's radical Gospel of grace lays the grounds for ministerial validity, he went on to note that episcopal consecration over against that Gospel was not only unnecessary but pernicious as well. The very title of this pastoral treatise highlighted the "local option" he called for: *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture* (1523).⁴ In the same year Luther offered similar advice to inquiring Bohemian Christians who faced bishops unwilling to ordain clergy for these dissident reformers.⁵ Although we can recognize the sadness of unhealed division in the exercise of Reformation "local options," at the same time the very heart of our understanding of the Gospel emerged in the context of this rending and dissent. Indeed, the core of our church's affirmation, namely, *justification by grace alone through faith alone*, has been present throughout church history and continues today as a minority position. So we live faithful to this minority or local choice which we continue to assert as the very heart of the church's catholicity. Today, of course, we celebrate how this notion of the Gospel grows ecumenically through dialogue. Nonetheless, this Lutheran "local option" stands for us as the basis upon which the entire church catholic rises or falls.

Although my brief account focusses on a few vignettes of church history, I believe the case has been made that Christians have in the past manifested their wider catholic unity in the stress and strain of local conflict and context. My hope remains that we can learn from and celebrate this tortured history by exercising a form of "local option" that engenders mutual respect and healthy dialogue on the issues surrounding full inclusion of our GLBT sisters and brothers. The history cited above is instructive; yet ultimately I affirm "local option" because I am convinced that it encourages us to embody God's grace beyond the manipulation of either legislation or political games, and it calls us to that humility that trusts the Spirit to lead the people of God.

⁴ See *Luther's Works*, Vol. 39, *Church and Ministry I* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), pp. 303- 14.

⁵ See *Luther's Works*, Vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), pp. 5-6, 8-11, 26-28, 34-36 .