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**Homosexuals in the Clergy: Biblical Perspectives on the
Ongoing Debate**

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

In 2009, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) decided to allow homosexuals in lifelong monogamous relationships to serve as Clergy. This decision upset many members of the organization, leading to the formation of the Lutheran Coalition for Reform (CORE) Church. Using the research method of rhetorical analysis, this paper analyzes the arguments of both organizations and compares them to the Bible, in order to determine the validity of both arguments, ultimately determining that both sides are entitled to interpret the Bible in the way they choose, meaning that the ELCA was biblically

justified in making its decision despite the continuing protestations of the Lutheran CORE.

Introduction: The Current ELCA Controversy

In 2009 the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) “voted by 56 percent to adopt a resolution that committed the ELCA to a find a way for people in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders” (elca.org). This decision sparked controversy between the Church and the more conservative members of its congregation who believe “it is crystal clear that the Bible calls homosexual behavior contrary to the Word and Will of God” (Hispanic Pastors of the ELCA). As a result of this dispute, the Lutheran CORE (COalition for REform) has sprung up as an alternative to the ELCA with part of the Lutheran CORE official doctrine concluding that the ELCA is losing its “Christ-centered focus” due, in part, to its “push for approval of sexual relationships outside of marriage” (Birkey). Notably, as of February 2011, this seeming acceptance of the LGBT community has caused approximately two-hundred ELCA member Churches to join the Lutheran CORE. Other congregations have opted to leave the ELCA for other pre-existing governing bodies, or are attempting to be self-sustaining, unaffiliated churches.

For the ELCA member Churches that have chosen to remain affiliated with the ELCA, new complications have arisen. For instance, worried about losing charitable donations because of the ELCA’s pro-homosexual stance, many remaining affiliate Churches have been induced to give members of their congregations the ability to choose that no portion of their individual offering donations will end up funding the larger ELCA organization. In so doing, the ELCA is struggling to continue bringing in enough donations to support its charitable programs (MacDonald 16).

This essay explores the rhetorical dimensions of the controversy over gay clergy within the ELCA in order to understand the ELCA’s decision and its consequences in light of Biblical

hermeneutics. In other words, this study seeks to understand whether the ELCA's move to legitimize certain types of same-sex partnerships is justified by the Bible's position on homosexuality. Undertaking such a rhetorical examination has great practical significance as far as the ELCA's decision clearly affects the lives of both current and former ELCA members and it does so only because of the differing interpretations the Bible's position on homosexuality. The central question of this study is whether the Bible itself allows for homosexuals in long-term, committed relationships to serve as members of the clergy. If the answer is no, then defectors of the ELCA are justified in their decision to form a new Church or join another already in existence.

If, however, the Bible *does* allow certain homosexuals (i.e., those in committed, monogamous relationships) to enter the employ of the Church, these defectors are not justified theologically. Such a finding would have several implications: First, it would mean that the ELCA's financial woes resulting from the split (which also hurt those traditionally helped by their charity) are unnecessary. Second, it would mean that the Lutheran CORE and its affiliate churches are promoting an unnecessarily harsh interpretation of Scripture that may promote the continued denigration of the LGBT community and the increasingly common perception of American religious people in general and Christians in particular as ignorant, intolerant, or hypocritical. This perception has the added consequence of making the worthy charitable contributions of all churches involved that much more underfunded.

In order to address the research question, "Does the Bible support the ELCA's decision to allow homosexuals in long-term, committed relationships to serve as pastors?," this study takes the following course. First, the essay will review the relevant literature on both sides of the debate, then, the study's methodology will be fully explained, third, that methodology will be

applied to the relevant literature, and finally, the conclusion of the essay will discuss the study's findings.

Review of Literature: Previous Negotiations of Protestantism and Homosexuality

Without question, a considerable amount of research exists on the topic of Biblical perspectives on the LGBT community. In large measure, this scholarship is what led the ELCA to its decision, and as a result, I must begin with an overview of research on the prior negotiation of Protestantism and homosexuality. The original contribution I intend to add to this ongoing argument will address not a gap in knowledge, but one in thought. By analyzing both the new perspective of the ELCA, and the old perspective of the organization's defectors, specifically the CORE Church, I intend to resolve the debate that has sprung up due to the discrepancy between the two sides interpretation of their core literature. In short, the contribution of my thesis will be to explain the arguments of both sides, then look at the actual text both sides base their belief systems on to analyze what it has to say about both arguments. Hopefully, both sides will benefit by each being able to understand the other's argument and by having their own argument understood.

In his 2001 book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, Robert A.J. Gagnon argues why the Christian response to homosexual behavior is to convince those engaging in it to stop by creating a model to judge "whether any contemporary considerations preclude the direct application of the Bible's message"(341). In so doing, Gagnon essentially questions when the analytical construct of hermeneutics is and is not justified (341). His criteria are as follows: first, is the issue of significant concern in the Bible? Specifically, is there a consistent perspective in the Bible, and is it a serious moral issue for Biblical writers? Second, does the biblical witness remain valid in a contemporary setting? Under this, Gagnon offers

several questions that are more specific: is the situation to which the Bible responds comparable to the contemporary situation? Are the arguments made by biblical writers still convincing? Do new socio-scientific insights or cultural changes invalidate the biblical witness? Has the church adopted a consistent and strong witness on the issue over the centuries and does a new work of the Holy Spirit in the church justify changing the biblical position? (Gagnon 341-342) Despite the obvious bias in much of Gagnon's book, his model is actually extremely relevant to the debate at hand and not, in and of itself, inherently biased. As such, the issues of this debate should and will be examined through this model in the application of method.

On the other side of the argument, the ELCA Studies on Sexuality form the basis for and explain the reasoning behind the ELCA decision. One of their arguments is that "the biblical writers knew nothing about 'homosexuality' as a sexual orientation" with that concept being "first articulated in... the nineteenth century. As strange as it may sound... the Bible teaches nothing concerning homosexuality" (Hultgren 17). Another argument shows that the difficulty of translating the Bible makes the use of connotations of key words which are constantly cited as being either liberal or conservative "both meaningless and inappropriate," using that rationale to state that decisions about homosexuality "cannot be arbitrated by biblical scholars alone.... Their contributions are only one part of a larger discussion" (Hultgren 18). The ELCA counters the idea that an acceptance of homosexuality would adversely affect the institution of marriage by arguing that such acceptance "would nurture responsible sexuality and faithful relationships in the homosexual community" (Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality 15), essentially extending the justification for marriage to the LGBT community as well. As these are the arguments the LGBT holds independent of its stances regarding specific passages of the Bible, they must be thoroughly applied to the Bible and Gagnon's model to understand whether their

basis comes from the Bible and a desire to apply biblical teachings to the modern world, or if they instead represent the ELCA stepping over its bounds.

In addition, various articles provide different insights on the controversy. *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* alone offers a wealth of articles on the subject. One describes the ELCA's historical use of hermeneutics by comparing them to the traditionally more conservative Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and finds that both “appropriated pre-modern hermeneutical impulses for ‘counter modern’ biblical apologetics,” suggesting “both need further historical as well as theological review and revision” (Heen 9). The significance of this finding is that, historically, even the ELCA has tended towards using the study of hermeneutics to justify not changing church doctrine. Further, this finding suggests that more openness to change—such as the specific ELCA decision that forms the basis of this thesis—should be welcomed, at least in so far as that the debate it should engender will ultimately be good for the faith as a whole.

Another article argues that the ELCA's justification for its decision shows a lack of faith in the “authority... of the Bible,” placing other sources of argumentation above the word of the Bible, which the ELCA claims to be its most important guiding text (Braaten 374). As a result, it asks a larger question: should the Bible override all other sources of argumentation in this instance, or should the church look to outside factors as well in making such decisions?

A third article argues that while the decision shows “an immense policy change” it is indicative of “no practical change,” recounting the historic tendency of individual bishops within the ELCA to demand unequivocal opposition to the rights of the LGBT community from candidates for ordination, claiming that while this ruling opens the door for change, specific members of the ELCA will make sure that change does not come (Rarke 122-123).

A fourth article states that same-sex relationships “can be just as life-giving as heterosexual relationships and need to be accorded equal respect and nurturing” arguing that “what determines sexual orientation . . . doesn’t really matter” because “homosexual orientation and behavior is acceptable . . . provided that sexuality is practiced lovingly between consenting adults without harm being done to anyone” (Lenius 247). This is one of the cornerstones of the overall argument for LGBT equality, and while not as overtly stated by the LGBT, is clearly implied in their rhetoric. If homosexuals are not hurting anyone, why not let them serve as Pastors?

Anglican Theological Review analyzes the similar schism over the same issue being debated in the Anglican church, arguing that “the violence of homophobia and the overlapping violence of schism . . . both . . . threaten the worldwide Anglican Communion” (Treloar 47). Though the church being split may be different, the overriding message is applicable—even if the two sides fail to agree, they must learn to coexist more peacefully, as the difference of opinion is at least as damaging to the churches, if not more so, than even the most detrimental potential effects of the new policy.

Biblical Interpretation focuses on a related struggle to the right of homosexuals in long-term, committed relationships to serve as Pastors: the right of homosexuals in long-term, committed relationships to get married. Its argument is that by comparing the currently taboo form of marriage to the biblical book of Ruth, in which an Israelite and Moabite get married, despite the prohibition of Moabites to enter Israel, resulting not in disaster, but in the creation of the lineage which will eventually spawn both David and Jesus, there is a biblical precedent for the overturning of previous restrictions on marriage (Stahlberg 442). If true, the question then becomes which right of homosexuals should hold more weight to the church. If the answer is the

right to marriage, then with the bible seemingly allowing for that possibility, then there would be no reason not to allow homosexuals in long-term, committed relationships to serve as Pastors.

Review of Religious Research specifically addresses the controversy within the ELCA, but does so from a very different perspective, noting that in the years of struggle leading to the ELCA's decision, "local situations and factors led congregations to respond to homosexuality in a broad range of ways", but that following a national study, there was much less variation in responses (Cadge 245). This begs the question: could facing such a controversial issue actually lessen diversity by causing people to pick a side in a dichotomy where a wider range of possibilities exists, and if so, should national denominations make such far reaching pronouncements?

First Things criticized the ELCA decision back when it was still a proposal, but not because of an opposition to the content of the proposal. Rather, the criticism is because of an opposition to the wording, as even it allows for members of the LGBT community to be ordained only "in exceptional cases and circumstances," taking the opportunity granted by the Church's refusal to clarify the proposal to call this ambiguity "an example of the 'paradoxical nature' of Lutheran theology" (Benne 13). In short, if even the most progressive side of the debate is willing to allude to the rarity of the proposed change, yet refuses to define what "exceptional cases" might be, how would one determine whether the ruling were being strictly adhered to or not?

Finally, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* conducted surveys on the topic of LGBT rights among members of the ELCA clergy and members of ELCA congregations over time, finding first that clergy seemed to be far more opposed than members of the congregations, and second that as the issue became more contentious and gained more attention, members of a

congregation became increasingly likely to share their Pastor's stance. As a result, one must again wonder whether equality would be better served by the ELCA's decision, or by the evasion of a discussion on the matter.

Statement of Method: Toward Reconciling the ELCA Debate over Homosexuality

I intend to satisfy the research agenda by using the methodology of rhetorical criticism, the systematic process of illuminating and evaluating the symbolic artifacts laid out in the scope of the analysis section, above, to discover how and how well they work in order to make an argument that interprets or evaluates the messages they expose to those affected by the ELCA's decision. This is a suitable way of addressing the problem because the problem is itself a rhetorical one. Those upset by the decision are upset because, in their estimation, the rhetoric of the ELCA in interpreting the Bible as supportive of the LGBT community is flawed, while the ELCA, on the other hand, made the decision in part because it felt that the rhetoric leading the public to perceive Christianity as intolerant of homosexuality was flawed. Both sides justify their arguments with rhetoric which the opposing side simply refuses to acknowledge as having any value, so it is only by criticizing the rhetoric of both sides that one can determine what parts of either argument are valid.

While I intend to remain as objective as possible, I must at this point acknowledge that, by the very nature of rhetorical criticism, some bias may occasionally slip through because when conducting such an exercise, if the persuasive artifacts at hand are analyzed in the way they were intended, "the critic enters into the arena of argument inhabited by the object he criticizes" (Brock 19). Furthermore, if such bias should creep into a rhetorical analysis, it does not, by necessity, harm the credibility of that analysis, as certain theories of rhetorical analysis "assert... that rhetorical analysis should introduce political ideology as a standard for judgment.... Critics

should... openly challenge rhetorical purposes if they are corrupt. In light of... oppression... critics should take an activist role” (Burghardt 2).

Moving on to stating more specifically how the method will be applied to the issue at hand, the Bible cannot be ignored in this analysis, and as it is the translation used by the ELCA, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) will serve as the translation of choice for this thesis as well. Passages from both the Old and New Testaments are crucial to understanding the Biblical stance on the issue at hand, including passages from the Torah, the Gospels, and especially the Pauline Epistles. Since the traditional attitude towards the LGBT community within Lutheranism in general and the ELCA in particular, and the ELCA’s rationale for its decision have already been addressed in the review of literature section, what remains is to look to the Bible, the source of both arguments, to understand how each is justified. Specifically, the application of method will take the issues and questions raised by the different articles mentioned in the review of literature in the order of their initial appearance in that section, and compare them to the word of the Bible.

Application of Method: Rhetorical Analysis of the ELCA Controversy

Gagnon’s argument against any Christian acceptance of homosexual behavior relies on the analytical construct of hermeneutics—asking if something has changed since biblical times that would justify a change in stance. In the review of literature, I included the model he used to explain when the use of hermeneutics is valid and when it is not.

Is Homosexuality a Significant Issue in the Bible?

Concerning Gagnon’s first criteria—whether the issue is of significant concern in the Bible—the answer is, simply, no. Gagnon himself admits, “Jesus did not speak directly to the issue,” claiming “he confirms the authority of the Old Testament witness... in his silence....

Christian teaching... awaits additional articulation” (Gagnon 229). Though he continues to argue that articulation in three examples—Romans 1:24-27, 1st Corinthians 6:9 and 1st Timothy 1:10—each of the latter two simply includes homosexuality in a list of vices. 1st Corinthians 6:9-10, for example, reads “Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God,” merely equating sodomy—which can be performed in heterosexual relationships as well as homosexual ones—with other forms of sex outside of marriage, making them all equally bad without raising one over another and never even necessarily referring to homosexuality. What’s more, the verse also shows sodomy as being on par with drunkenness—not only a very minor sin in the eyes of the modern church, but one which has attained that status because of the use of hermeneutics. Combined with the fact that Jesus never spoke about the issue, this shows that the overall perspective of the Bible on the issue is at most consistently lenient by today’s standards, or, depending on how one interprets Jesus’ silence, potentially inconsistent. Most significantly, the fact that, when pressed, Gagnon is able to come up with only three examples, shows that the Bible clearly has very little to say on the subject. Combined with the fact that much of what is there is neither particularly specific nor damaging, homosexuality cannot be considered a particularly serious moral issue for the authors of the Bible, and as such is eligible to be reinterpreted through hermeneutics.

With respect to homosexuality, does the biblical witness remain valid today?

Gagnon’s second criterion is whether the biblical witness remains valid in a contemporary setting. To understand the answer it is necessary to look at the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 18:20-32. As evidenced by the fact that the act of sodomy was named after this incident, this is one of the most famous condemnations of homosexuality in all of

Western culture. However, reading the actual story shows the angry masses ready to rape an innocent man, raising the question—does the fact that the rape will be homosexual make it any worse than heterosexual rape, which the Bible also condemns, or is the simple fact that rape is being threatened justify the punishment of the city? In the study of hermeneutics, as long as such a valid question remains, denominations like the ELCA have the right to interpret a passage. Also, the fact that this, like most Old Testament depictions of homosexuality, shows homosexuality only in the confines of what would be unhealthy sexual relations even in a heterosexual relationship shows that the concept of homosexuality to include loving, monogamous relationships is relatively new, meaning that the situation to which the Bible responds is not comparable to the contemporary situation.

Furthermore, Gagnon himself admits that biblical writers “construed homosexual urges to be a manifestation of inordinate heterosexual desire” (Gagnon 343), a viewpoint that is no longer popular even among the most homophobic in contemporary American society showing that even among the opponents of the ELCA’s decision, the arguments made by biblical writers are not still convincing. However, hermeneutics is also concerned with whether new socio-scientific insights or cultural changes invalidate the biblical witness, and the already quoted section from Hultgren shows fairly conclusively that they do by pointing out that “the biblical writers knew nothing about ‘homosexuality’ as a sexual orientation” with that concept being “first articulated in... the nineteenth century” (Hultgren 17). This means those biblical authors could not have possibly prepared for the modern world, where the concept that two members of the same gender could actually be in a healthy and loving relationship is at least accepted by some, and thus, hermeneutics must be put into practice due to the growing cultural change.

The issue of whether the church has adopted a consistent and strong witness on the issue over the centuries goes completely ignored by Gagnon, whose only defense is that “it is well known that, until the last few decades, the church has maintained a consistent stance against homosexual behavior as sin” (Gagnon 343-344). However, this ignores the entire reason the practice of hermeneutics exists. Why maintain a method for reinterpreting the Bible if one dominant interpretation over time is enough to ensure that new interpretations are not considered? Whether the church has maintained a consistent stance in the past is irrelevant—the ELCA’s decision shows that Christianity as a whole is no longer consistent on the issue, meaning that the use of hermeneutics is not merely allowable, but necessary, as it is the only way to resolve the current conflict.

The final metric used to determine whether the biblical witness is still valid is whether a new work of the Holy Spirit in the church justifies changing the biblical position, and in fact, one does: “homoeroticism threatened to undermine the prevailing cultural pattern of male dominance and female subordination” (Gagnon 361). Even in the last hundred years (and in the most advanced nations in the world at that), the rights of women and minorities have made enormous strides forward that people living in the Middle East two-thousand years ago never could have considered. The culture that spawned the authors of the Bible was one where men and men alone held power. Similarly, infant mortality rates of the time show that families needed as many children as possible both to serve as laborers helping the family to survive and to ensure that the bloodline would not run out due to infant mortality. These facts combined made the Middle East of Jesus’ time a place where any sexual practice not conducive to the production of children was considered wasteful and irresponsible. Frankly, men needed to save their sperm for those occasions when it might result in a male heir to carry on the family name. However, each

of those factors is quickly dissipating. In an age approaching equality, where contraceptives are used to ensure that even vaginal intercourse does not result in childbirth and the population level of the planet continues to grow past its ability to sustain itself, sperm is not the precious resource it once was. The human race can afford to use some in situations where childbirth cannot occur. As such, the sexual revolution, growing level of equality for women and minorities, and increasing acceptance of homosexuality as an orientation can all be seen as works of the Holy Spirit, designed to help the human race ward off the new problems it faces which were simply not an issue when the Bible was written. This does not necessarily justify a change in the biblical position on the issue of homosexuality and homosexual rights, but it does justify an ongoing discussion about whether that change ought to occur. Thus, the biblical witness may or may not remain valid in a contemporary setting, but to state firmly that it absolutely does is simply inaccurate, meaning that whichever side is right on this issue, the other, now, has a right to dissent.

Buttressing the ELCA's Hermeneutics on Homosexuality

On the other side of the argument, the ELCA Studies on Sexuality harm their progressive argument, as showing that the difficulty of translating the Bible makes the use of connotations of key words that are constantly cited difficult also brings to question whether the Bible should be a trusted source for anything. However, in the context of serving as the key document of the Christian religion, the Bible must be a trusted source in settling any debate taking place within the religion. Thus, calling the work of biblical scholars "only one part of a larger discussion" (Hultgren 18) costs the ELCA a fair amount of credibility. By implying that the Bible itself can be ignored, the ELCA drew the ire of many critics for entirely understandable reasons. What the most significant argument is in this case is the fact that there are countless biblical scholars on

either side of the issue, and as such, some will have arguments better supported by the Bible than others will. In short, while the work of all the scholars in the world combined could never be considered the be-all end-all argument in this discussion, the Bible, in serving as the basis for all of that scholarship, must be. This makes other arguments of the ELCA both more interesting and more valid. For example, the argument that acceptance of LGBT rights “would nurture responsible sexuality and faithful relationships in the homosexual community” (Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality 15) addresses the shift the world has taken from biblical times into the modern era by focusing on the most significant part of the passages which have been used in the past to prohibit homosexual behavior—the damage done to a loving monogamous relationship. 1st Timothy 1:9-11, another vice list, illustrates this point: “the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the glorious gospel of the blessed God....” Again, homosexuality is implied at best, and even then only equated with several other crimes, not shown to be any more damaging than anything else. What is most telling is that this passage implies in its opening clause the reason sexual sin is considered sinful—by the standards of the time, it impeded “innocent” relations in the context of a loving, monogamous relationships by offering an alternative. However, if homosexual relationships can be loving and monogamous—as they must for either partner to serve as a member of the ELCA clergy—they are not an alternative to the sorts of relationships the vice list seeks to defend. In that case, one must ask if they can even truly be considered sinful, and in fact, consider the possibility that, as loving and monogamous relationships, they deserve the same protection the vice list was arguing for.

As for the argument that the ELCA's historical use of hermeneutics "appropriated pre-modern hermeneutical impulses for 'counter modern' biblical apologetics" (Heen 9), it helps to look at easily the most direct condemnation of homosexuality Gagnon could find in the New Testament—Romans 1:24-27. Verses 24 and 25 explain that the worship of false idols led to God's punishment listed in verses 26 and 27: "For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. In these biblical passages, women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error." One might assume that such direct condemnation could not be misconstrued or overturned by hermeneutics. However, it is well worth noting that the verses cast homosexuality not just as bad, but specifically as a punishment for a far worse sin—idolatry. The fact that "God gave them up" to homosexuality actually flows along with a much more modern line of thought among religious supporters of the LGBT movement—that God made them that way, and even allowing that God's decision would cast homosexuality as a punishment, the fact that those who engaged in homosexual behavior "received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" would seem to imply that being gay was punishment enough, not a larger sin that deserved further punishment. In this view, accepting and allowing the aid of those living with a punishment of God is consistent with the same church doctrine has led to increased acceptance of other sins in the vice lists, and as such, it becomes increasingly unlikely that hermeneutics has been or is being abused by the ELCA.

The argument that same-sex relationships "can be just as life-giving as heterosexual relationships... provided that sexuality is practiced lovingly between consenting adults without harm being done to anyone" (Lenius 247), though clearly ignored by those siding with the CORE

Church, is actually one of the most compelling arguments in favor of supporting the ELCA's decision. However, it is not merely compelling to those in the modern age willing to listen. Had the concept of homosexuality as an orientation existed in His day, it would likely have been compelling to Jesus. However, He never directly commented on homosexuality one way or another, His opinion as to which of the Ten Commandments were most significant is readily applicable. In Matthew 22: 37-40, Jesus answers by commanding the crowds to "'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law" As far as Jesus is concerned, the most important thing any person can do is to love and follow God. Clearly, seeking a position in the clergy is a career move He would be supportive of. In addition, the fact that the next most important commandment in His eyes is to love those around us shows that Jesus would not particularly care what the sexual orientation of a potential clergy member might be. Jesus calls His followers to love all others, not on basis of sexual orientation or any other criteria, but plainly based on their humanity. In so doing, Jesus suggests not only can all be forgiven when one is looking to spread the word of God—it should be. As such, though Jesus may never have directly spoken on homosexuality, and may even have considered it a sin, He would consider homosexual desiring to become a pastor a person with a sincere and noble ambition, which deserves to be fulfilled. So as long as members of the LGBT community are not really hurting anyone, there is no reason not to let them serve as Pastors.

The argument that the difference of opinion is at least as damaging to the churches as even the most detrimental potential effects of the new policy shows, if not clear support for the ELCA decision, at least a need for consensus. When faced with a similar situation, Jesus agreed,

extending His argument to a point that is quite helpful to the ELCA point of view. In Mark 9:38-40, “John said to him, ‘Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.’ However, Jesus said, ‘Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.’” When faced with a minor schism—a lone dissenter using Jesus’ name without his expressed permission—Jesus wraps that dissenter into his followers, arguing that the use of His name for good ends supersedes any issue that dissenter may have with Him. This analysis is entirely applicable to the modern conflict. As homosexuals today can easily take issue with their continuing persecution based in traditional readings of the Bible, the specific homosexuals who would aspire to become Pastors are more relevant to Jesus as potential Pastors than they are as homosexuals. Similarly, the CORE Church, despite having defined the schism in the ELCA by splitting off from it, is a religious organization trying to spread God’s word and would also have Jesus’ approval. What He specifically addresses in the above passage is that the one thing that cannot be allowed to remain—as He did not allow it to really begin—is a continued animosity between the two groups. The CORE Church may not have to re-enter the ELCA, but they must stop opposing each other and simply focus on doing their work as they see fit.

Looking back to the aforementioned book of Ruth, the Bible does provide a precedent for the overturning of restrictions on marriage, and while popular opinion is still years away from allowing homosexual marriage on a large scale, if that point is ever reached Ruth will be used as a basis for that decision in the religious community. However, with the right to marriage not even being debated in the ELCA, let alone less progressive religious organizations, clearly, there is not widespread acceptance now to use the book towards that end. Thus, when the religious

community is ready to look to the Bible to allow same-sex marriage, it will be much easier to accept that the Bible will also allow homosexuals in long-term, committed relationships the comparably less contentious right to serve as Pastors, but the day when that defense can effectively be used is still some time away.

The national study gauging ELCA opinion on a readiness to adopt the decision, which showed much less variation in responses than had previously existed, brought up the issue of a false dichotomy. Whereas individual congregants had previously had their own feelings and opinions, they were now forced to pick a side—did they support the resolution, or did they not? This caused many to oppose their own views, as such a binary answer does not allow for the nuances of genuine opinions. Forcing the issue into this dichotomy is one move the ELCA made which Jesus would have likely disagreed with, asking “how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Luke 6:42). In order for true social good to be achieved, we must have a fair and honest discussion with true and relevant opinions, which become increasingly rare when forced into a false dichotomy that asks people to condense their views down to the point of potential contradiction. Thus, where a wider range of possibilities exists than a mere binary answer, national denominations should avoid making such far-reaching pronouncements, and instead ask individual congregations to make and stand by their own decisions. In short, while Jesus may have agreed with the ELCA’s decision, He would likely oppose the methodology they used in making it.

Opposition exists also to the wording of the ELCA’s decision, on the basis that it allows for members of the LGBT community to be ordained only “in exceptional cases and

circumstances”, causing the decision to be called “an example of the ‘paradoxical nature’ of Lutheran theology” (Benne 13) for being vague enough not to actually guarantee change. However, it is exactly this vagueness that responds to the notion that a wider range of possibilities exists than pure adherence or opposition to the measure. If “exceptional cases” remain undefined, that leaves individual congregations with the right to define them as they wish. So congregations in the ELCA which do not support the change can define them so strictly that they never occur, and congregations that support the change can define them so openly that they occur as frequently as the congregation has need for new Pastors—and, most significantly, everything in between. While this level of vagary might seem to be a strike against the ELCA’s decision, it is in fact the ELCA’s defense against forcing any members into the position of hypocrites, and thus, while it will be difficult to determine whether the ruling is being strictly adhered to or not, it allows the ELCA to justify its methodology in light of the opposition shown by the Bible in the previous paragraph.

Finally, one specific study on the debate shows that clergy seem to be far more opposed than members of the congregations are, and that as the issue became more contentious, members of a congregation became increasingly likely to share their Pastor’s stance. This explains how the wide range of divergent viewpoints could be narrowed down to a binary matter—as the Pastors, who’s jobs include following the issue, developed their stances along a binary method, their congregants were likely to justify their individual viewpoints in terms of the Pastors’ response. This once again raises the question of whether equality would be better served by the ELCA’s decision or by the evasion of a discussion on the matter, allowing freer discussion at the cost of binding force. Matthew 28: 19 provides an answer: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....”

The Bible calls all Christians to serve, regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, or any other factors. While holding the discussion in the manner the ELCA did may have limited the number of viewpoints at hand, it also laid a concrete foundation for a larger group of people to serve as members of the Clergy, furthering the fulfillment of the Bible's demand. In short, hermeneutics tells us that while different congregations and churches have the right to interpret the Bible's stance on homosexuality as they choose, the interpretation of the Bible as allowing the ELCA's decision is an entirely justifiable one, and that while the ELCA's methodology may seem questionable at first, it is ultimately justifiable as well.

Conclusion

In addressing the research question, "Does the Bible support the ELCA's decision to allow homosexuals in long-term, committed relationships to serve as pastors?," this study has determined that it can. The most relevant literature in the debate, the Bible, is at most ambivalent on the topic, if not, in fact, supportive, and the methodology of rhetorical analysis, combined with a thorough understanding of hermeneutics, proves that the ELCA is well within its rights by interpreting the Bible to allow homosexual pastors. As such, it is unfortunate that the ELCA has lost members and funding because of the controversy, and those concerned with this information should be willing to accept their interpretation.

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