

What *Did* Luther Do?

Wednesday, July 18, 2007



Mary Zeiss Stange is a professor of women's studies and religion at [Skidmore College](#) in New York and a member of *USA Today's* Board of Contributors. In an [article](#) published in the paper's July 9, 2007 edition, Stange suggests that mainline Protestant churches should ask, "What would Luther do?," on the issue of homosexuality.

The entire approach of her article invites trouble and mischief, for the truly informative question is not "What would Luther do?" but "What *did* Luther do?" In her article Professor Stange attempts to argue that Luther would respond to modern knowledge and the modern context by affirming homosexuality and same-sex relationships. The assumptions behind her ridiculous argument are based in any number of intellectual fallacies, but a closer look reveals that Luther, of all people, would recognize exactly what she is doing.

Stange begins by citing the Apostle Paul's statement in [Galatians 3:28](#) that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female," and asks: "Upon further reflection, might he have added, 'neither straight nor gay?'"

She answers her own question:

The question is nonsensical, of course, because in his time the concept of "sexual orientation" had yet to be invented. And yet modern-day anti-gay church activists love to quote the handful of his statements about "unnatural" sexual acts as definitive — indeed, divinely inspired — condemnations of same-sex love.

At least she understands something of the issue at stake. The Apostle Paul's statements in the Bible are either divinely inspired or not. This is and will remain the crucial issue in the issue of Christianity and controversies over homosexuality. The Bible's statements are clear and they are uniformly condemnatory of all same-sex sexual acts — period. Those who want to push for the normalization of homosexuality and the recognition of same-sex relationships within the church have to find some way around those passages and they must convince enough fellow church members to accept their arguments.

The specific move Professor Stange makes is not new, nor is it honest. Proponents of homosexuality try to argue that we now possess knowledge of sexuality that renders the biblical teachings obsolete. In other words, Paul was writing with the only knowledge of homosexuality available to him at that time. We now know better?

When Professor Stange acknowledges that the concept of "sexual orientation" is a modern invention, she acknowledges the massive shift in modern sexual morality. But do we really know anything new about the essential *morality* of homosexual acts? We do not.

The concept of sexual orientation is indeed a modern invention, if by orientation we refer to the entire complex of psychological, emotional, relational, social, and physiological factors that are involved in an individual's sexual development. We have learned a great deal in recent decades on these issues, but nothing we have learned changes the basic morality of same-sex acts. We may understand to a greater extent what might be involved in an individual's sexual profile and attractions, but this does not change the *morality* of homosexuality.

Professor Stange then turns to Luther:

Lutheran anti-gay activists routinely, and correctly, point out that Luther had plenty of bad things to say about the scourge of “Sodomites” in 16th century Germany. Like his role model Paul, Luther was a product of the social prejudices of his time and culture: a time when the concepts of homosexuality as an “orientation” or a “lifestyle” were still unheard of. But would the man whose break from Roman Catholicism involved a revolutionary rethinking of the role of sexuality in human relationships take such a negative view of homosexuality today? Most probably, given the way his theological mind worked, he would not.

Professor Stange is absolutely correct in pointing to the fact that Luther’s break with the Roman Catholic Church also involved a transformation in his sexual ethics. Luther held to the superiority of marriage over celibacy and he expected his Lutheran pastors to marry. Without doubt, this was a clear rejection of the Catholic tradition of priestly celibacy. He also celebrated the physical dimension of marriage, affirming sexual intimacy in terms of physical pleasure as well as procreation.

So, in this sense as in others, Luther was a revolutionary. But how did he come to his conclusions? By what authority did he defy Rome? The answer is simple and straightforward — by the authority of Scripture alone.

As Luther told his prosecutor at the Diet of Worms, he would be convinced only by “Scripture and plain reason.” That is, he would submit his conscience to the authority of the Bible, plainly understood, and to no other authority.

Professor Stange points to the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530 as evidence that the Lutherans, Luther included, believed that some Old Testament strictures were to be set aside in light of the New Testament. This is absolutely true, but Luther and his colleagues made clear that this was because the strictures requiring male circumcision and forbidding the eating of pork had been fulfilled in Christ and that the lifting of these strictures had been specifically mandated in the New Testament.

The key issue here is the fact that the New Testament is precisely the authority for making clear that the Church is not to be constrained by kosher laws or mandatory circumcision. The New Testament *is* the authority for these judgments.

Tellingly, Stange would leave her readers believing that the same is true of the biblical texts concerning homosexuality — but this is not true. In fact, the New Testament not only repeats the condemnations against all same-sex behavior, it amplifies and extends these condemnations. The Old Testament texts concerning sodomy refer specifically to male homosexual acts. In Romans, Paul specifically mentions female homosexuality as well.

Furthermore, Paul extends the argument to make clear that the essential character of same-sex acts is “against nature.” The Old Testament clearly condemns same-sex acts, and does so in the strongest terms. The New Testament continues, expands, and explains this condemnation.

What would Luther do? Asking this kind of question invites trouble. The question might be a fun exercise for a graduate seminar, but it cannot be answered in any helpful way, other than to go back to what Luther *did*.

Luther stood upon the authority of every single word of the Bible. As he repeatedly made clear, no word of the Bible could be dismissed — every word carries the full authority of God Himself. Luther put his life on the line for the sole authority of the Bible and this became the formal principle of the Reformation itself — *sola Scriptura*.

Luther specifically affirmed the Bible’s teachings on homosexuality and he never rejected or denied the full authority of *any* text of Scripture. It is intellectual dishonesty of the highest degree to suggest that Luther would change his position on homosexuality if only he could be instructed about the modern concepts of sexual orientation and sexual lifestyles.

This is the real Luther:

“Is it not certain that he who does not or will not believe one article correctly (after he has been taught and admonished) does not believe any sincerely and with the right faith? And whoever is so bold that he ventures to accuse God of fraud and deception in a single word and does so willfully again and again after he has been warned and instructed once or twice will likewise certainly venture to accuse God of fraud and deception in all of His words.

Therefore it is true, absolutely and without exception, that everything is believed or nothing is believed. The Holy Spirit does not suffer Himself to be separated and divided so that He should teach and cause to be believed one doctrine rightly and another falsely.”

Luther argued that anyone who would deny the authority of one biblical text will deny others as well. In his own words, “everything is believed or nothing is believed.” Those churches and denominations considering the homosexuality question should ponder that statement carefully.

Professor Stange’s agenda is to promote the normalization of homosexuality by hijacking Luther. What would Luther do? Look at what Luther *did* and there the answer is found. Any other answer is artifice and arrogance.

Martin Luther was a real man, an authentic human being. In his voluminous writings we find him wrestling with the greatest questions the human mind has ever considered. We find a theological revolutionary who defied the religious authorities of his day in order to reform the church by Scripture. We find a man who was often gloriously right, and sometimes tragically wrong.

Luther would be the first to insist that the question, “What would Luther do?,” is the wrong question. The right question is always, “What do the Scriptures teach?” The believing church will follow Luther’s example and stand on the authority of the Bible.

In doing so, the church must remember Luther’s warning — “everything is believed or nothing is believed.”

