

**CROSSING BOUNDARIES:
THE ETHICS OF STRUGGLE
IN MARK, PAUL, AND THE ELCA**

by David L. Balch

Biographical Vignette: Stephen V. Sprinkle

In 1994 in Fort Worth, Texas, Dean Leo Perdue appointed Stephen Sprinkle the Director of Field Education and Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Brite Divinity School—knowing that he was gay. In 1996 Texas passed laws regulating relationships between pastors and parishioners; therefore, at Brite the faculty organized seminars informing students of the legal consequences of sexual relationships in the parish. During one of those seminars, a Brite student decided to charge his senior pastor with pedophilia, and that pastor responded by making charges against others, including the charge that Prof. Sprinkle is gay, which was true. Steve deliberated at length, including consulting the faculty, and decided to come out of the closet. Choosing between denial and telling the truth, Steve chose the latter, even in the Bible belt.

I often say that during the following decade, all of us at the divinity school, students, staff, faculty, and administrators, not only *talked* about theology, but *did* theology. It was a very exciting time. When I ask Steve about the same journey, however, he calls it hell. As a friend who accompanied Steve, I became more and more aware that my life and body was not the one at risk. The highest university officials sought his dismissal, and several denominational executives betrayed him, all the while hugging him and protesting their deep concern. Dean Perdue doggedly protected Steve, until he left the Deanship and Presidency, and then it became open season on Steve. An Interim President persuaded one student to add negative evaluations of Steve to a report generated by a larger committee, but the other students were outraged when they discovered the editing. In the end, there was “success”: supported by the faculty, Steve was awarded tenure.

Was it worth it? I’m not sure what Steve would say. The struggle inflicted deep wounds in many that heal slowly. In this case, the tensions never really came to an end. None of us could any longer simply mouth the popular slogan, that, because we are baptized, “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” (Gal 3:28 [Bible translations in this article are from the NRSV]). At Brite we learned the cost of such a radical—spiritual and

political—confession. Some of my colleagues were silent through those repeated conflicts; when Steve needed their support, they disappeared into the closet. Words about acceptance and equality, said glibly in class lectures or written eloquently for scholarly journals, seemed impossible to speak out in public when the situation in the seminary or in the church grew tense.

Official Church Policies: Roman Catholic and ELCA

Would it not have been better for Steve to remain silent, one might wonder. Would it be better for GLBT candidates for ordination in the ELCA not to tell? Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has made silence official church policy. In 1986 he issued the Letter, which warns “homosexual activists” of violence to come.¹ Catholics were instructed not to contradict the church’s official teaching and to renounce gay life or suffer the consequences. The Letter concludes by directing bishops to remove any support, material or spiritual, from ministries that serve lesbians and gays, and from all ministers who dissent from the church’s anti-homosexual teaching. More recently the Vatican issued *Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons* (1992),² which states, “as a rule, the majority of homosexually oriented persons who seek to lead chaste lives do not want or see no reason for their sexual orientation to become public knowledge. Hence the problem of discrimination . . . does not arise” (no. 14). Good Catholics who are homosexual are to be discreet and closeted.

Some have understood the document “Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA”³ to formulate a similar policy. Last summer, however, at the 2007 Churchwide Assembly in Chicago, eighty-two LGBT

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Homosexualitatis problema* [Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, October 1, 1986], English translation in Jeffrey S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 39-47. Here I depend on Stephen V. Sprinkle, “Queer Fear: Ministry Made Strange by Fear of the Sexual Other,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* (journal article forthcoming, May, 2008).

² For the text see Jeannine Gramick and Robert Nugent, eds., *Voices of Hope: A Collection of Positive Catholic Writings on Gay and Lesbian Issues* (New York: Center for Homophobia Education, 2005) 229-33. See also Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Considerations Regarding Proposals to give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons” (June 3, 2003 [Vatican codice 7494-0]).

³ The document is available on the ELCA website.

Lutheran ministers introduced themselves to the ELCA.⁴ Later, after considerable discussion, the members of the Assembly voted to encourage its bishops to refrain from the discipline of ministers in same-gender relationships.⁵ Ethical questions occur to all about how to proceed.

The Ethics of Struggle in Mark, Paul, and the ELCA

In *Survey of Christian Ethics*, E. L. Long⁶ categorizes three ways Christians have formulated ethical norms: 1) by reason (Aquinas, Tillich), 2) by prescription (Calvin, Wesley), and 3) by relationships (Augustine, Luther, Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr). After outlining means of deciding what is ethical in the first half of the book, in the second half, Long outlines how Christians have implemented ethics. Again, he suggests three categories: 1) by institutions (Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin), 2) by power and influence (Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Gandhi), and 3) by intention (Franciscans, Jesuits, the Taize community, Wesley, Mennonites).

At the end of his book, Long does not advocate choosing one best means either for deciding what is ethical or for implementing the choice; he advocates rather a mixture of norms and of means to implement them. Here I want to commend and encourage Goodsoil for what I perceive as their combining and employing the first and second means, combining institutional power with Niebuhrian influence. First, I'll comment on institutions, second on Niebuhrian influence.

I assume that the readers of *The Network Letter* are committed to the God revealed to us through the cross and resurrection of Christ, and therefore, to Christ's body, the church into which we were baptized. We experience the church in the ELCA, through its institutions: individual congregations, synods, its church-wide expression, colleges, and seminaries, often with

⁴ See http://www.lcna.org/lcna_news/2007-08-07a.shtm, in the column "Churchwide Assembly 2007," under the heading "Eighty-two GLBT Lutheran ministers introduce themselves to the ELCA (Goodsoil press release, August 7, 2007)"; click on "devotional booklet," which is entitled "A Place within My Walls."

⁵⁵⁵ See http://www.lcna.org/lcna_news/2007-08-07a.shtm: under the same heading, "Churchwide Assembly 2007," and check the Goodsoil press release of August 11, 2007.

⁶ Edward Le Roy Long, Jr., *A Survey of Christian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University, 1967). The article I am writing is not an attempt at constructive ethics, or I would need to revise and update Long, adding names of feminist, liberation, queer, and third world, postcolonial ethicists. Decades later, however, Long's categories are clarifying, and I employ them below.

particular heritages in Scandinavia, Germany, or increasingly, we hope, elsewhere also. Each of us is dedicated to particular institutions, in my case to the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, where I teach, to the Oregon synod where I am rostered, and to the Society of Biblical Literature, which fosters original contributions to exegesis. These institutions give me an opportunity to proclaim Christ crucified and to celebrate God's presence when we gather to commune over a meal with Christ and each other.

Without these institutions very few of us would have faith.⁷ Without the families and local congregations in which we were raised, we would not have learned the Biblical stories. Without endowed educational institutions, we would not have experienced amazing teachers in colleges, seminaries, and graduate schools. In my case, without the Fulbright Grant program paid for by the U.S. government, I would not have been able to travel to and live in Germany to study with Ernst Käsemann, and very probably would never have become Lutheran. These institutions, orders of creation, (like marriage and the state), are not as static as Luther and some of our contemporaries imagine, but they invoke our respect and devotion. Without them few of us would have either faith or education.

Nevertheless, both individuals and institutions can turn in on themselves, and become more concerned with survival than with addressing our present evolving situation in a creative manner, particularly when this involves change. In those situations Niebuhrian prophetic influence is healthy. God characteristically sent prophets to call God's people into a transformed future. Jeremiah called Israel into a future without the sacred "ark of the covenant of the Lord. It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed" (Jer 3:16), even though God chose to be present above that very ark in the past, as stated in holy scripture, the Torah (Exodus 25:10-22). Even more astounding, the old story of salvation will not be recounted. The exodus from Egypt will no longer be celebrated: "it shall no longer be said, 'As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt.'" Rather, God's new act of bringing Israel out of the north, out of Babylon, will be acclaimed (Jer 23:7-8; contrast Exod 20:2). Deutero-Isaiah proclaimed, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isa 43:18-19a)

⁷ Larry D. Shinn, *Two Sacred Worlds: Experience and Structure in the World's Religions* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

Similarly, David Rhoads characterizes the Markan—Jewish—Jesus as “Crossing Boundaries.”⁸ In the first century, the Jewish nation was a temple state under the imperial domination of the Roman Empire. God dwelt in the inner sanctuary of the temple, now without the ark. Various Jewish sects/parties carefully interpreted the book of Leviticus as a way of preserving the holiness of the temple and its purity of worship. The range varied between the strictest Essenes, on the one hand, and the peasants, on the other, who followed many of the regulations only when they went to the temple. This system served Israel well, enabling it to preserve its minority culture from absorption into the dominant Greco-Roman world.

“By contrast, Jesus [as a Jew] makes an onslaught against these purity rules and regulations.... Jesus counters the purity rules that preserved and protected the holiness of the nation.”⁹ Jesus transgressed the boundaries of purity, while leaders of the nation protected those boundaries. Rhoads quotes Jonathan Z. Smith’s¹⁰ contrast between the two models, noting that Smith resists valuing only one of them: one erects boundaries and preserves holiness, the other breaks out and crosses boundaries.

This is not a Jewish versus Christian debate; any society or religious community has these two possibilities within it. “Order can be creative or oppressive. The transgression of order can be creative or destructive. Yet the two options represent such fundamentally different worldviews that ‘to change stance is to totally alter one’s symbols and to inhabit a different world.’”¹¹ The Jewish prophet Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God by his words and deeds, as narrated in Mark, created a new world. Jesus’ prophetic words and actions did not leave Judean institutions as they were.

⁸ David Rhoads, “6. Crossing Boundaries: Purity and Defilement,” pp. 140-75 in *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004); citations below are from 153, 157-60, 163-64. Now revised and republished in *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008, 2nd ed.) 145-79.

⁹ Rhoads, *Reading Mark* 159.

¹⁰ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Influence of Symbols upon Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand,” *Worship* 44 (1970) 457-74, now in his *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (SJLA 23; Leiden: Brill, 1978) 129-46, which I quote below.

¹¹ Rhoads, *Reading Mark* 164.

To emphasize this newness is not Christian anti-Judaism. The writers of mystical kabbalah in the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries and the Baal Shem Tov in the eighteenth also crossed boundaries within Judaism, again creating significant controversy and discontinuity, as well as a need to legitimate new worlds. Every religious community experiences continuity and discontinuity. According to Smith, “Each society has moments of ritualized disjunction, moments of ‘descent into chaos,’ of ritual reversal, of liminality, of collective anomie. But these are part of a highly structured scenario in which these moments will be overcome through the creation of a new world, the raising of an individual to a new status, or the strengthening of community. Change—in the strongest sense of the word, a society’s conversion—is required when such moments meld into history.”¹²

Controversies within North American Lutheranism in the twentieth century, that brought about a split within the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod and the organization of three predecessor bodies into the ELCA, are recent events that exemplify both erecting and crossing boundaries. Scandinavian and German Lutherans did not always find crossing boundaries towards each other easy. Tensions also followed struggles around the ordination of women in the 1970s. North American Christianity, which has been dominated by religious and political Fundamentalists is not the best model of following Jesus by crossing boundaries into the future.

But can we make a case that crossing boundaries by ordaining those GLBT candidates who meet all other qualifications would be faithful to the boundary-crossing of Jesus, Jeremiah, and deuterio-Isaiah? To bring about change, leaders need to persuade the people of God, as Jesus tries to do in Mark 2-3 and 11-12, and as Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi did in the last century. We cannot do this without controversy, but we can do it in a spirit that aims not only at change, but finally also at reconciliation and unification. Two case studies of Pauline texts illustrate this.

Paul and Boundary Crossing (1 Cor 7:21-22 and Gal 2:11-21)

Paul is often presented as implementing his ethics by intention: he gives imperatives to faith. Since Paul believes the *parousia* of Christ is imminent, and “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31b), exegetes conclude that he is not interested in social-political change. When Paul

¹² Smith, *Map is Not Territory*, 145.

addresses slaves who have come to faith in Christ, he writes, “Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever” (1 Cor 7:21).

Udo Schnelle similarly affirms: “Several aspects of this Stoic understanding of freedom are found in Paul. In 1 Cor 7:20-22, the apostle advises slaves to remain in their social class and gives as his reason, ‘For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ.’ Paul here defined freedom as inner freedom, a freedom made possible by Jesus Christ and having as its goal Jesus Christ alone. Social structures are irrelevant for this understanding of freedom, for they confer neither freedom nor slavery.”¹³

However, the NRSV mistranslates (by supplying “your present condition”), and Schnelle overlooks fundamental social, institutional transformation. Paul observes that believers in the Corinthian house churches have economic and legal statuses that vary, but that all of them are called, not called *to* their social status, but *in* their status: “consider your own call (*klesis*), brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise....” (1 Cor 1:26-27a). The Roman world was not the medieval world, where one was stuck in one’s parents’ social status by divine call.

People in diverse social classes, ethnic groups, and gender roles experience God’s call, a call which is from and toward God, not a call that locks them/us into particular social-legal, ethnic, or gender roles. Paul writes, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call [*klesis*] of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14), toward citizenship in heaven (3:20), from which we expect a Savior who will transform our bodies (3:20-21).

But does Paul support social-political change, typically preceded by Niebuhrian power and influence? It depends. Paul opposes symbolic, ritual, institutional change that identifies all believers in Christ with one ethnic

¹³ Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005, translation from the German of 2003) 80. For better exegesis and a different conclusion with respect to 1 Cor 7.21, see S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery (New Testament),” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 (1992) 65-73 and Bartchy, “Philemon, Epistle to,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 5 (1992) 305-10.

group, even when that group, Israel, has been God's chosen people through salvation history (Rom 9:4-5). Paul opposes the male Galatians/Gauls' move to be circumcised (Gal 5:1-12), that is, change from one ethnic/religious group to another. At this *kairos* in salvation history, God calls all ethnic peoples, Jews and Gentiles (Gal 3:28; Rom 1:14¹⁴). The Galatians' symbolic/ritual/institutional change through circumcision would deny God's present multiethnic call—to phrase it pointedly—to uncircumcised, pork-eating pagans.

Yet, in Gal 2, Paul advocates symbolic/ritual/social/institutional change. “Until certain people came [north to Antioch] from James [in Jerusalem], he [Cephas, Peter] used to eat [that is, celebrate the Eucharistic meal, I interpret] with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the [Judean Christian] circumcision faction” (Gal 2:12). Paul confronted Cephas, charging that this was “not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel” (vs. 14). Paul argued further that “if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor” (vs. 18).

Cephas, the spokesperson for the disciples when Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God in Galilee, has been sharing Jesus' meal with pork-eating pagans, who had come to faith in Christ. They celebrated the eucharist together despite prohibitions in the book of Leviticus, as interpreted by some other Judeans. But in the late 40s, only a decade and a half before other Judeans went to war with pagan Rome (66 CE), some more traditional Judean Christians made Cephas uncomfortable with his ecumenical openness, or to use Jonathan Smith's words, with these “moments of ritualized disjunction, moments of ‘descent into chaos,’ of ritual reversal, of liminality, of collective anomie.” So some Judean Christians persuaded Peter to retreat from crossing boundaries, from the new world that he had been celebrating, thus denying the new kingdom of God that he had heard Jesus proclaim and had experienced Jesus celebrate by eating with tax collectors and sinners in Galilee (Mark 2:15-17).

One verb that Paul uses in Gal. 2:18 is crucial: *kataluo*, “to tear down.” Matthew puts this same verb in the mouth of Jesus: “Do not think that I have

¹⁴ Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 130-34, calls this verse the key to Romans; note his further comments on pp. 46, 139-40, 632, 742, 841, 905.

come to abolish [*katalu-sai*] the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish [*katalu-sai*] but to fulfill” (Matt 5:17). There are denominational differences within the New Testament between Paul and Matthew,¹⁵ and Cephas/Peter was in between, even tried to be on both sides of the denominational line. Paul is infamous for using the first person singular pronoun “I” in confusing ways, but when he writes, “if I build up the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor,” his meaning is clear. Paul argues that *Peter* has “torn down” prohibitions of Leviticus by celebrating the eucharist with pagans, but then withdrawn, and again “built up the very things (Levitical prohibitions) that he once tore down,” thus proving himself a transgressor.

Paul was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5). Jacob Neusner researched all the texts that remain in the New Testament, in Josephus, and in the rabbis about Pharisees, and concluded that “67 percent of the whole [two-thirds!] directly or indirectly concern table-fellowship.”¹⁶ Neusner’s entire book *Invitation to the Talmud*¹⁷ concerns how to eat a meal! When studying to be a Pharisee, Paul had surely given intense attention to Lev 11, to what to eat, how to eat, and with whom to eat. Heart-rending stories in 2 Maccabees 6-7 reinforce these concerns. But when God called Paul to proclaim God’s Son among the Gentiles (Gal 1:15-16), he began participating in “moments of ritualized disjunction, moments of ‘descent into chaos,’ of ritual reversal, of liminality, of collective anomie.” He became like the pork-eating Gauls (“Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are” [Gal 4:12].)¹⁸ To the Corinthians he wrote, “eat whatever is sold in the meat market...” (1 Cor 10:25 & 27). This directly opposes God’s command, “you shall not eat ... the pig” (Lev 11:4, 7). James and other Christians in Jerusalem would have noticed Paul’s ritual reversal and put pressure on Peter, who caved in, despite his memory of Jesus’ own words and meals (Mark 2:15-17). The

¹⁵ Year A of the lectionary regularly pairs Romans and Matthew as epistle and gospel, a dilemma for preachers!

¹⁶ Jacob Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 86.

¹⁷ Jacob Neusner, *Invitation to the Talmud: a Teaching Book* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

¹⁸ According to my teacher, Nils Dahl, “Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: Epistolary Genre, Content, and Structure,” 117-42, esp. 134-39 and 141 in *The Galatians Debate*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), at 4.12 Paul shifts for the first time in the epistle to the imperative mood, which supports his appeals to the Galatians not to subject themselves to Judean law.

Judean Christian Peter was unwilling to exercise Niebuhrian influence in the face of criticism from Jerusalem.

None of these early Christian factions are exclusively emphasizing ethical intention, or individual moral rigor. This conflict is also not identical with some social questions that have disturbed and attracted us in the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, that is, questions about the emancipation of slaves or of the equality of women; Paul is not politically correct by our standards. It was, however, the key social question that inflamed the first century CE, which led to two wars of Judeans against Rome and later to a third war of North African Judeans against Rome, resulting in the death and enslavement of tens of thousands of them (Josephus, *War* 6.420 mentions 97,000 Judean prisoners after the 66-70 CE war against Rome). Paul insisted that the “truth of the gospel” had social/ethical consequences for the central question of his time, how Judeans related to other ethnic groups, especially to Rome, and he named Jesus’ key Galilean disciple, Cephas, a hypocrite for not following through on Jesus’ proclamation of the boundary crossing kingdom of God. Paul was likely martyred for the disturbing gospel he proclaimed and ritually enacted in ethnically mixed communities.

When around 49 CE in response to a revelation, Paul went up from Antioch to the first church council in Jerusalem, he brought along his Greek brother Titus, an uncircumcised, pork-eating pagan. That’s confrontation, Niebuhrian prophetic influence. Judean Christians had to decide how to relate to Titus, whether to celebrate the Eucharist with him. According to the best manuscripts, Titus came away uncircumcised (Gal 2:1-3). According to Acts, Paul repeated the confrontation years later (c. 58 CE), when he took a contribution from the Gentile churches up to Jerusalem. “He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Beroea, by Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, by Gaius from Derbe, and by Timothy, as well as by Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia [Ephesus]” (Acts 20:4). More uncircumcised, pork-eating believers in Jerusalem!¹⁹ This time we do not know what happened, whether the Judean Christians accepted the monetary relief for their poverty, or whether James celebrated communion with Trophimus. Acts is distressingly vague. Still, we may conclude that Paul’s implementation style included Niebuhrian influence, a precedent surely for the eighty-two GLBT Lutheran pastors who presented themselves,

¹⁹ Acts 16.1-5 is not historical, when reporting that Paul circumcised Timothy. Contrast Paul himself in Gal 5.1-12.

The Network Letter 17/1 (Lent 2008), ed. Norman Theiss, pp. 6-10, 12

their names, their bodies, and their calls from God to the Churchwide Assembly 2007 in Chicago.

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