

1	Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust	
2	<i>A proposed social statement from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality</i>	
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42 **I Introduction**

43

44 Invited to answer the question, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus
45 answered, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and
46 with all your mind.’ This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, ‘You shall
47 love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”
48 (Matthew 22:36–40). Christians respond to these commands in the confident hope that by God’s
49 grace alone we are set free to worship God and love our neighbor.

50

51 This social statement addresses the question: how do we understand human sexuality within the
52 context of Jesus’ invitation to love God and love our neighbor (Romans 13:9–10; Galatians
53 5:14)?

54

55

56 **II A distinctly Lutheran approach**

57

58 Our first response to this question is to remember that, as Lutherans, we are the inheritors of a
59 rich theological tradition that assists us in discerning how to live faithfully in a complex world.
60 Our starting point is the foundational Lutheran understanding that we read and understand the
61 Bible in light of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This “good news” of the
62 Gospel that we are freed from captivity to sin (justification by grace through faith on account of
63 Christ) allows us to respond to God’s mercy through love for and service to the neighbor¹ (our
64 vocation in the world).

65

66 As Lutherans, understanding that God’s promised future is the transformation of the whole
67 creation, we believe that the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is engaged deeply and
68 relationally in the continuing creation of the world. We anticipate and live out the values of this
69 promised future concretely in the present. It is therefore in the midst of daily life in the world that
70 we are called to the vocational task of serving the neighbor.

71

72 Central to our vocation, in relation to human sexuality, is the building and protection of trust² in
73 relationships. As justified and forgiven sinners, our efforts to create trust are in response to God’s

¹ *Neighbor*, as used in this statement, includes various meanings. It often follows the use in Matthew 22 where Jesus clearly intends family, friends, coworkers, and local acquaintances. But it also can be enlarged to include groups and broad social networks, which are important in Scripture also (Galatians 6:10). The meaning here depends on the context.

² *Trust*, as used in this statement, is a fundamental characteristic of right relationship. God is unfailingly trustworthy to us and all of creation. Just as we learn by faith that a right relationship with God is a relationship of trust rather than rebellious self-assertion, a right relationship with the neighbor is one in which each seeks to be truly worthy of the other’s trust. The trustworthiness that both fosters and can bear the weight of the others’ trust emerges as a central value to cherish and promote. Broken promises and betrayed trust through lies, exploitation, and manipulative behavior are exposed, not just as an individual failing, but as an attack on the foundations of our lives as social beings. Trust is misunderstood if reduced to an emotion, an abstract principle, or a virtue of one’s disposition, although these all suggest its multidimensional role as an axis in human life.

In *The Responsible Self* (1963), H. Richard Niebuhr set Christian ethical reflection on a new course by

74 faithful (trustworthy) relationship of love for the world in Christ. We are called therefore to be
75 trustworthy in our human sexuality and to build social institutions and practices where trust and
76 trustworthy relationships can thrive.

77

78 ***Justified by grace through faith***

79 As Lutherans, we believe that we are justified by grace through faith. The Lutheran Confessions
80 guide us in our understanding of justification by identifying three intersecting affirmations: *solus*
81 *Christus*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. (Christ alone, grace alone, and by faith alone).³ Deeply
82 grounded in Scripture understood as the living Word of God, these together proclaim Jesus Christ
83 as central to the Gospel:

- 84 • *Solus Christus* (Christ alone) insists that the purpose of Scripture is to reveal Jesus Christ as
85 the Savior of the world. Scripture is to be interpreted through the lens of Christ's death and
86 resurrection for the salvation of all.
- 87 • *Sola gratia* (grace alone) affirms that we are saved by grace alone. As with *solus Christus*,
88 *sola gratia* means that there is nothing a person can do through his or her action that will
89 create a right relationship with God. Only God's grace can do that.
- 90 • *Sola fide* (by faith alone) affirms that, through the hearing of God's Word, the Holy Spirit
91 ignites faith (trust) in God within us.

92

93 These three emphases also tell us that sin does not have to do simply with the keeping or breaking
94 of rules or laws. Rather, we sin when we turn away from God and look to ourselves. Sin turns us
95 toward obsessive self-concern, with disastrous consequences for ourselves and others.

96

97 We live therefore within the paradox that in our sexuality, as in other aspects of life, we always
98 encounter both our own sinfulness and God's grace. It is only through Christ that we can turn in
99 faith to trust God, which leads immediately to our baptismal vocation to love and serve the
100 neighbor.

101

102

103

treating trust as the center of Christian thinking based on the question of trust or distrust of God as the fundamental option in human existence. In terms of human relationships, he wrote, "Faith as trust or distrust accompanies all our encounters with others and qualifies all our responses" (118). Philosophers and theorists such as Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*, 1958), and Michael Polanyi (*Personal Knowledge*, 1958) have advanced reflection on the centrality of promise and networks of trusting reliance in human affairs and knowledge. Some social scientists have begun to identify social trust as an indispensable feature of healthy organizations, institutions, and whole societies, and social distrust as one of the destructive forces at work in the breakdown and dissolution of organized social arrangements. Such reflections operate in the background of this statement.

³ Each "sola" points to the same saving event. That is, they together proclaim Jesus Christ as central to the Gospel, each perceived from a different dimension. Other dimensions of God's saving work, other "solas," also have been associated with Lutheranism. Especially in the nineteenth century, Lutherans began to emphasize *sola Scriptura*, although the Confessions rarely used that phrase. Luther more often spoke of the Word of God alone (*solus Verbo*), by which he meant fundamentally the oral proclamation of the Gospel. For a key source suggesting the solas listed here, see *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, IV. 120 in: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

104 ***Christian freedom in service of the neighbor***

105 Lutherans are not reluctant to live confidently within the difficult, complex, and ambiguous
106 realities of daily life. Lutherans understand that active engagement in the world is integral to
107 Christian identity. They are able to remain secure in Christ in the midst of the confusions, lack of
108 clarity, and struggle that God’s calling entails. “Did we in our own strength confide,” sang
109 Luther, “our striving would be losing.” In Christ, “God is making his appeal through us” (2
110 Corinthians 5:20; 1 Peter 4:11). Lutheran theology prepares us precisely to hold in creative
111 tension the paradoxes and complexities of the human situation. This is also the case with regard
112 to human sexuality. God has created human beings as part of the whole creation and with the
113 intention that we live actively in the world (Romans 12–13; Ephesians 5–6).

114
115 In his letter to the Galatians, Paul testifies that the foundation of Christian identity is what God
116 has done for us through Christ (Galatians 2:20; 3:24–28). Luther echoes this affirmation in his
117 treatise, “The Freedom of the Christian,” claiming that Christians are at one and the same time
118 radically freed by the Gospel and called to serve the good of the neighbor:

119 A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

120 A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.⁴

121

122 Luther believed that these two affirmations were the key to understanding the entirety of
123 Christian life in the world. Following Paul, he understood freedom to be the basis for Christian
124 life and ethics.⁵ Luther believed that this understanding of Christian freedom flowed from the
125 doctrine of justification as that which “preserves and guides all churchly teaching and establishes
126 our consciences before God.”⁶

127

128 In other words, because we are radically freed in Christ, we are called in that freedom to love and
129 serve our neighbor as Christ loved and served us (Galatians 5:1; 5:13). Only in the freedom from
130 preoccupation with the self and the burden of unworthiness before the perfection of God’s law
131 can such concern for the neighbor become possible.

132

133 The Lutheran theological understanding of God’s salvation and our utter dependence on God’s
134 grace, grounded as it is in Scripture (Romans 3:21–26; Ephesians 2:8–10), has crucial
135 implications for Christian ethics and discernment:

136 • In emphasizing that salvation is not a reward for morally approved behavior, Lutheran

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* in *Luther’s Works 31* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344. This treatise is also available as part of *Three Treatises*, a printing of three key essays from 1520 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 277.

⁵ Luther wrote that this book “contains the whole of Christian life in a brief form, provided you grasp its meaning.” *Ibid.*, 343. See also the editor’s introduction, 329.

⁶ This citation is taken from Martin Luther’s preface to the published doctoral thesis on justification for Peter Palladius, who defended them before Wittenberg’s theological faculty on June 1, 1537 (Luther’s Works: Kritische Gesamtausgabe/ [Schriften/], 65 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993. Hereafter identified by “WA”) 39 I, 205, 2–5) For the Lutheran Confessions, the article of justification is central for all church teaching. See, for instance, The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, III.6 (BC 2000:563), quoting the Apology, IV.2–3 (BC 2000: 120) and Luther’s comments on Psalm 117 (Luther’s Works 14:37). The connection to ethics is demonstrated in the Augsburg Confession, IV–VI and XX and the Apology, art. IV, especially par. 122–182 (BC 2000: 140–49).

137 theology teaches that salvation is by God’s grace alone and not dependent upon human
138 action. We receive in trust, as Paul declares, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus
139 Christ for all who believe” (Romans 3:21–22).

- 140 • Justified by faith, Lutherans understand that, because of God’s gift, their freedom in Christ
141 leads to a vocation of responsible and humble service to the neighbor (Romans 13:8–10).
- 142 • Our vocation of service leads us to live out our responsibilities primarily in light of and in
143 response to the neighbor’s needs, often in complex and sometimes tragic situations.
- 144 • God’s mercy and compassion instill in us the capacity to empathize with others as “the love
145 of Christ urges us on” (2 Corinthians 5:14). They teach us to walk with each other in joy,
146 humility, and tender care.
- 147 • The love of God and neighbor, fulfilled by faith alone, are the two commandments by which
148 Christ taught us to measure and interpret every other commandment in Scripture (Matthew
149 22:36–40).

150

151 *God’s continuing creation*

152 Christians believe that God is the creator of all that is and that this ongoing handiwork is good,
153 good, and very good! (Genesis 1:31). Both narratives of God’s creative activity in the book of
154 Genesis (Genesis 1 and 2) reveal God’s goodness and desire for close relationship with human
155 beings as integral to the ongoing handiwork of creation. In Genesis 1, this desire is expressed in
156 humanity’s creation—male and female—in the image of God. In Genesis 2, that close
157 relationship is revealed as God scoops up and breathes life into earth to form humankind. As a
158 mark of personal confidence, the Creator even entrusts to human beings the task of naming and
159 tending the inhabitants of the earth God so clearly loves. The tender love and goodness of God’s
160 creative activity includes sexuality and gendered bodies (Genesis 2:23–25).

161

162 Just as both creation narratives reveal how God intends a relationship of trust with humanity, so
163 also the creation of male and female (Genesis 1) and the companionship of Adam and Eve
164 (Genesis 2) reveal that human beings are created for trusting relationships with each other. In
165 these narratives of God’s creative activity, we understand from the beginning that love and trust
166 are at the heart of God’s relationship with human beings. We also understand that creation is
167 God’s ongoing activity and not yet complete.

168

169 The biblical narratives also depict how people violate God’s trust, turning away from God
170 (Genesis 3). They want to be like God. They make excuses and apportion blame. They hide from
171 God. They cover their nakedness. The full breakdown of relationship enters, complete with curses
172 and exile, as depicted in the betrayal of brother against brother (Genesis 4). The relationship of
173 trust with God and each other, entailed in the image of God, is broken: people sin, that is, human
174 beings resist their own God-given identity and destiny.

175

176 Nevertheless, God remains faithful, seeking out and inviting all into intimate relationship as sons
177 and daughters. This dignity of the human being reflects God’s deep love and stands against all
178 forms of violence, discrimination, and injustice. Scripture reveals to believers that just as God
179 does not abandon that which God loves, neither should we.

180

181 We recognize, therefore, our need for God’s law to order and preserve the world, expose our sins,
182 and to show us the depth of our capacity to turn away from God and neighbor.

183 And yet we are consoled and encouraged because, even in the face of broken trust, God includes
184 all of creation in the unfolding of the human community and the world. As human beings, we
185 participate in creation's work that continues even now in fruitfulness and productivity.⁷
186

187 For believers, it is hope in God's future, not in an idealized past,⁸ that inspires participation in
188 God's changing, open, and inexhaustible creation. Christians believe that God's promised future
189 includes the transformation of the whole creation (Romans 8:19–25). Guided by this vision,
190 Christians anticipate and live out the values of God's promised future concretely in the present.
191

192 Through the saving work of Jesus Christ, we understand how Scripture ultimately is future
193 oriented and filled with promise; creation is fulfilled in new creation (2 Corinthians 5: 17;
194 Revelation 21:1–5; 2 Corinthians 3:18, Isaiah 43:16–21). Even now, by the power of the Holy
195 Spirit, our lives may reflect the love of Christ crucified and risen. “The life I now live in the
196 flesh,” declares Paul, “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”
197 (Galatians 2:20). Thus, Christ-like love for the neighbor informs all our activities, sexual and
198 otherwise, now and into God's future. In anticipation of that future, the ethics of sexuality is thus
199 not purely a personal matter, but one that affects the witness of the Christian community and the
200 well-being of the larger community (1 Corinthians 6:19; Galatians 6:10; Revelation 21:8).
201

202 ***God's law at work in the world***

203 As Lutherans, we believe that God has given the law not only to reveal sin and order society (1
204 Timothy 1:9), but also to point us to God's intentions and promises for our lives.
205

206 Luther described two functions of the law, one *theological* and the other political or *civil*.⁹ The
207 *theological* use of the law reveals sin, confronting us when we have broken our relationship with
208 God and driving us to the forgiveness offered in the Gospel. When the law forces us to examine
209 the extent to which we are ensnared—individually and collectively—in patterns of self-serving,
210 exploitation, abuse, and shame, we experience the power of the theological use of the law in
211 revealing to us the brokenness of our relationship with God. Knowing that we can do nothing to

⁷ For one example of how Martin Luther describes creatures as the hands, channels, and means through which God continually creates and blesses, see *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par 26, 389 in *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert,

⁸ “The attempt—with the origin and nature of humankind in mind—to take a gigantic leap back into the world of the lost beginning, to seek to know for ourselves what humankind was like in its original state and to identify our own ideal of humanity with what God actually created is hopeless. It fails to recognize that it is only from the Christ that we can know about the original nature of humankind.... Only in the middle, as those who live from Christ, do we know about the beginning.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 62.

⁹ See Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed* in *The Christian in Society, Luther's Works 45* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 75–129. The term “third use” of the law, not named here, indicates the law's role in guiding Christians as they seek to orient and conduct their lives; it receives significant attention in the *Formula of Concord*. This social statement streamlines its discussion of law by focusing solely on the “two uses,” but does recognize the role of law as a guide for Christians. Since the third use is defined in the Confessions as the civil use of the law by the repentant and reborn who keep the law with a willing spirit, this seems warranted. See *Formula of Concord*, Epitome, VI.6, 502 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

212 bring about our own salvation, Lutherans reject the notion that we can perfect either ourselves or
213 society.

214

215 The *civil* use of the law, at the same time, provides order in society to support the maintenance of
216 peace and justice in this imperfect world. The function of the civil law is, in a sinful world, to
217 protect from harm all those whom God loves, particularly the most vulnerable.¹⁰

218

219 Lutherans understand that God’s law, in its civil use, permeates and undergirds basic structures of
220 human society to support life and protect all people in a world that remains under the sway of sin.
221 Such social structures,¹¹ as the Lutheran Confessions identify them, include ministry, marriage
222 and family, civil authority, and daily work.¹² Because these structures are temporal, anticipating
223 the arrival of God’s promised future, they must respond continually to human needs for
224 protection and flourishing.

225

226 ***The Ten Commandments***

227 When asked to summarize what God requires in the law, most Christians will turn first to the Ten
228 Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17) as God’s guide for their own behavior and that of others.

229 What is distinctive about these commandments for Lutherans is that we understand them in light
230 of faith, which confesses God as creator and redeemer of the world. Thus, in addition to revealing
231 human sin, they constrain wrong behavior and point the way for us to serve the neighbor and care
232 for the world.

233

234 The first three commandments together point to our need as sinful human beings “to fear, love,
235 and trust in God above all things.” The remaining seven describe our responsibility to serve the
236 neighbor, especially the most vulnerable. They identify those actions that violate trust and destroy
237 relationships between people and within community. They also instruct us how to protect and
238 nurture relationships and build up the community: to honor those wielding legitimate authority
239 (fourth); preserve and enhance life (fifth); support boundaries, decency, and faithfulness in sexual
240 relations (sixth); prevent exploitation (seventh); and put the best construction on the actions of all
241 (eighth).

242

¹⁰ *Smalcald Articles* III.2, 311–12 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

¹¹ In Lutheran theology these structures have often been called “orders of creation” to express the point that they exist as structures that God uses to order human life. The origin of the term “orders of creation” and its original conceptualization can be traced to Christoph Adolf von Harleß (see *Christliche Ethik*, 7th ed. [Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1875], 491), who proposed this term to highlight the provisional nature of human social arrangements. It soon became linked to a static notion of creation and the idea of “orders” began to be understood as fixed, one-time acts of God in the past.

As such they came to indicate the establishment of human society in a hierarchy of fixed and unchanging social arrangements. On this basis, at one time some Lutheran theologians objected to the democratic developments in modern states on the grounds of the divine right of kings, defended the legitimacy of Hitler’s regime, or rejected the ordination of women as contrary to nature. While “orders of creation” also has been theologically enriching within Lutheran tradition, the concept of social structures is used here because it is less technical and more suggestive of God’s ongoing creative activity to shape and reshape social structures for human protection and good.

¹² *Augsburg Confession*, XVI, 48–52; *Apology*, XVI, 231–33; *Small Catechism*, Household Chart, 365–67; *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, 400–25 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and Wengert.

243 The ninth and tenth commandments “fence the heart.” They show us that not only individual acts
244 but also thoughts, words, and legal actions done for base motives are wrong and they invite us to
245 right action. All these things honor God by loving the neighbor.
246

247 The sixth commandment relates in a particular way to human sexuality. To this end, as Luther
248 wrote in the *Small Catechism*, “We are to fear and love God so that we lead pure and decent lives
249 in word and deed, and each of us loves and honors his or her spouse.”¹³
250

251 When this commandment is violated, many things are adulterated—relationships are damaged,
252 people are betrayed and harmed. Promiscuity and sexual activity without a spirit of mutuality and
253 commitment are sinful because of their destructive consequences for individuals, relationships,
254 and the community. The Apostle Paul’s list of vices (e.g., fornication, impurity, licentiousness,
255 idolatry) warns believers of the dangers of gratifying “the desires of the flesh,” thereby turning
256 away from belonging to Christ and God’s kingdom (Galatians 5:19–21). The breakdown of trust
257 through the sexual adulteration of the bonds of the committed, intimate, and protected
258 relationship of marriage wreaks havoc for the family and the community, as well as for the people
259 involved.
260

261 When this commandment is kept, however, care and attention are given to all aspects of life and
262 behavior, including sexuality, which creates marriage relationships and practices of trust. “There
263 is no law against such things,” declares Paul, because “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
264 generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” are the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–
265 26).
266

267 We are called to participate in God’s continuing creation as people who seek to fear, love, and
268 trust in God above all things. As such, we strive to lead lives that uphold relationships and a
269 social order where human beings can thrive, and to support one another in those endeavors. As
270 sinners justified through the Gospel we are able to receive creation fully as gift so that we can
271 serve our neighbor in need freely.
272

273 ***Our vocation to serve the neighbor***

274 We do not live in private worlds without thought or consideration for historic events or the impact
275 of our actions on individuals, the community, or the environment. Rather, the responsibility to
276 serve the neighbor through our daily callings seeks to shape human relationships and a world
277 community that honors God and anticipates God’s future transformation of all of creation. In so
278 doing, all people, in whatever situation they find themselves, are called to actively promote the
279 good of the neighbor.
280

281 We recognize the complex and varied callings people have in relation to human sexuality: being
282 in relationships, being single, being a friend, living in a young or aging body, being male or
283 female, being young or old, or having different sexual orientations and gender identities. In
284 whatever the situation, all people are called to build trust in relationships and in the community.
285

¹³*The Small Catechism*, Ten Commandments, par. 12, 353 in: *The Book of Concord*, eds. Kolb and
Wengert.

