

## The Church of Sweden, the Bible and Homosexuality

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**On Friday the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2009 the Church Board (Kyrkostyrelsen) of the Church of Sweden announced that it affirms marriages of homosexual couples. The Church Board also recommended that the Churchwide Assembly (Kyrkomötet) decide accordingly at its meeting the same year. Thursday the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 2009 the Churchwide Assembly voted along those lines.**

Perhaps this may cause surprise – at least for people with only scant knowledge of the church situation in Sweden. The Church of Sweden is, after all, formally an Evangelical-Lutheran church. A pillar in the Lutheran confession is the formal principle, *sola scriptura*, stating that Holy Scripture should be the only norm for the teaching and life of the church. This principle finds its most famous expression in the introduction of the crown of the Lutheran Confessions, *The Formula of Concord*:

“We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119:105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal. 1:8.”

Regardless of the fact that it has become more and more obvious for (at least) the conversant person, that the Bible is not the determining authority for the Church of Sweden, it still states in the portal paragraph of the Church Order (Kyrkoordningen):

“The faith, confession and teaching of the Church of Sweden, as manifested in church services and life, is based in the holy Word of God, as it is given to us in the Old and New Testament’s prophetic and apostolic books, [...] and is explained and commented in the Book of Concord and other documents approved by the Church of Sweden”<sup>1</sup>

### **The Bible on Homosexuality**

It causes no intellectual difficulties to discover what the Bible teaches on homosexuality. Paul writes:

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards,

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<sup>1</sup> *Svenska kyrkans kyrkoordning*, Stockholm 2000, 14. All citations in this article, except those from the Bible and the *Book of Concord*, are my own translations from Swedish.

nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Homosexuality is pictured not only as something devastating for the individual, but also ruinous for society. In Jude’s epistle we read in verse 7: “...just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” See also Romans 1:26-28. These are clear and plain words. As the theological seminary *Menighetsfakulteten* in Oslo stated in a report on homosexuality: “The texts have [---] never caused any particular problems of understanding. Laity and learned have understood them as prohibitions against homosexuality.”<sup>2</sup>

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### How can this be?

Against this background – the Church of Sweden’s formal Lutheran identity and the clarity of the Bible texts on this issue – one may ask how the Church Board could advocate homosexual marriages, and how the Churchwide Assembly could vote for approval. But those who have observed the development over the last decades are well acquainted with how the Church of Sweden, on the one issue after the other, has adjusted itself to modern society, which is alien to Christian faith. To give a few examples, this is true on issues like female pastors, abortions and the positive evaluation of foreign religions. Therefore it came as no surprise that the Church Board – only about a month after the Swedish Parliament voted on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2009 for a new law making marriages gender neutral – advocated homosexual marriages, and that the Churchwide Assembly approved of it later the same year. But the question remains how the Church of Sweden tried to justify its changed position to itself and to the surrounding world. Since the question of what the Bible has to say on this matter cannot be avoided, it is of interest to see how that question has been handled.

### The Bishop Letter 1951

The first time the Church of Sweden made an official statement on homosexuality was in 1951, in a letter from the 13 bishops. In the early 1950s the bishops thought they had to make clear the church’s position and view on sexual life. This was due to the new thoughts in this area making their ways into wider circles at that time. The bishops made their statement in a 16 page letter, called *Ett brev i en folkets livsfråga*, (A Letter on a Vital Question for the People).

The letter can in brief be summarized as taking a stand for the traditional Christian values, as it rejected every sexual relationship outside of marriage.

The issue of homosexuality was treated in just a single page. The bishops stated without any reservation, “Practicing homosexuality is breaking God’s commandment.”<sup>3</sup> Not long before, in 1944, homosexual relations between adult people had been decriminalized. The bishops thought this amendment was right, because “other means than prison terms are needed to save a person with homosexual orientation.” They inculcated that the new regulation in the law was not “to be taken as an excuse for the opinion that homosexual acts are defensible.”

The Bishops’ Letter’s statement on homosexuality was unambiguously negative. The letter was determinative; it didn’t refer to any Bible passage, medical survey or anything

<sup>2</sup> *Kyrkan och homosexualiteten*. (Svenska kyrkans utredningar 1994:8), Stockholm 1994, 125.

<sup>3</sup> *Ett brev i en folkets livsfråga*. Stockholm 1951, 14

else. We can't find any argumentation for the bishops' negative stance. It wasn't necessary regarding the Bible. The issue was self-evident.

### **The 1974 Report**

In 1972 several homosexuals, belonging to different denominations, together published *De homosexuella och församlingen* (The Homosexuals and the Congregation), there they described what it's like to be a homosexual. That book possibly prompted Biskopsmötet (The Bishops' Council) to commission a report on the topic. The result of this was *De homosexuella och kyrkan* (The Homosexuals and the Church), which was published in 1974. The main author was the pastor and associate professor, later professor in ethics, Holsten Fagerberg.

After arguing on ethical grounds for churchly approval of so-called genuine homosexuality, he approached the biblical material. Fagerberg stated that the Bible unambiguously, in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament, speaks negatively about homosexuality, and that therefore also the Christian tradition and civilizations influenced by Christianity have rejected all forms of homosexuality. But there are, according to Fagerberg, two ways to approach the Biblical statements. The first way is to simply read them directly and simply report what the Bible says as one's position. The other way is to try to interpret the Bible texts, put them in their historical and salvific historical setting, and try to apply their deeper, more principled meaning to the contemporary situation of today. It was the latter Fagerberg tried to do.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the Old Testament Fagerberg said Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are the crucial passages. There homosexuality is forbidden and in the latter passage the death penalty is even imposed. The report wanted to get around these Bible passages by stating that the kind of homosexuality Old Testament knows and rejects probably is the sacral type, which was related to gentile fertility rites, which, among other things, introduced temple prostitution in Israel. The report stated: "Many things suggest the conclusion that the Old Testament's statements in Leviticus don't necessarily give us guidance in the *ethical* evaluation of homosexuality."<sup>5</sup>

However, a careful reading of the above mentioned Bible passages makes it very hard to follow the interpretation given by the report. New Testament professor Lars Hartman, special advisor in a later inquiry in 1994, *Kyrkan och homosexualiteten* (The Church and Homosexuality) (see below), categorically refuted the thought that the whole thing was only a matter of ceremonial prohibition: "The attempts to say that this only is about temple prostitution are preposterous, especially if you have in mind that the immediate context in particular is dealing with marriages with close relatives."<sup>6</sup>

It is, however, not only in Leviticus the Old Testament speaks about homosexuality. Genesis 19 (Sodom's sin) and Judges 19:22-24, for example, pictures homosexuality as something abominable. Due to these Bible passages Fagerberg ascertained in his report: "It is therefore not possible to get around the Old Testament by stating that every mention against homosexuality has a ritual, ceremonial background."<sup>7</sup> But these latter passages, Fagerberg said, only expressed abhorrence for that kind of homosexuality which involves unrestrained lust. Therefore, indirectly, the so-called genuine homosexuality is excluded

<sup>4</sup> Fagerberg, Holsten (red.), *De homosexuella och kyrkan*, Stockholm 1974, 92-94.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>6</sup> *Kyrkan och homosexualiteten. (Svenska kyrkans utredningar 1994:8)*, Stockholm 1994, 132. See also prof. and bishop em. Bertil Gärtner's (also special advisor) critique in the same inquiry, 107-10.

<sup>7</sup> Fagerberg (red.), *De homosexuella och kyrkan*, Stockholm 1974, 98.

from these negative Biblical statements. In the report's judgment on homosexuality this theory was expressed very directly, when Fagerberg stated that the Biblical statements "are addressed against all forms of sexual promiscuity." Homosexual love must be subject to "the same ethical requirement" as heterosexual love and can be considered ethically qualified if it is rooted in the core of one's personality, if it is faithful etc.<sup>8</sup>

If we turn to the New Testament passages – three passages in the Pauline epistles were discussed (Rome 1:22-32, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10) – the report continued along the same lines. Fagerberg regarded only the unrestrained homosexual promiscuity as condemnable: "New Testament only knows one type of homosexual; men capable of a normal sexuality but who due to perverted worship are engaging in unnatural relationships."<sup>9</sup> In this way the report made room for the so-called genuine homosexuality also from arguments regarding the Bible – or more correctly by stating that the Bible is silent about this form of homosexuality – and therefore claimed that genuine homosexuality could be defended without rejecting the Bible.

With regard to what has become a reality today, homosexual marriage, it should be mentioned that Fagerberg in his report clearly rejects such a thing, because "in comparison with marriage the homosexual relation is, after all, something distinctive."<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that the report had been commissioned by the Bishops' Council, it didn't result in any official decision or even statement from the church. The Bishops' Council also refrained from taking a stand concerning the report's proposals. On the whole the report didn't cause as intense a debate as Fagerberg and the co-writers perhaps hoped. Not until the 1980s did the discussion on homosexuality occur in a strong way in the Church of Sweden.

Nevertheless, the report from 1974 *De homosexuella och kyrkan* can be considered a milestone in the development towards a changed attitude on homosexuality, because we here, for the first time, see an affirming view from a somewhat official report. The report was too radical to be approved by a churchly authority in 1974, but it surely indicated what was going to happen in the future. Not surprisingly, the report was later relied on by homosexuals within the church.<sup>11</sup>

### **Homosexuality in Antiquity and the world of the New Testament**

Fagerberg stated in the report from 1974 that the New Testament only is aware of promiscuous homosexuality. But is that really true? New Testament professor Chrys C. Caragounis shows very convincing in his book *Homoerotik. I forntid och nutid – och den kristna församlingen* (published in 2000) (Homo Eroticism. In Antiquity and in Modern Times – and in the Christian Congregation) that both the concept of stable homosexual relationship between adults (examples are drawn from Plutarch) as well as the concept of hereditary homosexual orientation, which manifests itself in a deep, constant relation (examples are drawn from Aristotle and Lucian) were well known during Antiquity. Caragounis draws the following conclusion:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 158-64.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. *En fråga om kärlek. Homosexuella i Kyrkan*, Stockholm 1988, 7. There the then Archbishop Bertil Werkström informs that a group of homosexuals referred to the 1974 Report in a private audience they had with him.

It is therefore false, as some modern advocates of homosexuality do, to make a distinction between on the one hand ancient, supposedly cult-related or raw homosexuality and on the other hand modern homosexuality between two grown up, consenting individuals, promising each other faithfulness. The so-called modern form of homosexuality [...] was well known in Antiquity. That is clear from what has here been brought forward.”<sup>12</sup>

Professor and bishop em. Bertil Gärtner, the exegetical expert in the inquiry of 1994 (see below), stated the same thing. He writes in the report from 1994, that the statement that Paul did not talk about genuine homosexuality,

“is not compatible with the texts’ historical background or their biblical context. It is easy to see that this interpretation is reading into the text the meaning one wants them to have. The interpretation must be according to the modern conditions and not according to the texts themselves.”<sup>13</sup>

Since the so-called genuine homosexuality can be documented in the writings of such well-known writers as Aristotle and Lucian, this shows without any doubt that the concept was spread all around the Hellenistic culture. But is it therefore certain that the writers of the New Testament, Paul in particular, were aware of it? Yes, undoubtedly! Caragounis writes in the book cited above:

“The apostle Paul did not live on an island. He was raised in Tarsus, an important Hellenistic city, and his constant, daily contacts with his contemporaries made him aware of all these forms of homosexuality. To state that Paul alone was ignorant of what was going on in the surrounding world is not convincing, hardly even serious, and is based upon ones own basal ignorance about the basic conditions, life and cultural climate of Antiquity’s societies.”<sup>14</sup>

One may add, as an “overkill” argument, that Paul was well educated, a scribe, at home in the intellectual world of the day.

Today hardly any important exegete would argue that the Bible’s prohibition against homosexuality only covered temple prostitution. Associate professor Per Block (exegete and Bible translator), who accepts homosexuality, wrote this in *Kyrkans Tidning* (Church’s Newspaper) 1999:46:

“A scholar stated a few years ago that ‘men laying with men’ (“manslägrare”) doesn’t mean men having sex with men, but men who make their living by laying with men or women. Paul would only have condemned prostitution, not homosexuality. Even though that interpretation now is rejected in the learned community, it is only natural many were delighted by it. It would of course be better if Paul had condemned only mechanic, emotional coldness in sex life without condemning a deviation that can include personal warmth. But a translator’s first duty is to reflect what the author said. One must not lie about this, not even with the best intentions. To take stance in regard to Paul’s words is

<sup>12</sup> Caragounis, Chrys C., *Homöerotik i forntid och nutid - och den kristna församlingen*, Haninge 200, 48

<sup>13</sup> *Kyrkan och homosexualiteten*, 120-21, see also 113-14.

<sup>14</sup> Caragounis, *Homöerotik i forntid och nutid - och den kristna församlingen*, 49.

something different – that everyone has to do for himself. I may personally give my opinion, but not as a translator or as a delegate of the Bible Commission, but as an ordinary Christian theologian. [---]

To find the right way, one has to focus on the great positive values, which ought to be realized: love, consideration, mutuality. Doing so gives the courage to contradict Paul himself, when he is trying to confine them in too narrow rules.”<sup>15</sup>

### The Inquiry of 1994

The Church of Sweden’s Central Board (Svenska kyrkans centralstyrelse) decided in 1988 to appoint a team to investigate which view the Church of Sweden should adopt on homosexuality. This was due to the Churchwide Assembly’s decision in 1988 to have the Central Board “appoint an all-round composite commission on the church’s attitude towards homosexuality and its consequences in the church’s spiritual counseling, preaching and teaching.”

Six persons made up the commission, which no sooner than 1994 presented *Kyrkan och homosexualiteten* (Svenska kyrkans utredningar 1994:8) (*The Church and Homosexuality*). The Church of Sweden’s Inquiry 1994:8). Four of the members of the commission suggested that the church should accept homosexuality, while two were of the opposite opinion, e.g. the above mentioned Bertil Gärtner. In the Inquiry the first view is called “main line,” while the other is called “alternative line.”

The main line’s conclusions and suggestions for concrete measures were the same as the standpoint of the report in 1974. This meant for example that so-called genuine, ethically qualified homosexual relations should be accepted, homosexuals should have access to the church’s pastoral and diaconal offices, the church should in an active way struggle for acceptance of homosexuality and a special prayer service was suggested to confirm and support the homosexuals. But as in the Report of 1974 the Inquiry very carefully distinguished homosexual partnership from marriage, which still was considered only for heterosexuals.<sup>16</sup>

The Inquiry however differed from the Report of 1974 in the way it argued for the acceptance of homosexuality. Now it was openly said that the Bible should not be decisive in some cases, namely when its statements collide with “the Law of Creation,” which was defined as those rules we human beings understand as being helpful in the realization of a good life.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore love got an absolute role in ethical assessments. That which was seen as promoting love was to be accepted.<sup>18</sup>

Of course the “alternative line” criticized this way of arguing. First of all they stressed that the concept of love is unclear as to its content. Love means something different for the abandoned wife than for the husband, who has met a new woman and for the sake of love wants to have a divorce. Secondly, it was pointed out that love gets its content from God’s creation- and salvation-work in Christ. Here the basic creation order – “male and female created He them” (Genesis 1:27). – plays a decisive role for human love relations. Jesus confirms this order in His teaching on marriage (Matthew 19:4-6). Thirdly, it was said that neither Jesus nor the apostles played out love against the concrete commandments. On the contrary, Jesus says: “If you love me, you will keep my

<sup>15</sup> Block, Per, ”Modet att säga emot Paulus” in *Kyrkans tidning* 1999:46, 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Kyrkan och homosexualiteten*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-65, 174-80, 188.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

commandments” (John 14:15) and Paul writes that “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8-10), not its abolition.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Inquiry of 2005**

In 1998 the Church of Sweden’s Central Board asked the Theological Committee to work through several principal issues about homosexuality. The result of this work was the discussion document *Homosexuella i kyrkan* (2002) (Homosexuals in Church). After that document’s publication an intense and extensive discussion process took place in the Church of Sweden, and October 27, 2005 the Churchwide Assembly decided that homosexual partnerships could be blessed in an official service.

Of uttermost importance in this discussion process was the open hearing arranged in Uppsala on September 6-9, 2004. All in all 28 persons were questioned: scholars, persons in authority [over others], church leaders and homosexuals were interviewed. Everything was broadcast live over Internet and also replayed the week after on Swedish national television, SVT 24. The hearing was published as *Kärlek, samlevnad och äktenskap* (Svenska kyrkans utredningar 2005:1) (*Love, Living Together and Marriage*. The Church of Sweden’s Inquiry 2005:1).

Most important, because of his office, was the contribution of Archbishop K.G. Hammar. His contribution may at the same time be considered as in the center [of those interviewed]. On one side Hammar had opponents of an official act of blessing of homosexual partnership, on the other side he had more radical advocates for the homosexual lifestyle – but most of the interviewees took about the same standpoint as Hammar.

When Hammar made a statement on the Bible’s role in Christian theology, he said:

“My view on the Bible may be characterized as movement. The Bible texts have to be understood contextually. Already within the covers of the Bible a development takes place, where the understanding of who God is and what He does changes. We are in a dangerous situation if we cite from the Bible’s books, written in different time periods, as if that would be unproblematic.”<sup>20</sup>

Hammar also warned against “the confusion of God with the Bible”, he said that “the temptation is to grab a Bible verse and simplistically make it the voice of God”.

When the Bible in this way had been relativized, the absolute appeared; the principle deciding all issues: love. Hammar said:

“If we understand God as love, this means that we in some way have to find an understanding of peoples’ experience and knowledge of love. The Christ-story has given us a comprehension of love as living for the other, living self-sacrificing, making life a sacrifice. When I then see self-sacrificing love around me I cannot – with my understanding of God, formed by a reflection inspired by the New Testament – think of that experience as theologically irrelevant: I see God there.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>20</sup> *Kärlek, samlevnad och äktenskap*. (Svenska kyrkans utredningar 2005:1), Uppsala 2005, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Hammar said in his conclusion that homosexual partnership should not be called marriage. They are equally good, but different.

The Theological Committee, which arranged the hearing, said it viewed homosexual partnerships as a good thing. As justification the committee said that they had found convincing theological arguments to support the notion that all persons, including homosexuals, should be able to live in faithful and equal relationships. Homosexual partnership promotes such relationships. The committee stated that “from an exegetical and hermeneutical perspective” they can dismiss the Bible texts which have been used against homosexuality. However, they didn’t tell which exegetical or hermeneutic insights they assumed, but continued: “Instead it is in the love-message of the Bible we find the prerequisite for acceptance of mutual, responsible relationships between persons of the same sex - relationships characterized by love and concern.”<sup>22</sup> The Theological Committee did not in 2005 make a statement whether or not homosexuals should also have the right to marry each other, or if they only should get the church’s blessing upon their partnerships.

#### **The Church Board’s Petition and the Churchwide Assembly’s decision in 2009**

On June 12, 2009 the Church Board made a positive statement on gender neutral marriages. That had only been possible by Swedish law since May 1, 2009, after a decision by the Swedish Parliament on April 1 that same year. By this the Church Board took the whole thing one step further than the Church of Sweden had done before, but the motivation was the same as in the Report in 1994 and onwards: It is no longer the actual Bible passages about homosexuality which are decisive regarding homosexuality. Instead the great Biblical values like love, community, faithfulness etc. are the ruling principles. With these values as basis, they said they can accept homosexual marriages, even though the Bible passages about homosexuality are negative towards the phenomenon.

The Archbishop succeeding K.G. Hammar, Anders Wejryd, said the following in his official commentary on the Church Board’s Petition – a statement that also well summons up the standpoint of the Theological Committee:

“When the church is to take a stance on the issue of marriage for persons of the same sex, it is a relevant question whether this damages or helps men. The church wants to support faithful relationships, and for us, in a Bible-theological perspective, the commandment to love is superior to all other commandments in the Bible.”<sup>23</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

In Lutheran tradition the Bible has been regarded as the only rule and standard for doctrine and life. Therefore it is not surprising that Holsten Fagerberg in the Report in 1974 put a lot of effort in the attempt to re-interpret the Biblical texts condemning homosexuality.

Efforts to get around what the Biblical texts – to put it simply – mean, have efficiently been refuted by exegetical expertise. In 1994, the “main line” in the Inquiry *Kyrkan och Homosexualiteten* (The Church and Homosexuality) instead chose another way to relate to the Bible. They upheld its message of love and accepted everything that, in their view, promotes love - even if it conflicts with concrete Biblical commandments.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>23</sup> Press release published in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 2009-06-11.



That the Bible doesn't - as the advocates of homosexuality do - play out the message of love against the concrete commandments, but on the contrary claims that love towards Jesus displays itself in the keeping of the commandments (John 14:15), doesn't seem to bother them.

The new way to relate to the Bible was also very noticeable in the investigation from 2005. With the then archbishop Hammar in the lead, the Bible's position was relativized and instead it was argued from what could properly be called "the argument of love".

"The argument of love" was also the justification the Church Board and the then archbishop Anders Wejryd used in their suggestion for the Churchwide Assembly to accept homosexual marriages - a suggestion the Churchwide Assembly also voted in favor on October 22, 2009.

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