On Chastity:

A Lutheran Examination of Chastity in the 21st Century

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In memory of my mom, Cindy, who first sowed the seeds of ministry in my heart, and my dad, Bret, who always supported my brothers and me in absolutely anything we wanted to do.
“How I dread preaching on the estate of marriage!

I am reluctant to do it because I am afraid if I once
get really involved in the subject it will make a lot
of work for me and for others.”

—Martin Luther, On the Estate of Marriage (1522)

Chastity has become the new celibacy. In many ways, this is the logical outcome of the earliest reforms in the Lutheran tradition. Lutheran theology has at its core a commitment to the individual believer’s well-being, and, through this theology, the church is willing to adapt its thinking and change its ways in the face of both longstanding and novel questions and circumstances. Martin Luther and the other reformers took seriously the issues that they saw in the church, and chief among these issues was the taking of vows and the mandatory celibacy of priests and monastics. This mandatory celibacy only existed in theory, though — monastics, for example, are charged with “abound[ing] in every delight, [though] they claim to be celibate.”¹

On one hand, there were questions of vows providing special justification that was inaccessible to regular Christians.² But, on the other hand, people who were naturally inclined toward getting married were systematically denied the opportunity to because of their office — monk, nun, or priest.

As Lutheran scholar Jillian (Jill) Cox explains, “Luther’s commitment to ensuring the physical and spiritual welfare of Christians in the face of a literal interpretation of Scripture that would cause harm is a hermeneutic that can inform interpretations of Scripture and tradition in

debates on same-sex and indeed queer sexuality.”

Now, of course, Luther and the other early reformers and authors of the Book of Concord would say that by reversing course from the Roman Catholic Church and abolishing mandatory priestly celibacy, they are actually being more loyal to scripture like 1 Timothy. But Cox’s sentiment rings true: Luther and the other reformers, fundamentally, have a commitment to people. The mandatory celibacy of religious leaders did not help them or the people they served. Instead, people were caused direct spiritual harm, primarily those vowed to celibacy. But others were harmed too: the people and communities they served. Despite the intervening years, reading the work of older theologians like Luther remains relevant: “Looking closely at Luther’s arguments and other traditional resources is worth doing because it disrupts the claim of a linear, clean history in ideas about sexuality and marriage that seem definitive in our own time.”

Luther, despite working in the 16th century, still serves as a discursive partner to help us examine what we believe to be natural or normal and why we believe so. He guides us as an example of someone who questioned everything: how things were, how things are, and how things can be. He teaches us not to take anything unquestioningly or uncritically.

In eliminating celibacy, Luther and the reformers brought in a new (old) tool: chastity. While celibacy would be considered still a gift for some (since “not everyone is fit for celibacy,” whose practice requires “a singular gift and work of God”), chastity was available for all Christians: “Those that act in true faith and are genuinely religious, they certainly belong to the right religious order of chastity.”

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sexuality, “Christians throughout history have affirmed that lifelong celibacy is a spiritual gift and calling, not a path that should be forced upon someone.”6 The Lutheran Reformation is one such moment when celibacy was rightly called a spiritual gift, something that some truly do have — but indeed, that number is likely exceedingly few. In the Reformation, we find a historical example of a moment when anything and everything was put into question. The church and everyday life were radically questioned and reshaped. Lutherans today should not be afraid of the deeply unsettling process that the Reformation was: we should, in fact, carry that same energy through to today, questioning and challenging hegemonic structures at all times.

Nonetheless, returning to what the Reformation did to reform celibacy, it is chastity that comes in to fill the place that celibacy once held. If celibacy is no longer expected of people, chastity is the new norm to hold people to. Cox has convincingly argued, for example, that “Luther merely replaced celibacy with marriage as the norm for most Christians, which has evolved into just as fixed a conception of marriage that is drawn upon in current religious debates around same-sex sexuality.”7 Indeed, in the intervening years between the Reformation and now, chastity has taken on a life of its own. In many ways, it is now the same oppressive tool that celibacy once was — a theological tool used to police peoples’ sexualities in ways that do not honor their spiritual health and well-being. In this way,

Most of the discourses on sex, be they religious, psychiatric, popular, or political, delimit a very small portion of human sexual capacity as sanctifiable, safe, healthy, mature, legal, or politically correct. The ‘line’ distinguishes these from all other erotic behaviors, which

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7 Cox, “‘If Love Commands It’: Love and Law in Luther’s Queering of Chastity,” 127.
are understood to be the work of the devil, dangerous, psychopathological, infantile, or politically reprehensible.\textsuperscript{8}

Chastity, following a strict Lutheran theology, is the reigning discourse around which all sexual activity becomes analyzed and understood, especially in today’s day.

However, despite the fact that a turn to chastity was a liberatory tool, in the years since the reformers were at work, chastity has taken this more nefarious turn. While in Luther’s time chastity was perhaps the most important theological concept that allowed for a movement away from celibacy, it still was a limiting tool. It was used to classify what sexual activity was appropriate — by definition, chaste — and what sexual activity was inappropriate — unchaste. Chastity and unchastity became the two buckets into which all sexuality could be sorted. Over the centuries since this was first articulated, though, instead of keeping its ‘gospel’ valence, i.e., its ‘good news’ meaning that set people free to no longer fear their sexuality, it has turned into a kind of law. Instead of pointing toward a healthy sexuality, distinct from what Luther would consider being the bad sexuality under celibacy, chastity now functions as a law of its own, pointing out what sexual activity is sinful and must be avoided. In that way, chastity has indeed become the new celibacy — a mandated sexual behavior whose application is not and should not be one-size-fits-all. There is no singular, universal sexual system that works for everyone at all times and in all places.

In this paper, I will examine the roots and current manifestations of this important theological concept of chastity. Chastity lies implicitly behind much of the current sexual theology of the largest Lutheran church body in the United States: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). If people cannot be told that they must be celibate, what can they be

told to be? The answer turns out to be chaste, even if that is not what is being said outright. I will begin by examining some of the earliest Lutheran thought about chastity and celibacy, as well as its rationale and usefulness in the moment. Martin Luther’s writing will be preeminent, but the Book of Concord — the historical confession of the Lutheran movement — will also take a central role. I will turn then to more modern understandings of Lutheran theology: scholars and thinkers in the ELCA, as well as other Lutheran and queer theologians who grapple with the question of sexuality. I will look specifically at how chastity functions as the dominant, unspoken theological concept that underpins the ELCA’s 2009 social statement “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” (henceforth, “Human Sexuality”) and the church’s disciplinary code, “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline: Rostered Ministers, Congregations, and Members of Congregations” (henceforth, “Definitions and Guidelines”). Finally, I will look at chastity’s expansiveness as a means by which Lutherans will be able to examine their sexuality more honestly and openly, opening a space for discernment and dialogue that the church desperately needs.

Chastity, far from its original liberatory use in Luther’s time, has instead turned into the theological underpinning of both the church’s understanding of the proper expression of human sexuality and the basis by which the church organizes its discipline for rostered ministers. It has become domesticated: Lutheran theologians and leaders treat it as an unquestionable part of our theology, when Lutheran theology is all about asking the hard questions and dealing with the change that the answers to those questions necessitate. In doing so, the church has caused and continues to cause spiritual harm to countless numbers of faithful people. No longer a gift,

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9 Luther is not the sole author of The Book of Concord. Citations from The Book of Concord in this work come from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).
chastity has become law; instead of being good news that sets the faithful free to love one another, it constrains them under the fear of punishment and sin.

**Toward Defining Chastity**

Despite its command over the discourse, chastity remains an elusive term to define. Even in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, there is no definition given in the glossary for the term, and it seemingly remains undefined in Jane E. Strohl’s chapter in said volume, “Luther on Marriage, Sexuality, and the Family.” Strohl does helpfully link it to the idea of a ‘vow of chastity,’ much like the vows of celibacy that Luther derides. Luther, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7, also seemingly slips between the terms chastity and celibacy, highlighting a potential fluidity of the terms in his developing thought. Chastity then has the ability to float about as a discursive tool to talk about sexuality without being pinned down in a concrete sense. This turns out to be the central problem of chastity as it is received in the 21st century because the lack of a definition for the term allows theologians and religious leaders to use it to their own ends — ends that turn out to be quite harmful. Therefore, in an attempt to edge toward a definition of the term, I would define chastity as it currently functions as the theological concept that fills the hole made in the sexual lives of Christians through a de-emphasizing of the special holiness/sacredness of celibacy. Christians must have something to aspire to in their sexual lives, so Luther and the other reformers give them ‘chastity’ toward that end. Chastity then becomes wrapped up in the social mores that exist in whatever time period that is under examination, and chastity becomes synonymous with ‘normative sexual behavior,’ be that

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12 1 Corinthians 7 (1523), in LW 28:50.
through Luther’s creation of the office of the housewife (discussed later), the marriage of priests, or mainstream purity culture in the United States. Chastity can also then function as a term that hearkens back to a 16th-century sexuality that simply is no longer operative in the 21st century. By remaining nebulous, chastity retains its power over the lives of Christians. The turn that this paper hopes to make is that rather than using chastity’s vagueness as a way to narrow the understanding of acceptable sex and sexuality, it should be used as a capacious term that makes room for Christians to have sexual lives that are fruitful — even though we might make mistakes in the process, our sure assurance of God’s grace through faith should allow the faithful to make mistakes and navigate relationships without the fear of divine retribution. To quote an adage that a Lutheran mentor has often told this author, “Either we [as Lutherans] believe in grace, or we don’t.” This author believes in that grace.

**Luther’s Thought, Reformation Thought**

When the Protestant Reformation began, one of the major and most important changes made was moving from enforcing celibacy on priests and monastics to allowing priests to marry. The vows of celibacy that monastics — monks and nuns — had taken were seen in a particularly negative light. The reformers’ discussions around vows of celibacy for monks and nuns provide the starkest example of their opinions on celibacy. For example, in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Philipp Melanchthon writes that despite their alleged celibacy, monastics in reality “abound in every delight, [though] they claim to be celibate.”13 Certainly some people have the gift of celibacy, but in the case of the monastics and indeed the priests, many who had taken such vows were not suited for them and then were, of course, unable to maintain them. Because of this, the reformers leaned on church history, citing scripture like 1 Timothy (where bishops are

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required to “be above reproach, the husband of one wife”) and their own contemporary history, where “It was only four hundred years ago that priests in Germany were compelled by force to leave the married state and take the vows of celibacy.”\(^{14}\) Even beyond this, though, the reformers believed that many people were being urged to take vows without what we might call today informed consent — including children who were too young to truly understand what they were doing.\(^{15}\)

Luther talks about chastity, celibacy, and relationships in many places in his writing, but none of his writings on the matter is more ‘authoritative’ than what he writes in his *Large Catechism*. This authority stems from its inclusion in the *Book of Concord*; this book is seen, at least in the ELCA, as “further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.”\(^{16}\) This differs from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s understanding of the Book of Concord, which it “accepts without reservation.”\(^{17}\) From a point of view within the ELCA, which is the focus of the present work, by virtue of being included in the *Book of Concord*, Luther’s *Large Catechism* is treated as a higher authority within the church over and above Luther’s other writings; it is one of the primary sources that the church will use when doing theology or structuring its polity.

The primary treatment of the issue of sexuality in the *Large Catechism* is contained within Luther’s discussion of the Sixth Commandment: “You are not to commit adultery.”\(^{18}\) This

\(^{14}\) AC, Ger. XXIII.11–12, in BC 2000, 64.
\(^{15}\) AC XXVII.5–6, 18-20 in BC 2000, 82, 84. “In CA XXVII [i.e., AC XXVII], one of Philip Melanchthon’s chief complaints is that young people entered the monastery and took these lifelong vows long before they were able to comprehend what they were promising,” in Timothy J. Wengert, “The Book of Concord and Human Sexuality, Seen Through the Institution of Marriage,” *Dialog* 48, no. 1 (March 2009): 12, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2009.00426.x.
\(^{16}\) Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, November 2023), https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Constitutions_Bylaws_and_Continuing_Resolutions_of_the_ELCA.pdf?_ga=2.19996986.342976002.1699282868-227737813.1698027869.
\(^{17}\) Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “Handbook” (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2010).
\(^{18}\) LC 199, in BC 2000, 413.
association of chastity with adultery will have long-lasting effects in Lutheran theology, including in the much later “Definitions and Guidelines.” To escape adultery and unchastity, then, Luther argued that “God has established marriage, so that all may have their allotted portion and be satisfied with it.” I do not want to diminish how radical of a proposition this was. In saying that marriage is something that is equalizing, something that all people may have and that they may find satisfaction in it, Luther is arguing directly against the notion of marriage being somehow worse than other ways of life. Part of the motivation for Luther’s work here is pseudo-historical in itself. In his own opinion, Luther argues that the prohibition against adultery was given to the Israelites in the Ten Commandments because adultery was “the most widespread form of unchastity among them,” over and above prostitution and lewdness (which he says were not common); he also highlights that the Jewish people valued marriage over virginity. This assessment is necessarily influenced by his understanding of marriage as a sacrament. Adrian Thatcher writes, for example, that “Only in the second millennium did the church officially regard marriage as a sacrament, and for reasons which may horrify Christians believing it to be a sacrament today. The sacrament of marriage was the medicinum, the medicine, or the remedium, the remedy, for the sickness of sexual desire.” Luther, then, is working under a frame of mind that sexuality is something that must be controlled — that sex practiced outside of the bounds that he sets is a ‘sickness’ of some sort that must find a cure.

Therefore, in Luther’s thought, chastity was most perfectly exercised within a marriage as a medicinum and remedium. Indeed, for him, “it is not possible to remain chaste outside of

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19 Notably, “Definitions and Guidelines” does not cite any of the confessional writings. It instead relies on the governing documents of the church and its social statements to derive its authority.
20 LC 212, in BC 2000, 415
21 LC 201, in BC 2000, 413.
marriage; for flesh and blood remain flesh and blood, and natural inclinations and stimulations proceed unrestrained and unimpeded, as everyone observes and experiences.”

Marriage might be considered, then, the ‘easy way out’ for someone who does have sexual desire — and, as explained above, most all people do, in fact, have sexual desire. Remarkably, what Luther notes here in his *Large Catechism* is that people indeed exist in the world and have bodies — bodies that experience desire and have physical pleasure. What he is worried about, primarily, is where these desires and pleasures can most appropriately be exercised. To him, in his cultural and temporal context, he determined that the most appropriate place for doing so was within the confines of a marriage. This is, as Lutheran theologian Kirsi Stjerna notes in the second volume of *The Annotated Luther*, “radical”:

Luther’s arguments about the nobility of the marital vocation, for women and men, were radical in a religious world where asexuality and celibacy were revered, and where women were not considered equal with men either in their creation or redemption.

Luther’s drastically egalitarian approach draws from his reading of Genesis and the creation of Eve as Adam’s equal partner in grace and sin.

Though she focuses on the equality between men and women here, there are other avenues of inquiry to pursue. Of particular importance is that Luther is not interested in diminishing the value of marriage. For him, marriage is, indeed, a way of life that is not to be looked down upon. His focus on marriage’s importance is linked to the social and theological moment that he found himself in: if the Catholic authorities were saying that taking vows of celibacy imparted special

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grace, this diminished the marital estate for the large mass of people who could not and would not take such vows.25

In understanding how Luther came to these understandings, one cannot help but consider the time and place in which Luther lived. Luther, indeed, lived in a particular time and in a particular place, with particular customs and norms. The Reformation, in its essence, was an effort to challenge the hegemonic structures not only of the church but also of everyday life. To reframe marriage is to reframe a fundamental building block of society: arguing that marriage is just as valuable as celibacy challenged beliefs that were deeply held by many people. One could argue that these were not changes “to marriage” but rather changes to “who may become married.” Nonetheless, there is something more radical happening here in that both the shape of marriage and its status in society certainly changed. Luther was very open to the fact that different places had different norms and customs around marriage; in fact, he encouraged each land to maintain its own marriage rituals and not to discount them.26 Frankly, if Luther is willing to admit that culture differs across space, it is not difficult to imagine that he also understood that it differs across time. Our theological logic must be flexible and adaptable enough to account for the very real ways that our lives have changed since Luther’s time, and indeed how people’s lives changed between the writing of the Bible and Luther’s own time.

Returning to the issue of marriage for clergy, however, we see that this same logic of marriage being not just an alternative to celibacy but, in fact, being as good as celibacy continues to hold water. Knowing that those under vows of celibacy were breaking them, and since “a

25 Regarding monasticism, its vows, and grace, the reformers write, “Now they pretend that the monastic life is of such a nature that through it a person may earn God’s grace and righteousness before God—indeed that it is a state of perfection, far above all other walks of life instituted by God,” in AC, Ger. XXVII.16, in BC 2000, 84. This relates directly with Luther’s argument that marriage is just as good as celibacy, see, infra, pp. 12–3, 31–3.
mighty, loud complaint has been heard throughout the world about the flagrant immorality and dissolute life of priests who were not able to remain chaste; their vices reached the height of abomination. In order to avoid so much terrible offense, adultery, and other immorality, some priests among us have entered the married state."\(^{27}\) Having the option to marry was not some perfect escape from sin; what it instead was and continues to be is an opportunity to be set free. What, in fact, was sinful in the prior arrangement was that clergy who should have been married or at least afforded the opportunity to have a partner in the first place were unable to do so. This, unfortunately, led some with positions of authority and power to have illicit relationships that could not be public and caused public offense.

Apart from this, though, we need to consider again that marriage was something that was intended to be freeing. Luther saw a real-life issue affecting wide swaths of Christian people (priests acting improperly, people worried that their marriages were not as good as celibacy, etc.), and he wanted to come up with a solution. He saw a need, and he wanted to fill it. Despite this, Luther’s language could be “abrasive,” as we have seen above. According to Jane Shaw, “Luther’s needs-based approach [to marriage] meant that he found it difficult to have any empathy with those who experienced things differently. In particular, he thought that all women should marry, and some of his most abrasive language was reserved for nuns.”\(^{28}\) This is a fundamental tension present in Luther’s theology, then: that he sees a need but imagines one particular solution to the issue. Even if the solution that Luther came up with at a certain time no longer works, contemporary theologians in the Lutheran tradition ought not to forget that Luther’s method involved seeing a need in his community and trying to grapple with ways to

\(^{27}\) AC, Ger. XXIII.1, 3 in BC 2000, 62.

make sure that people were not suffering due to theological and social norms imposed by the church. Luther did not necessarily need to use a needs-based approach, but he did; in reading the bulk of his theology and the theology of the reformers, he is working with actual issues that real people face. This does not discount that Luther finds sin to be a very real phenomenon — but the reality of life on Earth influences how he chooses to respond theologically to the issues. By no means do I mean to say that Luther’s beliefs around marriage and sex were perfect in his time: there were likely still many who did not find themselves falling neatly into his system. In a traditional Lutheran understanding of sin, even, it would be impossible for a relationship to be perfect because Lutherans believe that it is impossible to be perfect; it is impossible to stop sinning; the focus is instead on grace instead of perfection.²⁹ We would be wrong to assume that Luther had everything 100 percent correct because no one is 100 percent perfect. Nonetheless, there is still something powerful in having a theology that is adaptable to the present social and cultural moment, one that focuses on alleviating spiritual suffering caused by oppressive theologies.

A Discourse on Virginity

One of Luther’s more interesting discussions about actual sex that people have is contained in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7. He goes on for about a paragraph discussing virginity and explaining how it is not something better than other ways of being in relationship with others.

He begins, “Many will make a wry face at this and be very peeved that they have preserved their virginity for nothing, especially since God will not regard them any more highly than other Christians.”³⁰ What is particularly under question here is how people have been

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²⁹ AC, Lat. XII.8, in BC 2000, 45.
³⁰ 1 Corinthians 7 (1523), in LW 28:50.
falsely taught that there is something more virtuous in remaining a virgin, or taking vows of celibacy, than there is in being a person who lives in the world and has a family. The vast majority of people followed this latter lifestyle, and Luther did not want them to believe that they were in some way worse than the ‘religious’ people around them. Reading this quote, one also gets to hear Luther’s voice and his brash tone. People are being taught, he says, to preserve “their virginity for nothing.” We will turn later to discussing people in contemporary times who have found themselves preserving their virginity for no good reason and to their spiritual and interpersonal detriment through purity culture. Luther’s writing here, then, has an ability to give to the present day a model for understanding sexuality that does not necessarily need to be exactly emulated but one that shows that human beings need not stay virgins for God’s sake. It ends up being more important that people discern their own positioning and their own relationships with God, themselves, and other people before deciding how to live out a sexual life.

After this, as Luther often offers in his writing, we get a bit of humor as he discusses “foolish virgins”: “But by this very sign one will not that they are foolish virgins (Matt. 25:3 ff.) who have spilled their oil in that they have remained virgins not from simple Christian belief but for the sake of reward, reputation, honor, and glory.”31 Luther argues that simple Christian belief will be the reason that someone chooses to stay a virgin or not. As he outlines clearly throughout his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7, there is something to be said about a celibate life. Though he is reading Paul in an extremely counter-cultural way during his time, especially in the context of the Roman Catholic church and its mandated celibacy for clergy and monastics, he still holds closely to Paul’s argument that there is something good in chastity — especially for those who

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31 1 Corinthians 7 (1523), in LW 28:50.
have a gift for it. However, as Luther argues, there are indeed very few who have such a gift. And, since we are talking about a gift, there is no reward, reputation, honor, or glory for maintaining virginity. It is simply something to praise when exercised by someone appropriately and when it does not become something that makes one better than someone who does not practice virginity. One’s status as a virgin does not impart any special benefits, and nor does marriage. They are simply two states that can be beneficial or detrimental depending on the individual person.

Luther ends his discourse on virginity by invoking “a lost chastity”: “Therefore they cannot help but be downcast, for all this has been difficult for them and yet they preserved a lost chastity.”

In Luther’s eyes, and the eyes of the other reformers, there has been a great lie fed to people. This lie centered around the idea that our works are what justify us in the eyes of God. Stemming from this, then, is a misinterpretation of Paul that Luther is trying to work around and through in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7. Luther writes, for example, about verses 1 and 2 that “The words of St. Paul are spoken in the freedom of the spirit, demand a free spirit, and must be understood with a free spirit. But hypocrites are unwilling to understand them so. They make a dead letter and cowardly law of them, a law that applies force and makes their lost false chastity difficult with outward abstinence from women.”

In conversation with what one reads in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, namely that “the law requires of us our own works and our own perfection,” this misinterpretation places chastity and virginity higher in a hierarchy of things that ‘please God,’ putting these things over and above the married state. This is not what Paul is arguing at all, according to Luther. Once people realize that this is a great lie, they

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32 1 Corinthians 7 (1523), in LW 28:50.
33 1 Corinthians 7 (1523), in LW 28:10.
will, of course, be downcast because they have been deceived by the church — including by people that Luther and other reformers would argue were not practicing what they preached.

It is not easy to remain a virgin, as evidenced by the reformers’ reference to people who fail to maintain their vows of chastity and instead “abound in every delight.” They have “preserved a lost chastity” for no good reason. Because they have been tricked into maintaining this chastity and been sold a great lie, people who have kept themselves chaste or remained virgins without having such a gift will, of course, be downcast. This is direct spiritual harm caused by life-denying theologies perpetuated by religious leaders.

**Contemporary Chastity**

It is a leap to move from the 16th century to the 20th and 21st centuries, but despite the intervening centuries, a Lutheran theology of chastity continues to exert its influence on people and the way that the church is structured. Chastity is far from a has-been theological concept, but that does not mean that it is understood in the same way or that it must remain the same. Krister Stendahl astutely notes that “for a liberated reading of the Scriptures, one has to know that everything is conditioned by time and place [...] All Scripture is marked by time and place. The question is: Where does it point?” Admittedly, this is not a novel point. It is clear that this is the same ethos that Martin Luther and the other reformers articulated in their theology: that context is not just one factor, but rather that it is one of the most important ones.

One challenge is that there are no two people for whom Scripture points in the exact same direction. Scripture is marked not just by time and place but also by *person*, people, and community. The needs of God’s people are highly contextual, and, right now, the church needs a

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better understanding of chastity. Chastity, in contemporary Lutheran communities, is not a liberatory theological tool but instead one of oppression — one used to subdue and control. In upholding the married life as worthwhile and good in its own right, and not a lesser ‘office’ compared to monastic vows or ordination, “Luther liberated millions of generations of women outside the religious establishment by creating the holy office of housewife. But his teaching became a shackle on women in the nuclear family in the 20th century. It’s not strange that good teachings can have bad effects.”37 We will turn later to exactly how chastity manifests as a good teaching with bad effects in the Lutheran context when we examine ELCA documents like “Definitions and Guidelines.” In the meantime, one place where a so-called ‘good teaching’ has gone drastically awry is in purity culture in the United States during the late 1900s and early 2000s.

It is without a doubt that the quest to maintain virginity until marriage, something endorsed by so-called ‘purity culture,’ has proven to be disastrous for many Christians. Purity culture is an example par excellence of how something that might be a ‘good teaching’ for one person cannot and will not be a good teaching for all people, just like celibacy is not a spiritual gift afforded not to the many but instead to only the few. For example, one has the example of one of the major proponents of purity culture, Joshua Harris, who wrote the book I Kissed Dating Goodbye, who has, in the years since the book’s publication, distanced himself from his former stances and asked his publisher to let the book go out of print.38 Nadia Bolz-Weber, in her book Shameless: A Sexual Reformation, describes Harris’s purity culture theology thusly:

Encouraging young people to not have sex until marriage is nothing new, but in 1997 a twenty-one-year-old preacher’s kid named Joshua Harris wrote a book called I Kissed

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37 Stendahl, 29, emphasis added.
Dating Goodbye, in which he made the case that not going all the way before marriage was not going far enough. True purity, Harris posited, demands that you refrain from even kissing someone until you kiss your spouse at the wedding altar.  

This is, of course, not to say that all people must have sex with someone before they marry them. Saying so would be antithetical to the life-giving logic behind Luther’s move from celibacy to chastity, which gave people a culturally sensitive and more faithful option compared to celibacy. Harris himself acknowledges the complexity of the issue, writing to both those who “were misdirected or unhelpfully influenced by it” and to “those of you who benefitted from” it; despite this, he tells the latter group, “to borrow an analogy from the automotive industry, if a car serves some people but a flaw in its design causes damage to others, good intentions by the carmaker and even the endorsement of other customers don’t overrides the problem.” This ethos lies at the center of Lutheran theology — in a church that is committed to being reformed, our good intentions do not matter. We must continuously try new things and evaluate old things, especially when we know that something we are doing is broken in some way.

Lutheran theologians and pastors grapple with the consequences of purity culture and the broader beliefs around sex that prevail in the culture of the United States. Bolz-Weber also addresses the many ways in which the church failed to and fails to address the real needs of church members and their sexualities. This leads people like Bolz-Weber to need to provide significant pastoral care to people who have been incredibly hurt by the church’s attitude toward sex. Take, for example, the story of Sara and Tim in Bolz-Weber’s book: they are a couple who were raised as “conservative Evangelicals” and who were encouraged by faith leaders to not “

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40 Harris, “A Statement on I Kissed Dating Goodbye.”
too far” sexually.”41 Not having sex before marriage was the so-called ‘right thing’ to do. According to Bolz-Weber, “They had been told that if they followed the rules, they would have more satisfying and exciting sex than couples who’d had sex before marriage. The kind of sex that was better because it was pure. But when they got married, they found out that all of that was bullshit.”42 This is, beyond a doubt, an example of how a one-size-fits-all sexual system simply does not work. The training that Sara and Tim had received, the theological formation that had been given to them, was not life-giving. It ended up being harmful. Another case study that Bolz-Weber analyzes is the story of Cecilia. According to Bolz-Weber, Cecilia “was taught to ‘wait for marriage’ and told that if she wanted to lead a life pleasing to God, she must remain pure for her future husband.”43 Cecilia, once she left conservative Christianity, found a first partner, but the way that the relationship played out was far from what purity culture had promised her. Her first “lover...James...cheated on her and the relationship ended.”44 Bolz-Weber highlights, importantly, that relationships are something that take practice and discipline; we grow into our ability to be in relationship with other people. She writes, describing her counseling of Cecilia, “I thought, You were robbed. The church took away over a decade of her sexual development. All this time, she could have been gaining the kind of wisdom that comes from making her own choices, from having lovers, from making mistakes, from falling in love.”45 When we deal in people, we deal in both successes and mistakes. Later, I will discuss two ELCA bishops who, writing years before Bolz-Weber, believe that this kind of behavior,

41 Bolz-Weber, Shameless, 53.
42 Bolz-Weber, 55, emphasis added.
43 Bolz-Weber, 16.
44 Bolz-Weber, 16.
45 Bolz-Weber, 17.
which might involve making mistakes, should be avoided at all costs. Their approach, in my view, is not just wrong but actually harmful.

But, for the time being, we should consider what Gayle Rubin plainly writes: “Most people mistake their sexual preferences for a universal system that will or should work for everyone.” Though Rubin is not a theologian but rather a scholar of feminism and queer theory, her point still matters because Lutherans do not live apart from the world; if with how much Luther lambasted the monastic life, one rightly deduces that Lutherans should not hide away in a monastery but rather be involved in the society and culture around them. Unfortunately, though, Rubin’s observation about sexual systems is the approach that many theologians in the church have taken and continue to take. From Augustine to Luther to the pastors and faith leaders who taught Sara, Tim, and Cecilia — leaders in the church tell people that there is one universal system that must work for them. Bolz-Weber frames this idea similarly, instead highlighting how the sexual ethics Tim and Sara had been taught was not a perfect model for all people: “the plan that was handed to Tim and Sara—the plan that told them they must be celibate until marriage and then adhere to specific gender roles within their relationship in order for it to be healthy and pleasing to God—isn’t actually a plan for pleasing God. In some ways, it’s just a description of a particular type of person.” As explained before, celibacy is a spiritual gift that very few are called to; meanwhile, in Luther’s model, all Christians are called to chastity. It is illogical to say in the same breath, then, that though only some are called to be celibate, all must be chaste in the exact same way.

47 “Because while many of Augustine’s teachings have been revered for generations, when it came to his ideas around sex and gender, he basically took a dump and the church encased it in amber. But instead of realizing this was one guy’s personal shit, we assumed it was straight from God. We ignored the harmful impact these teachings have on actual people, and the way they’ve contributed to the sexual misconduct that we are becoming increasingly aware of,” in Bolz-Weber, Shameless, 43–44.
48 Bolz-Weber, 56.
Rubin and Bolz-Weber agree: sex is a problem. It is a problem for people, and it is a problem for institutions. For example, Rubin argues that, between people, “This culture always treats sex with suspicion. It construes and judges almost any sexual practice in terms of its worst possible expression. Sex is presumed guilty until proven innocent. Virtually all erotic behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established.”\(^{49}\) Meanwhile, Bolz-Weber’s analysis of sex in the church leaves her to conclude that “Sex does compete with the church.”\(^{50}\) Sex is something that must be dealt with, controlled, and minimized. The church, acting as an institution, sees sex as a threat. Yet, this is despite the fact that sex and intimacy are truly central to what it even means to be a human. The Bible is used, especially in Protestant traditions that hold closer to a *sola scriptura* lens, as a rhetorical tool to conduct this management and control. Indeed, “There is virtually no evil cause in the world which has not found a Bible verse for support.”\(^{51}\) Biblical texts that are even explicitly sexual and that celebrate intimacy have their meaning warped in order to control people’s sexuality.

Take, for example, the Song of Songs/Song of Solomon in the Hebrew Bible. This story is undeniably one about sexual attraction and desire: “My beloved thrust his hand into the opening, and my inmost being yearned for him. I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned away and was gone” (Song of Songs 5:4–6a). These verses, at their face value, seem to be talking about someone opening up their body for their partner (“I opened to my beloved”) and becoming aroused for them (“my hands dripped with myrrh”). Theologians have gone to great lengths to erase this sexual tension in Song of Songs, with the

\(^{51}\) Stendahl, “What Does It Mean to Be a Reforming Church?,” 29.
most common explanation being that the book is really a story of Christ’s love for the church. Bolz-Weber, who understands this story to be sexual, points out what is truly going on: “If it’s true that the church sees sex as its competition, then Song of Songs is like if the competitor set up camp inside the church’s borders. Religious leaders bent over backward to deny Song of Songs its identity.” Lay Roman Catholic theologian Michael Bernard Kelly, who was an out gay man, also wrote about Song of Songs, says that the book teaches us that “Sex is not a distraction from the spiritual [...] it is a flash of fire, a flame of [God] himself that we experience in erotic love, in erotic lovemaking.” If sex is something that needs to be controlled in human beings, then religious leaders feel that they need to control sex even appearing in the Bible. According to this logic, if people must be chaste, then the Bible has to be, too. The word of God, then, is denied the opportunity to express itself truthfully. Theologians bend the truth about what the Bible really says — verses that show the truth about human sexuality are warped, turning into support for an evil cause (per Stendahl).

Despite this, as we have seen with Luther’s treatment of 1 Corinthians 7, scripture can also be used to support people, encourage them, and set them free. In her discussion of Luther’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 7, Cox reminds us just how liberatory chastity is meant to be. She writes that, in this commentary, Luther “asserts that anyone who believes God in their heart

52 Wil Gafney, a womanist theologian and an Episcopal priest, also highlights that “The Song of Songs is a celebration of erotic love, not surprisingly its literal reading was quickly abandoned in favor of allegorical readings...where it has been read as symbolizing the love of god or Christ for Israel or the Church;” in Wil Gafney, “Commentary on Song of Solomon 2:8–13,” Working Preacher (blog), September 2, 2012, https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-22-2/commentary-on-song-of-solomon-28-13. The Episcopal Church is in full communion with the ELCA, and the two denominations regularly share rostered/ordained ministers. The Lutheran Study Bible argues that the Song of Songs/Solomon “is about the beauty and power of human physical love...Later interpreters of this book saw these love poems as symbolic of the love between God and God’s people. The claims about human love take on deeper, fuller meanings when applied to God’s love for us. Song of Solomon is best read at two levels, celebrating both human and divine love,” in Lutheran Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 1076.
already lives a chaste life – they need not take up celibacy to be counted as righteous. Instead of following the law of vowed celibacy, Luther argues that we are only bound to follow the law of love.”55 This is a revolutionary understanding of what chastity is — that believing in God in one’s heart means that one already lives a chase life. This is a radical formulation that should not be discounted. If Lutherans truly believe that because we are justified through grace apart from the works of the law, we are free to live lives that show love toward our fellow human beings. And there is, beyond doubt, no more intimate way to show care and affection than through physical intimacy.

According to Cox, “For Luther, faith turns the social order upside down.”56 Too often, theologies remain markedly conservative and resistant to change. Lutherans should be especially wary of attempts to say that our historical theology is the end-all, be-all for our standard of faith. In the reigning understanding of chastity in the ELCA, the theology has become so fixed, so internalized, that the theology that once turned “the social order upside down” has become set in stone (or, perhaps, as typeset) as the written text of the Bible. For this reason, we find “it is difficult to grasp the queerness of Luther’s proposal now because [...] it has become domesticated. Luther’s emphasis on marriage as the ideal form of Christian life has been used to service present understandings of heterosexual marriage as paramount to religious sanctity and social order.”57 Unsurprising to many queer Christians, though, and to the chagrin of many conservatives in the United States, changes in sexual ethics do not lead to a wholesale unraveling of the social order. In fact, “Looking closely at Luther’s arguments and other traditional resources is worth doing because it disrupts the claim of a linear, clean history in ideas about

55 Cox, “‘If Love Commands It’: Love and Law in Luther’s Queering of Chastity,” 126, emphasis added.
56 Cox, 127.
57 Cox, 127.
sexuality and marriage that seem definitive in our own time.”58 Our own conceptions of what it means to be in relationship with each other are highly culturally and temporally dependent — and our own current conceptions of relationship actually rest on revolutionary changes that Luther himself pushed forward, such as “creating the holy office of housewife,” as Stendahl explained above.

Nonetheless, contemporary Lutheran scholars and pastors have continued to view sexuality with great skepticism. As hinted at earlier regarding the Cecilia story, former ELCA bishops Herbert Chilstrom and Lowell Erdahl wrote in 2001 about their views of human sexuality and sexual expression. For them, extreme caution needed to be practiced around all sexual activity, and they advocated that all sexual activity happen within a marriage. For example, they write that gays and lesbians should not have sex with a partner until they are truly committed for a lifetime: “We fear that such experimenting, like heterosexual testing of sexual compatibility by having relations prior to a committed relationship, would be like testing a parachute by jumping out of a fifth-story window. Without sufficient height, a parachute cannot be tested. Without sufficient depth, a sexual relationship cannot be tested.”59 Sex, for them, is something to be feared: something that can bring ruin to a relationship if it is conducted too soon, without being ready. Now, of course, this can be true. But as I quoted above, many people confuse their own sexual ethic with a sexual ethic that all different people are supposed to follow. A model that tries to shield others from harm very well could lead many to misery and shame. And, in this case, Chilstrom and Erdahl are extremely risk averse. It should be uncontroversial to say that being in a relationship with another person is complex, and it is hard

58 Cox, 127.
to know exactly what ways one may (or may not) be compatible with a person until the waters have been tested — until you jump out the window. Taking risks, though, allows us to find out first-hand what the outcomes will be; Chilstrom and Erdahl are not wrong for providing their point of view but instead are wrong for universalizing it and claiming it for all types of people.

Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community often face the most scrutiny of their relationships. This is as evidenced above, where lesbians and gays have their sex compared to jumping out of a fifth-story window. For Chilstrom and Erdahl, sex is something incredibly dangerous, akin to risking your own life. Of course, sex is an incredibly powerful thing — it can be used for abuse and control and can damage people’s lives. That is without question. However, a sexual ethic that teaches people to fear sex above all else does not equip them to be able to have healthy sex lives, with pastors like Bolz-Weber then needing to step in and help people pick up the pieces of their shattered expectations of what sex will be like for them. Having sex can be incredibly important to self-discovery and development. As Roman Catholic lay theologian Michael Bernard Kelly wrote, “I think another thing that can be happening when we’re having a lot of sex, a lot of different types of sex, is that people are coming to know themselves. They’re coming to find, Who am I? What do I want? What do I desire? What happens if I have it? What is going on inside me?”60 And, despite what Chilstrom and Erdahl might say, having a lot of sex might even be an opportunity to form deep, lasting bonds and build community. During the AIDS crisis, which instilled an immense fear of sex into the hearts of gay men, the sexual relationships that they had actually helped people stay together despite tragedy. “What happened was, AIDS was discovered, AIDS emerged, and of these people who’ve been having all of this sex, an awful lot of them, have become the most tender,

60 Kelly, The Erotic Contemplative, 52. Despite being a Roman Catholic, Kelly is a helpful resource since his book provides a thorough explanation of the spiritual lives of gay and lesbian Christians.
loving, heroic, self-sacrificing, faithful people demonstrating heroic love for the church and the world in a way that finds few parallels in human history.” Chastity, which should equip the faithful with a lens through which to analyze their own behavior and find where it is sinful, is too often functionally equated with a stricter denial more akin to celibacy, a stricter denial of sexual intimacy. In the example of the gay men during the AIDS crisis, having a lot of sex actually promoted a level of care for their community that would not have happened otherwise. Disregarding these truths moves us far away from the spirit of Luther’s theology of chastity.

When thinking about queer sexuality, Cox reminds us about what the driving force of Luther’s theology is. She writes, “Luther’s [theology] is a realistic, welfare-centered theology, developed in response to specific historical, theological, and ethical dilemmas.” In 2024, one of the specific historical, theological, and ethical dilemmas that must be addressed is how the church polices and controls peoples’ sexualities. The church does this through both overt and subtle ways, and the church’s documents are written in such a way as to allow for maximum flexibility in enforcing whatever sexual standard the church wants to uphold at that moment. I will turn to this in the next section.

**Gift Becomes Law: Chastity in the ELCA**

It is remarkable that theologians have to remind us that sex is fundamental to our being human. Bolz-Weber reminds us that “Theologically speaking, we were endowed by our creator with the capacity to both desire and to experience pleasure. It didn’t have to be that way, and yet God gave us this gift.” Instead of something to be feared, Bolz-Weber urges her readers to see pleasure not as something to be feared but rather to see it as a gift from God.

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61 Kelly, 56.
63 Bolz-Weber, Shameless, 137.
something baked into our being human in the world and is not something that needs to be
innately feared.

Just like anything in the world, sex and intimacy can be used for good and bad purposes.
It would be antithetical to a Lutheran understanding of sin to say that we can ever stop sinning
and achieve perfection. This is propelled by an understanding of the book of Romans, where
Paul writes that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;” for this reason, God justifies
us by “grace as a gift” (Romans 3:23–4). The reformers, therefore, “condemn [...] those who
contend that some may attain such perfection in this life that they cannot sin.”64 Following a
Lutheran understanding of sin, people are incapable of being perfect; human imperfection is fully
acknowledged, and there is no expectation that we will get things right all of the time.65 This
frees us as people to try and discern what an ethical course of behavior might be, using our
ability to read scripture, trust God, and love ourselves and other people.

We should remember how Luther frames his understanding of the Ten Commandments in
his “Small Catechism”: these laws reflect not just what we should not do but also how we should
treat ourselves and our neighbor.66 In this framework, we are enabled to see sin as something that
exists in relationship: in relation to ourselves, to our neighbor(s), and to God. Mary Lowe, in a
book chapter titled “Sin from a Queer, Lutheran Perspective,” encourages us to do just this. She
frames sin as a series of subject positions related to discourses in which we as humans
participate.67 This is a faithful reflection of a Lutheran understanding of our being humans in the

64 AC,Lat. XII.8, in BC 2000, 45. This passage in the Augsburg Confession declares that Lutheran theology does not
accept what other denominations call Christian perfection or entire sanctification.
65 See also, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” (The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2009), 6: “Knowing
that we can do nothing to bring out about own salvation, Lutherans reject the notion that we can perfect either
ourselves or society.”
67 Mary E. Lowe, “Sin from a Queer, Lutheran Perspective,” in Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist,
Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives, ed. Mary J. Streufert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 72.
world: we do not live just for ourselves or for God, but by our very nature are relational creatures that exist in community with others. Lowe writes, for example, that “Humans don’t just exist in sinful structures; they come to be as sinners (and saints) in distorted discourses. I can repent of the sin of racism, but because there is no place outside of discourse, I can never fully give up my privileged white subject position.”

We are fully shaped as human beings by the discourses that surround us, often ones that we have created: homophobia, transphobia, racism, etc., but also discourses of sexual purity that have proven to be harmful and oppressive, leading to spiritual damage.

The discourse around sexuality, I believe, is a distorted discourse, and the church continues to prop it up despite the myriad ways that it causes people to be in sinful subject positions. People are taught that there is one correct way to be a sexual being, when by our very nature, we have been sexual beings since our creation. Scripture has been interpreted and will continue to be interpreted, and interpretations that may seem to be entirely normal and healthy now may end up not being so far into the future. Rather than leaving the Reformation as a historical event that once was and has now ended, Lutherans should not shy away from our founding principle that when we see something wrong in the church, we call it out. We should borrow the phrase that came from Karl Barth in the reformed tradition — *ecclesia semper reformanda est* — and observe carefully and respond courageously to places where the church continues to err. We must remember that “It was more important to [Luther] that unnecessary suffering was addressed through a faithful and reasonable interpretation of scripture than that stringent church laws be inflexibly maintained.”

As has been seen through purity culture, the inflexible maintenance of church laws can and does cause immense harm to faithful people,

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68 Lowe, 77.
69 Cox, “‘The Only Safe Guide Is Love,’” 366.
leaving them feeling ostracized from the church and their own partners, wondering why, even though they did everything right, they still suffer. This is nothing short of sinful. Lowe even helps us understand sin more fully when she explains that “sin is relational.” She continues, “Sin is not primarily committed against the commandments or the natural order (although this is Luther’s problem with sodomy). *Humans sin in relationship to other beings*—be it God, others, or the self, and Luther consistently argued that sins against the neighbor are as harmful as sins against God.”

By maintaining the same dogma year after year, by making it arduous to actually make changes to official church teaching, and by keeping guidelines for discipline vague, the ELCA allows for the maintenance of sinful structures that are used to unfairly police people’s sexualities. The church accomplishes this through a strict, traditional understanding of Luther’s chastity that does not account for the ways in which his theology no longer fits our present time and place.

*Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*

The social statement “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” is a challenging document in many ways. On one hand, it is what allowed the ELCA to ordain openly non-celibate people in same-gender or same-sex relationships. A social statement on human sexuality had been in the works since near the foundation of the ELCA in 1988, but one did not pass until the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. Hence, “Human Sexuality” is often euphemistically called “the 2009 decision.” Social statements in the ELCA are the most authoritative expression of church doctrine and belief that can be adopted by the denomination, and each social statement must pass by a two-thirds supermajority at a churchwide assembly; in 2009, “Human Sexuality” passed by the exact margin needed. One fewer vote, and the statement would not have been adopted. A

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70 Lowe, “Sin from a Queer, Lutheran Perspective,” 78, emphasis added.
second vote after the adoption of this social statement allowed for people in “publicly accountable, lifelong, same-gender, monogamous” relationships (or PALMs) to be ordained as rostered ministers in the ELCA.\footnote{David D. Swartling, “Reports and Records: Assembly Minutes” (Office of the Secretary, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, October 1, 2010), 371–73. Records of debate on both the social statement and the changes to rostered minister policies are contained within this document.} This was a radical departure from the stance that the church had previously held, and it was a marked change from the mandated celibacy for queer ministers that had existed in the church and that was enforced by “Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA,” a document that though allegedly not disciplinary in nature, was finally thrown out and replaced with “Definitions and Guidelines” in 2021.\footnote{“Sexual conduct. The expectations of this church regarding the sexual conduct of its ordained ministers are grounded in the understanding that human sexuality is a gift from God and that ordained ministers are to live in such a way as to honor this gift. Ordained ministers are expected to reject sexual promiscuity, the manipulation of others for purposes of sexual gratification, and all attempts of sexual seduction and sexual harassment, including taking physical or emotional advantage of others. Single ordained ministers are expected to live a chaste life. Married ordained ministers are expected to live in fidelity to their spouses, giving expression to sexual intimacy within a marriage relationship that is mutual, chaste, and faithful. Ordained ministers who are homosexual in their self-understanding are expected to abstain from homosexual sexual relationships,” in Division of Ministry, “Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the ELCA” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1996), https://web.archive.org/web/20190428202554/http://www.thisobedience.com/html/vande.html; For historical background on the document, see Lewis Eggleston, “ELM Celebrates the Suspension of Vision & Expectations,” Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, November 29, 2021, https://www.elm.org/2021/11/29/elm-celebrates-the-suspension-of-vision-expectations/. “Definitions and Guidelines” existed before “Vision and Expectations” was suspended.}

Despite the change that “Human Sexuality” was able to precipitate in the ELCA, the document itself remains quite conservative and holds closely to a traditional and historical understanding of the Lutheran confessions. For one, the PALMs designation is the example par excellence of how chastity is hard coded into the social statement. Considering that chastity is a stand-in for ‘normative sexuality,’ PALMs is the path of least resistance for assimilating queer sexuality into a heteronormative (or even homonormative) mode: if queer people cannot be married, the church requires that their relationships look as closely as possible to what a straight marriage would look like. Further, all sex outside of marriage is treated as highly suspect and
potentially dangerous, all based on Luther’s writings about the Sixth Commandment in the *Small Catechism*: “Promiscuity and sexual activity without a spirit of mutuality and commitment are sinful because of their destructive consequences for individuals, relationships, and the community.” Under the most gracious reading of this, the way promiscuity is being used here could mean any number of things, including having multiple sexual partners with no regard for their emotions, well-being, or whatever else. But it could also mean any sex outside of a relationship or any one-night stand. The theology presented here is not so different from Chilstrom and Erdahl’s five-story window analogy: sex is to be feared and to be considered dangerous.

One is justified in reading this prior statement in the most restrictive light because the social statement continues to advocate for an extremely restrictive sexual ethic. Later, the text says that “the desire for sexual love, therefore, does not by itself constitute more justification for sexual behavior [...] too often lust is mistaken for love, which in turn becomes the rationale for selfish behavior.” It bears asking if, in the framework of the social statement, people are even allowed to desire to have sex. It seems like instead of sex being treated as a gift, as the title of the social statement suggests, it is instead treated as an existential threat to a person’s life. This is a wild misunderstanding of what Jesus means in Matthew 5:28, “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (NRSVUE). This verse is too often interpreted in a way that equates attraction with lust; here, Chilstrom and Erdahl do something similar with love and lust. Will the whole world fall apart if people want to have sex or if they experience sexual attraction? People regularly desire it and experience it, and we should be entitled to sexual fulfillment in our lives.

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73 “Human Sexuality,” 8.
74 “Human Sexuality,” 11–12.
Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the social statement is that it seems to lack self-awareness around a theological concept that the entire statement hinges upon: bound conscience. Bound conscience provides for members of the ELCA to hold four different positions around same-gender sexuality: 1. That same-gender sexual activity is sinful, 2. That people can be in same-gender relationships, but that they reflect a “broken world” and should not be considered like a “traditional marriage,” 3. That scripture does not address same-gender relationships, but that they should not be “equate[d] with marriage” while being supported, and 4. That scripture does not address same-gender relationships, but that same-gender couples should “seek the highest legal accountability for their relationships.”

Despite allowing people to come to different conclusions about same-gender relationships and sexual activity, the statement only presents one model for how sexuality should be practiced: in marriage, which exists “not solely to legitimate sexual intimacy but to support long-term and durable communion for the good of others.”

The stringent sexual standard presented by “Human Sexuality” was conservative when it was adopted and is even more so fifteen years later. Yes, the statement features a discussion on same-gender relationships that was groundbreaking for the time it was written. However, in its attempt to make room for LGBTQ inclusion in the church to a greater degree while also allowing diversity of opinion, the same statement applies a near copy-paste of the sexual morals Luther and the other early reformers presented through their understanding of chastity. Uplifting marriage as the only “legitimate” place for sexual activity is exactly the same standard that the reformers put forward. Luther, in his creation of the office of the housewife, participated in the

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75 This is just an overview of the four points of bound conscience. The four points are explained in full in “Human Sexuality,” 20–21.
76 “Human Sexuality,” 16.
long chain of shaping what marriage looks like today. But by making marriage the most 
authentic, highest, most appropriate standard against which all sexual activity is judged, it made 
LGBTQ Lutherans *de facto* second-class citizens because, in 2009, same-gender marriages were 
not even legal nationwide, despite whatever alternative the “PALMs” designation tried to 
provide. Luther’s uplifting of marriage as just as good as a vowed life as a priest, monk, or nun 
helped level the playing field among the faithful. Luther, for example, “argues that the practice 
of [priests and monks] taking vows [of celibacy] creates an unnecessary moral hierarchy among 
Christians,” according to Cox.77 The restriction of sexuality to marriage, then, systematically 
denied and denies the fullest expression of sexuality to people in same-gender relationships: for 
one, because marriage was not legal in all 50 states in the United States when the social 
statement was adopted, but also because access to marriage is not uniformly available nor 
desired by same-gender relationships for myriad reasons.78 For decades, queer people were 
unable to marry the partner of their choosing, and just because it is legal now, does not mean that 
all people want to become married. And, despite the fact that social conditions have changed 
dramatically since the time that Luther was writing, marriage in “Human Sexuality” continues to 
be a *medicinum* and a *remedium* to the problem that sexuality poses.

According to Cox, “In asserting that a chaste attitude and way of living flows not from 
vows of mandatory celibacy held by the religious, but from a living and justifying faith that is 
free to all, Luther ushered in a reassessment of the dominant late medieval Christian

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77 Cox, “‘If Love Commands It’: Love and Law in Luther’s Queering of Chastity,” 125.
78 Some same-gender couples do not desire to be married, even though it is legal. See Cara Buckley, “Gay Couples, 
Choosing to Say ‘I Don’t.’” *The New York Times*, October 25, 2013, 
understanding of chastity, virtue, and faith.”79 Human Sexuality does not usher in a 21st-century reassessment of chastity to a significant enough degree.

Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline

The church, apart from its social teaching on human sexuality, has also established “Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline” that apply to rostered leaders (i.e., ordained pastors and deacons), congregations, and members of congregations. Each of these three groups have different definitions and guidelines set up for them, but the particular interest of this section will be the guidelines that apply to rostered ministers.

The document begins by laying out why it exists in the first place: a mandate from the denomination’s constitution and bylaws. It tells readers that it “is written in accordance with the decisions of churchwide assemblies. It is grounded in our biblical and Lutheran confessional sources, which help to shape this church’s social teachings.”80 This means that the social teaching of the church, as expressed in Human Sexuality, are at work in the document and that the document follows them. For this reason, the definitions that are contained within the document are just as conservative as the social statement is, with a strictly confessional understanding of chastity forming the background the definitions build from.

For example, the definition that the document presents for “promiscuity” is shaped by the church’s understanding that marriage is the only appropriate place for sexual activity to occur. The church defines promiscuity as “having casual or indiscriminate sexual relations which do not proceed from or contribute to mutual respect, intimacy, commitment to, and care of others.”81 If

79 Cox, “‘The Only Safe Guide Is Love,’” 370.
81 Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 6.
we follow the social teaching that the church offers in *Human Sexuality*, then any and all sexuality that takes place outside of the confines of a marriage is immediately treated as suspect. This is the heritage of Luther and the reformers, through to Chilstrom and Erdahl, to the 2009 decision, and ending in the 2021 version of “Definitions and Guidelines.” The definition as given leaves the further defining of the terms contained therewithin to whoever is examining someone for potential discipline: one wonders, then, what “casual or indiscriminate sexual relations” might be. How long does someone have to date someone before they are allowed to have sex with them, to jump out of that five-story window? The bound conscience exception for same-gender sexuality comes full circle here, since what is “casual or indiscriminate” might vary from one person to another — yet bound conscience is not used to give flexibility around what this means in the social statement and instead only reduces to, basically, whether or not you think same-gender sexual activity is sinful or not, justifiable or not.

This puts pastors and deacons in a very difficult position: they must adhere to the most restrictive understanding of promiscuity lest they face potential discipline for their sexual relationships. This is because the “Definitions and Guidelines” provide that “Rostered ministers who abuse the trust placed in them by engaging in infidelity, adultery, promiscuity, or sexual abuse of another are engaging in conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office.” The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 8.

There is no parallel disciplinary action for members of congregations — this scrutiny is solely applied to rostered ministers. As leaders, rostered ministers are, of course, expected to be under heightened scrutiny. However, by setting up a standard where rostered ministers can be subject to discipline according to guidelines that are written to be as widely applicable as possible, with a conservative understanding of chastity standing in the background, we do not set
up a system under which people can be judged fairly or equitably. The system becomes arbitrary and subject to the whim of whoever is doing the interpreting. The Lutheran theology of “good order” does help shed light on why a pastor or other rostered leader would need to be held to a higher standard; the people in a congregation need to be able to trust their pastor. What is also interesting is that in this discipline document, members of congregations are only charged with having violated the guidelines if they have committed one or more of a list of “violent crimes.”

This sets up a kind of double standard, where in certain matters, parishioners are afforded a chance for pastoral care; pastors and deacons, on the other hand, are subject to punishment. This bifurcation is possible because chastity is so nebulous: it is something that has neither a consistent definition nor application. Issues of this type are why chastity needs to be reevaluated.

**Moving Forward Faithfully**

Christians are not just individuals roaming the earth, doing their own things. Luther’s model of Christian life is one of obligation to the other. This is clearly seen in the way that he treats the Decalogue in his Small Catechism. Commandments two through ten do not just say what you ought not to do, but include an “instead” statement, saying what people ought to do. For example, the Fifth Commandment, “You are not to kill,” is explained thusly: “We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.” When discerning all behavior, then, it is incumbent on the Christian to think not just about what one ought not to do but what they should do to others.

There is something noble in trying to protect people from harm, like what Chilstrom and Erdahl try to do. But what is missed when we try to protect people from all harm, from all sin,

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83 Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 13.
from all pain, is that we deny the fundamental teaching of sin in Lutheranism: that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. That belief is not a bad thing; it is realistic in its understanding of what it means to be human. It is in this way that we should evaluate chastity and how it applies to every person’s life: “In asserting that a chaste attitude and way of living flows not from vows of mandatory celibacy held by the religious, but from a living and justifying faith that is free to all, Luther ushered in a reassessment of the dominant late medieval Christian understanding of chastity, virtue, and faith.”\(^86\) With a living and justifying faith that is free to all, Christians have been set free to live in the world and be human — to try new things, to get things right, and, oftentimes, to also get things wrong. The examples that Bolz-Weber provides, many explained above, which describe her pastoral care toward her congregants, show that protecting people from making mistakes makes them ill-equipped to handle challenging moments in the future. If we are to grow as God’s faithful people, what matters most is that we trust that even when we are at our worst, we can turn to God for forgiveness and receive it.

Luther is clear that the law is unnecessary for salvation, but instead grace through faith is. Christians are thus set free: “This is the Christian freedom referred to above, namely, our faith, which does not cause us to be lazy and lead evil lives but instead makes the law and works unnecessary for the righteousness and salvation of the Christian.”\(^87\) Christians cannot be idle in the world because we have been set free to live in the world as God’s faithful people. He goes further to say that “just as faith makes someone a believer and righteous, so also it produces good works.”\(^88\) Our faith will help us do good works because experiencing the love of God equips us to provide that same love to our neighbor while also moving our hearts to truly have the desire to

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\(^86\) Cox, “‘The Only Safe Guide Is Love,’” 370.
\(^88\) Luther, 515.
do so. However, importantly, we are not God — we do not save ourselves or others. Instead, it is God who saves us. We are not called to harm other people, and our living faith should incline us away from doing so. But it would be unrealistic to say that we will never harm another person. Being set free by faith allows us to live in a world where we do not need to force others to conform to our behavior or expectations, but rather to “live out love”: “Living out love, then, also means respecting theological and epistemological uncertainty — resisting the impulse to resolve moral and textual difficulties — rather than taking an absolutist approach to the will of God as it is revealed in scripture regarding complex issues that arise throughout the ages.”

Too often, our sexual ethics — rather than supporting the neighbor and allowing them to do well — become a tool of oppression and control. They can take the form of an absolutist approach. What was once a theological tool that set people free — chastity — has become an oppressive force causing spiritual harm to contemporary Christians. It has become a law, and we have lost sight of our calling as Christians to be free to love and serve the neighbor. Even though people upholding chastity and purity culture as perfect ideals for perfect lives might think that they are doing the right thing, in so doing, people are having their spirits crushed and oppressed, and the church is using a life-giving theology as a basis for its discipline. It is difficult to be confronted with Luther’s teachings like this, where he says: “In all of one’s works a person should in this context be shaped by and contemplate this thought alone: to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbor.” These ideas are difficult because people teaching harmful theologies and upholding harmful disciplinary documents think that they are keeping “the need

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89 Luther, *The Annotated Luther: The Roots of Reform*, 520.
and advantage of the neighbor” in view. Time is important here because it is only through the passage of time that we as humans are able to accumulate information and histories that influence the decisions that we make today. As much as we might be able to gain by returning to hegemonic, ‘authoritative’ writings, such as the Book of Concord, Luther’s writings, or even the Bible, our interpretations of the issues will be necessarily predicated on the temporal moment in which we live, as Stendahl convincingly argued. As humans, we cannot separate ourselves from time; if we were to ignore the passage of time and the knowledge gained through it, we would throw aside a fundamental aspect of God’s creation.

Throughout the entire existence of the ELCA — a particular time period, of course — the main point of conflict surrounding human sexuality has been over same-sex and same-gender relationships. As Stendahl wrote in 1995, fourteen years before the 2009 Churchwide Assembly approved “Human Sexuality,” “For whatever else the homosexual issue is said to represent, it certainly presents an opportunity for anyone to show hospitality to a neighbor, an opportunity for which the church at present seems paralyzed.”91 Even more than this, if we are supposed to follow our heritage as Lutherans, we should follow Luther’s example, a man who “dared to think that the Gospel [...] could free his parishioners from the harm their own church had done to them. Luther was less loyal to the teachings of the church than he was to people.”92 The theology that the ELCA and churches around the world hold up as ideal causes real harm to real people. Chastity is something that keeps the church paralyzed today.

The way forward for the ELCA is a complicated one. The church has already authorized updates to “Human Sexuality,” but only in a very limited manner: 1. “A review of specific text

92 Bolz-Weber, Shameless, 5, emphasis removed.
references that ‘would consider the import that marriage legally is now a covenant between
individuals;’ review specific wording ‘in light of public acceptance of marriage of same-gender
and gender-non-conforming couples;’ and ‘consider references to diversity of family
configurations;’” and 2. “A possible revision that reconsiders the ‘church’s current concept of the
four positions of bound conscience’ found on pages 19-21 of Human Sexuality: Gift and
Trust.”93 Changes to the larger understanding of appropriate sexual relationships are not likely as
they are not specifically permitted. This leaves a conservative understanding of chastity as the
sole and only framework for understanding sexuality in the ELCA.

But we have seen that there is nuance to be had around sexuality and sexual expression.
What is operative in the ELCA’s official theology is very similar to the purity culture that many
scholars, theologians, and previous practitioners alike have determined to be harmful: harmful to
people, harmful to relationships, and harmful to a relationship with God.94 The theology, then, is
sinful — sinful in that it breaks peoples’ relationships with themselves, with others, and with
God. If sin exists in relationship, as I have argued (following Lowe), then the ELCA has a big
problem on its hands. Beyond this, the theology as it is currently written is more loyal to dogma
than it is to people (following Bolz-Weber). This is antithetical to how Luther operated as a
theologian, and the church, despite claiming to follow him and the Book of Concord, has strayed
far away from this. “Human Sexuality” was imperfect when it was written, and its flaws have
only continued to precipitate until the present moment. The reforms that are allowed are likely to
not go far enough and may come too late.

93 “Human Sexuality - Gift and Trust Study Process” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, n.d.),
https://www.elca.org/reconsiderations.
94 Refer to the material on purity culture, supra, pp. 17–20.
The way forward likely comes from an understanding of the dual nature of the law, as expressed in Luther’s explanations of the Ten Commandments (with advisories of what not to do alongside what to do) and a Lutheran understanding of sin as expressed by Lowe. If sin exists in relationship — to ourselves, to others, and to God — then we are rightly asked to do things with care. In a sexual relationship, we ought not to cause harm (physical, emotional, or spiritual), but we ought to cause pleasure, love, and feelings of mutual satisfaction. This is where a redefinition of chastity would be most important. Rather than chastity standing in for hetero/homonormative, or just plain normative sexuality, which does not challenge us in any particular way, what if chastity instead stood for sexual behavior that is based on trust, mutuality, respect, and care? Under such a re-interpretation of chastity, sex would not need to be something feared but instead something to be deeply respected. Sex might continue to be like jumping out of a five-story window — losing one’s virginity is likely bound to be felt in that way. But if people were taught that sex is supposed to be pleasurable, mutual, and consensual, we would have an understanding of chastity that would equip people to go have sex and be prepared for the myriad outcomes that will occur.

To borrow a phrase from “Human Sexuality,” I have a bound conscience: here I stand, and I can do no other. The sexual theology of the ELCA must be reformed. Chastity should be a capacious enough term to hold many types of different sexual practices: not just one, defined by straight, white men (like Luther), but one that draws from the rich sexual experiences of faithful people. Kelly, though a Roman Catholic, helps us greatly here in pointing out that sex is something that can and should be celebrated and cherished; by highlighting that people having lots of sex are capable of having meaningful relationships and forming communities of care (i.e., during the AIDS crisis), he provides a counterpoint to the fears expressed by people like
Chilstrom, Erdahl, and the drafters of “Human Sexuality.” Sex is not something that must always be feared: it can and should be celebrated for what it is, a gift from God.

Something that is a gift from God is something that is good. Something that is a gift points us not toward the law but toward the gospel. Something that is a gift calls us to look at it, cherish it, and not fear it but love it. As it is now, the ELCA treats sexuality like it is guilty from the start; instead of being innocent until proven guilty, sex gets the opposite treatment. In a redefined chastity, sex should be treated as something that is good — something to be respected and cherished that can take many different forms. And, perhaps through having sex that fulfills our needs, we might even grow closer to God, not in spite of but rather because of God’s gift. Kelly reminds us of this through a deeply moving statement on the relationship between the spiritual and the sexual: “Deep sexual experience tends to draw us towards the spiritual, deep spiritual experience tends to draw us towards the sexual. And gradually as we go deeper and deeper into both, the water becomes one, and there is no way of differentiating between the sexual and the spiritual.”

It is impossible for all sex to be perfect and not cause harm; that is the nature of our conditions as humans. But the realities of life in the 21st century require that we adapt our theologies to help people discern what healthy sexuality looks like: to discern what fosters relationship with the self, with others, and with God. I am not arguing that we need to tear the sexual system apart, but rather that we need to find better ways to understand it as it actually is practiced today. Pastors and other spiritual care providers are regularly going to be faced with questions from teens about having sex, committed partners worried about their sex lives not being fulfilling and perhaps wanting to bring in a third partner into the bedroom, people who like

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to have lots of sex with lots of different people, and maybe even people who participate in the porn industry. I am also not arguing that marriage should be done away with, but it should perhaps be treated as one option among many. This could be done by moving away from a literal interpretation of Scripture, Luther’s writings, and the confessions, and instead focusing on what Luther’s disavowal of celibacy really was: pointing out that one type of life does not impart any kind of special grace. If Luther thought that celibacy and holy orders did not impart special grace and that a calling to marriage was just as good, perhaps a calling to be in a different type of relationship could be just as good. Our relationships and behaviors do not impart grace, and our works certainly will never save us. But God, working in us because of our faith, will help us discern how to be good partners to each other.

This means that we need to be open as a church to different forms of relationships. We need to meet members of the queer community where they are, including gay men who participate in hookup culture or people who are in polyamorous relationships. We are lying to ourselves if we believe that people who practice these kinds of sexuality are not in our churches already. People of all different backgrounds, with different relationships to sex, are already in our pews. Chastity has the power to be a tool to help the faithful discern what their sexuality means without chastising them and telling them that they fail to live in a certain kind of way. We need to take the spirit of what we have been given by the Lutheran tradition rather than adhering to an unchanging, singular interpretation that exists throughout all space and time.

Lutheran theology calls us to look: to look at the things that might not immediately make sense and to meditate on them. We are called to consider the foolishness of the cross and how Christ always guides us to pay special attention to that which is unexpected or paradoxical. Jesus breaks through to us in ways that we could never imagine. Maybe, by opening up our sexual
theology to new ideas and new ways of being, we might catch glimpses of things that we never would have seen otherwise. Lutheran theology is committed to being not rooted in an abstract moment or an abstract ideal: it is best done in a particular moment, after which it is open to continuous examination and adaptation. The world as God created it is not stagnant, and the diversity of humanity and its ability to change is part of God’s design. There is no one-size-fits-all sexual ethic: straight relationships are different than queer relationships; relationships in different nations and cultures pattern themselves differently. So why is chastity as it was understood in the 16th century still the vital underpinning of a Lutheran sexual ethic?
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