

Gustavus Adolphus College

From Controversies of the Past to the Present:
How the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy Offers a Framework for Understanding the
Controversy in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America over Homosexuality

A Thesis Submitted To
The Department of Religion
In Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Religion
Department of Religion

By
Nicole Welke

Saint Peter, Minnesota

December 2009

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
THE FUNDAMENTALIST-MODERNIST CONTROVERSY	2
The History of the Controversy	3
Fundamentalism	5
Modernism	11
Summary	16
HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA	17
History	19
Conservative Side	24
Liberal Side	28
Summary	32
CAN FRAMEWORK BE CONSTRUCTED OR NOT?	33
Similarities	33
Differences	37
Predictions	40
CONCLUSION	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY	44

INTRODUCTION

Conservative and fundamentalist churches...feel that they have a clear and direct revelation of God's will concerning homosexuality, and they vigorously condemn it on the basis of biblical fundamentalism and a conservative acceptance of certain cultural mores....¹

This quotation from a member of the homosexual community brings together terminology from a past controversy and current issues. This is an interesting and important observation. Fundamentalism and homosexuality entering into conversation together; what does that mean or even look like? The church has been a part of America and has faced many challenges, but what will happen with this one? Will the church survive the challenges, or will it self-destruct? These are all questions that may start to appear when fundamentalism and homosexuality encounter one another, the past and the present converging. This language of fundamentalism and homosexuality is what allows for the question to be asked if the fundamentalist-modernist controversy can provide a framework for looking at controversies about homosexuality. If the fundamentalist-modernist controversy ended with divisions, will the same thing be the outcome of the challenges within the church with homosexuality?

Within the church things have not always been smooth. One of the big issues of the past in the church was the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. This controversy took place in the early 1900s and has had a lasting impact on the Christian church. But this controversy was not the end of disagreements within the church by any means. There is currently a debate within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) on the issue of homosexuality. Both of these controversies have had and will continue to have an impact on the Christian church as a whole.

¹ John J. McNeill, "Homosexuality: Challenging the Church to Grow," *Christian Century* 104, (March 11, 1987): 242-246, reprinted in Jeffery S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. Jeffery S. Siker (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 53.

As past language and a present controversy converge, does that mean that the fundamentalist-modernist controversy can offer a framework for understanding the present homosexuality controversy in the ELCA? A framework can be established by looking at essential elements within the two controversies like scripture and sin. There are similarities that enable that framework to aid in establishing predictions and insights as to where the current controversy may lead, but acknowledging the differences between the two is also essential. The differences are essential, because those are what make the two controversies unique in their own way. The framework established by the convergence of conservatives and homosexuality however does not offer definitive answers but rather predictions about what the outcome may be. This framework will be built by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and what each of those branches was based on. Then we will investigate the current issue in the ELCA and the two sides. Finally we will use the framework constructed from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and through finding parallels and differences predict what the results of the ELCA controversy may be.

THE FUNDAMENTALIST-MODERNIST CONTROVERSY

The fundamentalist-modernist controversy was an event in the church during the 1920s that had lasting effects on American Protestantism. This controversy occurred because of the different points of view within the denominations. The denominations that were impacted by the controversy were mainly the northern Baptists and northern Presbyterians. According to historian Michael Utzinger, “One important reason the controversies erupted in the 1920s was evangelical churches’ push for the centralization of denominational structures and organizational efficiency, paralleling the bureaucratization of American industry and government.”² The push

² Michael J. Utzinger, *Yet Saints Their Watch Are Keeping: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and the Development of Evangelical Ecclesiology, 1887-1937* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2006), 154.

in the direction of centralization made the fundamentalists and modernists come head to head, because centralization demanded a norm and common stance. Fundamentalists and modernists had very different ideas as to what the norm should be.

Fundamentalists were not willing to compromise, but the modernists were unwilling to compromise in some ways as well. The fundamentalists' unwillingness to compromise was on their understanding of doctrine, while the modernists were unwilling to compromise on the demand to allow diverse opinions. For the modernists this meant that they were not going to give up allowing those diverse opinions to be heard. As Utzinger notes, "Fundamentalism is a cluster of beliefs centered on personal immanentism (holiness of life), scriptural authority, individual conversion, and emphasis on evangelism."³ Modernism on the other hand stood for some very specific things as well. Historian William Hutchison claims that "modernism surrounded 'a cluster of beliefs' including 'adaptation, cultural immanentism, and a religious-based progressivism.'"⁴ Fundamentalists and modernists both had firm stances and beliefs, and those beliefs made compromise not an option.

The History of the Controversy

This controversy occurred mainly in the northern part of the United States during the early 1920s. The debate impacted the denominations of northern Baptists and Presbyterians. The fundamentalists and modernists both wanted to dominate over the other in what they believed to be the "right" theology.⁵ This controversy started in the 1920s, but its effects lasted

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: Traditions & Cultures* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 257.

for many years and can still be seen today. The greatest conflict took place in the early 1920s because;

Liberals [modernists] and Fundamentalists had polarized sufficiently to have generated an ongoing public struggle for the control of their denominations, especially the Baptists and Presbyterians. ... Methodists and Episcopalians were not seriously affected by the controversy....⁶

It is important to note that the fundamentalist-modernist controversy did not impact every Christian denomination. The controversy took place within the northern Baptists and northern Presbyterians because the northern Baptists and northern Presbyterians were still working on developing a stance on interdenominational fundamentalism.⁷ Since they were working on developing this anyone who did not agree with fundamentalism went with modernism, leading to the controversy between the fundamentalists and the modernists. This pattern is similar to what is seen with the ELCA Lutherans presently because they are trying to develop a stance on homosexuality, and when they took the stance if some did not agree they went to the opposing view.

The controversy was also very much isolated to the North. Even though some of the controversies issues may have trickled into other denominations and into the south it was for the most part a very “controlled” controversy. When it comes to looking at the North and South and why the controversy was so isolated to the North, looking at developments in both the North and South is important. Up “until the 1920s ... Southern revivalist conservatism and Northern fundamentalism developed more or less independently, although in parallel ways.”⁸ With the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁷ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: New Edition* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

North and South functioning as separate branches in many ways it is not all that surprising that when a controversy arose that it stayed isolated in an specific area. It is more challenging for a controversy to spread when prior to the controversy the two areas did not interact much.

It was a controversy in which sparks led to explosions. One example of a spark that caused an explosion was the sermon preached by Henry Emerson Fosdick titled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” It happened on both the fundamentalists and modernists’ sides, because it offered huge support for the modernists’ beliefs, but upset the fundamentalists. There was a sermon by Clarence E. Macartney titled “Shall Unbelief Win?” in response.⁹ This was an important response because Macartney was another prominent preacher and fundamentalist of the time, so it won some ground back for the fundamentalists. This is important because it indicates to us that the controversy was very much a public debate, because the sermons caused tension and were widely publicized. You did not have to be present to know what the sermons were about. The sermons were also very attacking making it a very malicious debate.

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalists were a group that had firm beliefs, and had a name that was brought about because of those beliefs. The “fundamentals” in the Christian faith are what they believed and were named after. These fundamentals were described in a twelve volume series. *The Fundamentals*, published from 1910 to 1915, shortly before the fundamentalist-modernist controversy was beginning.¹⁰ The fundamentalists named themselves after the series because “it called to mind the broad united front of the kind of opposition to modernism that characterized

⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

these widely known, if little studied, volumes.”¹¹ The main focus of the series was on defending faith, with one third focused on Scripture (the Bible), another third on “traditional theological questions—apologetics, the nature and work of each of the persons of the Trinity, the doctrines of sin and salvation,” and the final third not easy to classify.¹² The World’s Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA), a group started in 1919, proposed a nine-point doctrine stating the essential tenets of fundamentalism. This group “was founded at Music Hall in Philadelphia with approximately 6,000 participants. ... The WCFA conference helped solidify what would shortly be labeled a fundamentalist agenda and indicated its possible implementation within the Protestant establishment churches.”¹³ The nine points were:

...the verbal inerrancy of the Bible ... the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the fall of humanity, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection and ascension of Christ, Jesus’ premillennial Second Advent, justification by faith and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and the resurrection of the body followed by judgment.¹⁴

Although other fundamentalists created other lists, many of the ideas that they discussed in the nine-point doctrine showed what the fundamentalists stood for.¹⁵ An example of how the lists were stated slightly differently is found in historian George M. Marsden’s four point list. About fundamentalist beliefs, he states that “Their fundamental doctrinal tests were (1) special miracles such as the Virgin Birth (2) the inerrancy of Scripture ... (3) the ‘special theory’ of substitutionary atonement, and (4) the second coming of Christ to set up a millennial kingdom

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹² *Ibid.*, 119-120.

¹³ Michael J. Utzinger, *Yet Saints Their Watch Are Keeping*, 158.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158, 162.

....”¹⁶ This list does not have nearly as many points, but covers essentially all of the same major ideas and foundations for fundamentalism. Some of the big points that are similar and essential to fundamentalists are the fact that they both include what they view as the correct doctrine, specific parts of the Bible that are “facts” for them, and how they use those facts. The way they are worded may be different but the foundations of both are essentially the same.

There were many prominent individuals during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy on both sides of the debate. One of those figures for the fundamentalists was John Gresham Machen. He wrote books about the controversy and they display the disagreement with modernists’ and the fundamentalists’ stance within the debate. One of those crucial books was *Christianity and Liberalism*. In Machen’s fight against modernism (“liberalism” is how Machen referred to it) he faced many struggles. Machen founded Westminster Theological Seminary because he did not agree with the modernism that was happening at other seminaries. The fact that he was a scholar was important because it allowed him to be educated and provided him with a firm foundation of what he believed. He eventually was suspended from the Presbyterian ministry, but that did not stop him fighting against modernism.¹⁷ Machen fought for the fundamentalists every step of the way, because it was what he believed to be true. This stance of fighting until the end so there was a winner is clearly demonstrated in an important Machen quotation: “There can be no ‘peace without victory’; one side or the other man must win.”¹⁸ Machen’s quote here is essential in demonstrating how fundamentalists were not willing to

¹⁶ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 171.

¹⁷ Elgin S. Moyer, *The Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1982), 257.

¹⁸ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 4.

compromise and that there had to be a distinct winner and loser. The only real option for the fundamentalists in Machen's eyes was to win with their "fundamentals" all still in place.

The Bible

One point that was first and central to the fundamentalists was that they interpreted the Bible very literally. The fundamentalists were not willing to compromise, and this was apparent when they made statements like, "Because the authority of the Bible rests upon revelation, and if you are open-minded¹⁹ about revelations you simply do not believe in it," in dialogue with modernists.²⁰ This quote may have been from a distinct critic of the fundamentalists, however, it was accurate. Walter Lippmann was a vehement critic, but his statement here aligns with Machen's view of fundamentalism. This statement is reinforced when looking to Machen. Machen does not use the term "fundamentalism" but rather uses "Christianity," because he thinks that modernism is not Christianity. This thought is due to modernism's loss of focus on the message of Christianity. When looking at the Bible Machen states,

According to the Christian view, the Bible contains an account of a revelation from God to man, which is found nowhere else. It is true, the Bible also contains a confirmation and a wonderful enrichment of the revelations which are given also by the things that God has made and by the conscience of man.²¹

The conservative and literal nature of fundamentalist Biblical interpretation made a compromise view very challenging and almost impossible. The Bible had divine authority which needed to be maintained because it was based on things "beyond the reach of human inquiry and

¹⁹ "Open-minded" is the term that the author uses, but a better term that is less biased would be "flexible."

²⁰ Walter Lippmann, *American Inquisitors: A Commentary on Dayton and Chicago* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), 64.

²¹ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 69.

evidence.”²² To Machen, these aspects of the Bible allowed for it to be the “infallible rule of faith and practice.”²³

Sin and Salvation

The Bible was not the only thing that fundamentalists would not compromise on. It related to other areas of disagreement in sin and salvation. Machen believes that his understanding of salvation comes from the Bible and that only through God revealing salvation through the Bible would be how we could know of salvation. Salvation is not something we can reason or experience to work through and understand. Therefore, we need the Bible to help us understand sin and salvation, according to Machen, and only the view the Bible provides on sin and salvation is the one that should be used.

Fundamentalists believed that the Bible linked sin and salvation. The two were linked together, because there was not a way to have one without the other. The fundamentalists feared that the modernists had lost the idea of sin and this added to the fundamentalists’ emphasis on sin. The important part of sin is not the sin itself, but rather that salvation is reached after being sinful. Machen helps in clearing this idea up with stating that for fundamentalists salvation is an act that comes from God, not something within man.²⁴ It all links to Jesus dying on the cross to reach that salvation from God, which is why “Jesus is our Saviour, not by virtue of what He said, not even by virtue of what He was but by what He did.”²⁵

²² Walter Lippmann, *American Inquisitors*, 65.

²³ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 74.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

The idea of an act of God for fundamentalists is God realizing that there is sin, but then giving his only son Jesus to die on the cross to forgive those sins and in turn we gain salvation.²⁶ The whole idea is: “‘We deserve eternal death, but the Lord Jesus, because he loved us, died instead of us on the cross’—surely there is nothing so very intricate about that.”²⁷ This whole concept of the Cross of Christ is an essential branch to the beliefs of the fundamentalists. The concept of the Cross of Christ and Jesus dying for our sins is foundational for the fundamentalists, because it links with the fear that they have with modernism losing sin. The fundamentalists think that “Modern liberal preachers do indeed sometimes speak of the ‘atonement.’ But they speak of it just as seldom as they possibly can, and one can see plainly that their hearts are elsewhere than at the foot of the Cross.”²⁸ The Cross of Christ is important because “the word of the Cross no longer seems to the Christian to be merely a far-off thing, merely a matter to be disputed about by trained theologians,” and this is what the fundamentalists want to happen.²⁹ Another part of this belief is the fact that “it binds salvation to the name of Jesus, and there are many men in the world who have never in any effective way heard of the name of Jesus,” and that is what the fundamentalists want to happen.³⁰

The fundamentalists were a dominant force during the early 1920s and they wanted to be heard. When we look at what their doctrine was based on it becomes clear that they were sure of what they stood for. This assurance is what brings up what was at stake for the fundamentalists if they did not fight in the controversy. It was not just a simple “we believe this and you believe

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁸ *Ibid.*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

that and we will be fine either way,” but rather it was a matter of “Christianity or not.” It is important to Machen that you can have one, but not both. For the fundamentalists this controversy was a matter of Christianity standing for what they believed to be the true and authentic Christianity. These were huge stakes for fundamentalists like J. Gresham Machen and others who want Christianity to remain in its true authentic form.

Modernism

Before entering into a discussion and understanding about the actual controversy itself, understanding the modernist’s perspective is essential. The modernists were the liberal branch of the church, located in the northern Presbyterian and Baptist denominations, and were often called liberals rather than modernists. William Hutchison, historian, in his book *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* defines modernism as a “conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture.”³¹ He offers, “A functional explanation of modernism as the direct opposite and negation of biblical literalism.”³² Historian Fred Kniss gives another helpful definition by saying,

One can define religious modernism as holding that: (1) religious ideas should be consciously adapted to modern culture; (2) God is immanent in and revealed through human cultural development; and (3) human society is progressively moving toward the realization of the Kingdom of God.³³

These definitions are essential in helping us understand modernists and modernism fully. It is important, because with modernism the adaptations of beliefs are essential to what they stand

³¹ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976), 2.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Fred Kniss, “Listening to the Disenfranchised: Toward a Multiparty Conception of American Religion,” in *Re-forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 78.

upon. The personal adaptation of beliefs is partially why modernism allows for so many open doors.

At the start the plan of the modernists was probably not to split denominations, but rather to provide a way for different perspectives to remain in the same church. The modernists' view was that revelation was immanent and that different perspectives could function together, if they do not agree on what was the essence of the gospel. The modernists' main problem with fundamentalists was their strict interpretation of doctrine. The fundamentalists started to view modernism as corrupt and it was their job to rid the church of the corruption that was taking place due to the modernists.³⁴ This was because the modernists stood for the opposite in many ways to what the fundamentalists believed. According to Harry Emerson Fosdick:

It is interesting to note where the Fundamentalists are driving in their stakes to mark out the deadline of doctrine around the church, across which no one is to pass except on terms of agreement. They insist that we must all believe in the historicity of certain special miracles, preeminently the virgin birth of our Lord; that we must believe in a special theory of inspiration—that the original documents of the Scripture, which of course we no longer possess, were inerrantly dictated to men a good deal as a man might dictate to a stenographer; that we must believe in a special theory of the Atonement—that the blood of our Lord, shed in a substitutionary death, placates an alienated Deity and makes possible welcome for the returning sinner....³⁵

Just as there were crucial people on the side of the fundamentalists, there were also crucial individuals on the side of the modernists. Harry Emerson Fosdick was one modernist who was indispensable when it came to explaining what the modernists believed, and offering support for it. Fosdick was a minister who, because he demonstrated his views so often in his preaching and life, was eventually forced to resign his pulpit. This decision to resign from First

³⁴ Michael J. Utzinger, *Yet Saints Their Watch Are Keeping*, 161.

³⁵ Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" *Christian Work* 102 (June 10, 1922): 716–722. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>

Presbyterian Church in New York City came after he preached, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” that caused a huge uproar. But it did not make Fosdick any less of a crucial player on the side of the modernists.³⁶ On the contrary, it actually provided a great starting block to battle the fundamentalist movements, because it showed that Fosdick was well informed and knew what was at stake for the modernists, if they did not act.³⁷ The fact that Fosdick was passionate about what he was saying in his sermons and was well informed of the issues made him the crucial player he was.

The Bible

Once again, just as for the fundamentalists, the Bible plays a key role in modernism. It plays a role because the modernists want to still interpret the Bible but instead of a literal interpretation, they want to interpret in light of new understandings of science. For the modernists “this Bible is a vast literature not all written at one time and by no means all of the same quality.”³⁸ This view of the Bible allows for a more flexible interpretation for modernists. Each believer in modernism can have their own interpretation of the Bible. Modernism claims that parts of the Bible are divinely inspired by God, but not the entire thing. This idea allows for one modernist to say a certain section is divinely inspired, while the next modernist may not agree.³⁹ The fact that the Bible is not all divinely inspired for modernists allows for the Genesis story to fall into the category of not literal. If the Genesis story is not taken literally it opens the door for Darwinism and evolution which can play as a part of modernism. Modernism does not

³⁶ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Harry Emerson Fosdick."
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/214485/Harry-Emerson-Fosdick>

³⁷ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 171.

³⁸ Walter Lippmann, *American Inquisitors*, 53.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

specifically rely on Darwinism and evolution, but rather is willing to fit current science into their theology to provide an adaptive outlook. The entire view of the modernists is not so much as to whether the Bible is literal or not literal, but that the Bible has to be read in light of what we now know about science. We can not ignore what the sciences have found and that has to play a role in how we look at the Bible in comparison to how the Bible was viewed prior to modern sciences.

The view that modernists took was highly influenced and shaped by the social and physical sciences, which in turn made only parts of the Bible literal. It also opened the door for rational criticism.⁴⁰ This kind of thinking allows for change to happen. One of these areas for modernists that does not have to be true, Fosdick states in one of his sermons, is the section about the virgin birth. Other sections and writers in the Bible never even allude to the virgin birth, making those sections of the Bible parts that could be authentic to one modernist but not to another.⁴¹

Sin and Salvation

This view of the Bible also led into their perspectives on sin. The modernists did not think sin had as much power as the fundamentalists thought it had. They viewed sin as a more relaxed notion and, in some cases, had almost forgotten about it. According to William Hutchison, “the culture of modernity, both elite and popular, had forgotten about sin and repentance, and liberal religion was not doing anything to jog its memory.”⁴² The concept of repentance and salvation was not the focus that the modernists had right out front. For them there were large issues in the controversy to be dealt with and the issue of sin was put by the side

⁴⁰ Fred Kniss, “Listening to the Disenfranchised,” 78.

⁴¹ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”

⁴² William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*, 252.

to deal with later. One issue that the modernists put more focus on instead of sin was looking at how modern sciences fit into the Bible and our Christian understanding. Sin was something that was not at the top of the priority list for them, which is why fundamentalists feared that modernists had forgotten it. Fosdick in his sermon does not go to the extent to say that modernists forget sin, but he makes it very clear that accepting the view of the Cross of Christ in the way the fundamentalists look at it is not an option.⁴³ The idea of Christ dying to forgive our sins along with the whole blood and body of Christ seems to be ridiculous and a long stretch for him. This idea of calling all sinners is something difficult for modernists to agree with. It is the way that the fundamentalists view Scripture and sin that does not make any sense to the modernists. The repentance aspect was not the focus and therefore could be forgotten without needing a reminder of it in the future.

The views that led modernism to a more liberal and scientific perspective have a larger picture attached as well. This is greatly because of the openness to change and the fact that “human nature is seen as basically ‘good.’”⁴⁴ This allows modernism to change and adapt with the times and move towards the current culture and norms of society. The flexible nature that was present in modernism was the core for the liberals (modernists), and when that flexibility was threatened by the fundamentalists, it was a core they were not willing to compromise. The stakes were too high when it came to the flexible nature of modernism over the more rigid or structured nature of fundamentalism. The rigid aspect was not something that was not going to work for them, and it was frightening enough in Henry Emerson Fosdick and other modernists’ minds to be fought. Fosdick demonstrated this in a sermon where he said, “I would rather live in

⁴³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?”

⁴⁴ Fred Kniss, “Listening to the Disenfranchised,” 78.

a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it."⁴⁵ There was a lot at stake for the modernists related to a rigid or flexible structure, but at the core of this was being forced out of the church altogether due to not fitting into the rigid structure fundamentalism functioned under.⁴⁶ The not fitting into the structure that the fundamentalists designed was a huge fear for the modernists and was a reason that they fought for their own beliefs. They did not want to lose a structure that they were able to fit into.

Summary

The controversy between the fundamentalists and modernists in the 1920s had profound implications within the northern Baptist and Presbyterian denominations. The foundation of what the controversy was based on was the view of the Bible. There were many other branches that stemmed from the issues found within the Bible, but the Bible was a central focus for prominent figures like Machen and Fosdick, as well as many other fundamentalists and modernists of the time. Another important aspect of the controversy, which was not quite as foundational but still influential was the concept of sin and how sin was viewed. It was a controversy that lasted for many years, and one that has had lasting impacts on denominations and the Christian church as a whole.

The fundamentalist-modernists controversy may be one that took place in the 1920s and had specific parts that became the focus, but it did not just end. There have been aspects of the controversy that have continued to have presence even in the 21st century. People today may not say that they are a fundamentalist or a modernist like they did in the 1920s. However, there are still denominations that tend to fall on one side of the beliefs more than others. These beliefs

⁴⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Harry Emerson Fosdick."

⁴⁶ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 171.

may not be exactly the same or as strong as they were in the 1920s, but some of the basic elements like views of the Bible are still present. The Southern Baptist Convention leans toward fundamentalism and the Episcopal Church leans toward modernism are examples of how denominations tend to fall today. The ELCA is a denomination that falls more in the middle of the spectrum allowing there to be individuals that are on both sides.

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

There have been issues within the church in the past and there are new issues arising everyday within the church. Currently the issue of homosexuality is being raised within many Christian denominations. The topic of homosexuality is difficult outside of a religious setting, and has even more challenges once it is brought into the religious structure. One denomination that is facing the issue is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). There have been other denominations that have faced it and have taken a stance either for or against, but the ELCA is one of the largest denominations that have recently taken a clear stance including gay and lesbian people. This summer on August 19, 2009, the ELCA announced its stance, accepting homosexuality through the “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust” social statement and making new recommendations for the ministry policies.⁴⁷ These recommendations for the ministry policies were

Resolutions that commit the ELCA to bear one another’s burdens and respect bound consciences in these matters; to allow congregations that choose to do so to find ways to recognize and support lifelong, monogamous, same gender relationships and hold them publicly accountable; and to find a way for people in such relationships to serve as rostered leaders in the ELCA.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ “2009 Assembly Voting Results,” Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly/Actions.aspx> (accessed Oct. 16, 2009).

⁴⁸ “Frequently Asked Questions About the 2009 Churchwide Assembly Actions Regarding Human Sexuality,” Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/cwafaqs.aspx> (accessed Nov. 15, 2009).

The acceptance of these two statements at the Churchwide Assembly opened the door to the conversation and the controversy started to be public.

The issue of homosexuality is one that loomed in many churches; some denominations addressed it quickly while others took longer to decide what their position would be, while many have not addressed it at all. Just as it was an issue for the denominations as a whole, it was also an issue that was important to the gay and lesbian community. The importance of denominations addressing the issue was owing to how the gay and lesbian community was feeling. As John J. McNeill, an expelled member of the Society of Jesus for going against what the Roman Catholic Church taught observed,⁴⁹

That many, if not most, lesbian women and homosexual men felt caught in a dilemma: to accept themselves and to affirm their sexuality, they believed that they must leave the church and even give up their faith; and to affirm their Christian faith, they felt that they had to repress and deny their sexuality and lead a life devoid of any sexual intimacy.⁵⁰

McNeill was able to observe others that were part of the homosexual community, but denominations' taking a stance was also important for him, due to the fact that he was a member of the homosexual community himself. If the feelings that McNeill states are the feelings that more than just a few individuals are having in the church community, then the community that the church is trying to create is not happening very effectively. Feelings like these are what break down a community and have led to the controversy that is currently unfolding.

⁴⁹ Charles Chiarelli, "Proudly Presents the Pioneering Books of John J. McNeill: The Landmark Trilogy of Books on Gay and Lesbian Liberation, Self-Acceptance and Spiritual Maturity," The Owls Nest, <http://www.johnjmneill.com/> (accessed November 30, 2009).

⁵⁰ John J. McNeill, "Homosexuality: Challenging the Church to Grow," in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, 49.

This is the view of the liberal side, but there is another side to this debate as well. The conservatives take a stance against the decisions of the ELCA. The Lutheran Coalition for Renewal (CORE) is one that is taking the stance against the decisions. They are not pleased with what has happened in the ELCA and want to take actions to form a new denomination. As the Reverend Paul Spring told the Lutheran CORE Convocation in suburban Indianapolis, “we will be free-standing, not a part of the structure of the ELCA. For us the ELCA churchwide expression has fallen into heresy as a result of the decisions that were made in Minneapolis.”⁵¹ This group is one that is highly opposed to the ELCA decision and is willing to fight for their beliefs.

History

The ELCA controversy on homosexuality was not one that came from nowhere when the vote happened in 2009 finally to accept homosexuality. Many years led up to the stance being taken, and many debates and research also played roles. The stance accepted on August 19, 2009 had many years work put into it, and included ideas that failed to be accepted in the past. The failed attempts of the past were reworked and finally made it through the assembly in 2009.

This controversy is similar to what we see in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy right from the beginning, before the ELCA was formed. The merger of the American Lutheran Church, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, and the Lutheran Church in America were the three that combined to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America began January 1, 1988.⁵² Then shortly after this

⁵¹ Lutheran CORE Coalition for Renewal. "Lutheran CORE organizes as free-standing synod, begins work toward reconfiguration of Lutheranism." Lutheran CORE Coalition for Renewal. Available from <http://www.lutherancore.org/index.shtml>. (accessed 23 November 2009).

⁵² “History of the ELCA: A Union of Common Beliefs,” Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/History.aspx> (accessed Nov. 30, 2009).

merger the beginning of the homosexuality controversy began. This process of addressing the issue of homosexuality within the church started in 1989 with the formation of a 17 member task force on human sexuality.⁵³ This was a big step at the time, which may seem small today, but it was the start of what has now unfolded into a controversy within the ELCA.

Thus, 1989 was the start of the church publicly debating what should be done about homosexuality. This action was very elementary at the start. The 1989 notion was just the beginning thread in what was going to become a colorful quilt. The quilt quickly hit its problem spots though, because the progression from 1989 on homosexuality did not just fly along. The 1991 the Churchwide Assembly, "...affirmed '... that gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.'" ⁵⁴ Statements from the Churchwide Assembly are essential to the history of the homosexuality within the ELCA, because the Churchwide Assembly is the highest legislative body within the denomination.⁵⁵

Churchwide Assemblies in 1993, 1995, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009 all discussed and voted on issues related to homosexuality. These years all provided some stitching in the quilt, although some provided more than others. The 1999 Churchwide Assembly may have taken apart some of the quilt when votes of 716 against and 267 in favor "defeated an amendment that would have suspended the enforcement of ELCA policies that banned the ordination of practicing gays and lesbians and call for ordained ministers to abstain from

⁵³ "ELCA Decides to Delay Statement," *Christianity Today* 38 (November 14, 1994): 64.

⁵⁴ "Homosexuality and the ELCA," Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/New-or-Returning-to-Church/Dig-Deeper/Homosexuality-and-the-ELCA.aspx> (accessed October 16, 2009).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

homosexual relationships.”⁵⁶ If the one vote was not enough for the 1999 Churchwide Assembly in removing stitch work there was an additional “vote of 559-414” (559 against and 414 for) defeating “an amendment calling for a denominationwide consultation to propose ‘strategies which might allow for the ordination of noncelibate lesbian and gay persons.’”⁵⁷ Not everyone supported these actions so it caused some challenges. “Cynthia Witt, president of the Network for Inclusive Vision, called the actions ‘a missed opportunity to end discrimination against gay and lesbian pastors in committed relationships.’”⁵⁸ Witt’s statement here may not have seemed like much at the time, but it was integral in not letting defeated amendments stop the ELCA from continuing to move forward on the quilt that was being created when addressing the issue of homosexuality.

One year that proved to show some substantial stitching was 2001 with the decision to conduct studies on homosexuality. However, while there may have been decisions that provided the background, the actual stitching did not take place until 2003 when:

ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson ... [stated that the] “...assembly’s actions mandated that this church engage in a study on homosexuality and a study on sexuality. The first study is to deal with the blessing of same-gender unions and the rostering of persons in committed gay or lesbian relationships. The second study is to lead to the development of a social statement on sexuality.”⁵⁹

Studies that followed this statement from Bishop Hanson continued for many years. They were not simple studies, and they were not finished the next year by any means. In 2005, the ELCA was still working on fully developing what the next proposed statements would be. The

⁵⁶ “ELCA to maintain stance on homosexuality,” *Christian Century* 116 (September 8, 1999): 843.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 844.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Homosexuality and the ELCA.”

consensus was a repetition of the invitation to gay and lesbians to participate in church congregations, but still no further official stance.⁶⁰ Then in 2007, there were some forms of statements that were still in rough copies, but none that were voted on to make official at Churchwide Assembly.

Then on August 19, 2009 the ELCA finally voted and took a stance accepting homosexuality. Accepting homosexuality for the ELCA means allowing individuals that identify themselves as homosexuals to be fully involved in the church, meaning that they can be leaders, ordained, married, or just members. The language of monogamy is not its own separate resolution in the ministry policies, but is used in the fourth resolution where all of the details are lumped together. This language of monogamy is significant because it allows for complete inclusive language when talking about homosexuality. This allowed for the focus of the ELCA to be on the monogamous relationships rather than the sexual orientation itself. The social statement that was accepted, with a 676-338 vote in favor and then a 695-285 vote in favor after resolutions, was titled “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust.”⁶¹ This statement specifically addressed homosexuality as well as sexuality in general terms. The areas of this statement that are crucial to supporting gay and lesbian relationships are related to the Bible. There are passages within the Bible that can be debated upon when it comes to the topic of supporting gay and lesbian relationships. Another way that the Bible can be used is by focusing not on who is entering the relationship, but rather the type of relationship the two individuals have and the community that supports them. The entire statement puts the focus on the community and loving

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ “2009 Assembly Voting Results.”

the neighbor, not on whether the relationship should be between a male and male, a female and female, or what we traditionally think as a male and female.⁶²

The Churchwide Assembly also accepted the recommendations made to the ministry policies, with a 717 for and 270 against, making the overall vote in favor.⁶³ There were three large parts to the recommendations that were accepted and a fourth one that was a combination of other aspects of ministry;

1. "Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support and hold publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships."
2. "Resolved, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church."
3. "Resolved, that in the implementation of any resolutions on ministry policies, the ELCA commit itself to bear one another's burdens, love the neighbor, and respect the bound consciences of all."
4. This resolution called upon members to respect the bound consciences of those with whom they disagree; declared the intent to allow structured flexibility in decision-making about candidacy and the call process; eliminated the prohibition of rostered service by members in publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships; recognized and committed to respect the conviction of members who believe that the ELCA should not call or roster people in committed same-gender relationships; called for development of accountability guidelines; directed that appropriate amendments to ministry policy documents be drafted and approved by the Church Council; and urged that this church continue to trust congregations, bishops, synods and others responsible for determining who should be called into public ministry.⁶⁴

⁶² Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "'Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust': A Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Adopted August 19, 2009," <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Proposed-Social-Statement.aspx> (accessed October 16, 2009).

⁶³ "2009 Assembly Voting Results."

⁶⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Brief Summary of Actions Eleventh Churchwide Assembly • Aug. 17-23, 2009 • Minneapolis, Minn.," <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly/Actions/Voting.aspx#MP> (accessed October 16, 2009).

Recommendations like these opened the door to homosexuality within the ELCA, and to taking a stance that was not the same as many other denominations. Many other denominations took the stance of not allowing homosexuals the same rights within the church based on a number of different issues, but the ELCA did studies and opened up a new door. The new door allowed for two perspectives to form and for the controversy to start taking shape. The controversy was not one that came about quickly, though, but rather developed along with what happened through the years in the ELCA on the issue. The quilt is not complete but is starting to look like a quilt. However, there are still many steps left before the completion of the quilt happens, because that will be when a resolution is met within the ELCA. Understanding the two sides of the debate is essential for analyzing where the controversy may lead, which is the next step.

Conservative Side

The conservative side of the controversy on the issue of homosexuality consists of the organized group that does not agree with the passing votes of the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. The conservatives sit on this side of the fence for a whole number of reasons, which makes it difficult at times to understand the controversy as a whole very effectively. An individual may fall on the conservative side of the fence because of a bias against gays and lesbians, while other conservatives could be there because they hold a more traditional view of the Bible and religion. Or they may be on the conservative side due to not wanting to change what the church has always done and believed. This makes this group of individuals span a wide spectrum, but for one reason or another they all are part of the conservative side of the debate. It is important to note that this section is comprised of many different views and this section is fluid, so everyone may not agree with all sections or aspects that are stated in this category.

This side of the debate is forming right now and beginning to get off the ground more each day as time progresses. One group that is starting to be a key player on this side of the debate is called Lutheran Coalition of Renewal (CORE). This group formed almost immediately after the decisions that were made at the Churchwide Assembly in 2009.⁶⁵ This is a group that has the focus on “forming a new Lutheran church body separate from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”⁶⁶ The current hopes of the group are “to have it off the ground by next August” since they have already begun drafting a constitution of the new denomination.⁶⁷ This group has a very specific idea in mind, and they do not agree with the events that happened at the Churchwide Assembly and hold a view that is far more conservative in nature.

The Bible

Scripture has a role in the debate no matter what side of the fence a person falls on, due to the importance of the Bible in Christianity. McNeill, although an ex-Catholic aptly states that “Conservative and fundamentalist⁶⁸ churches...feel that they have a clear and direct revelation of God’s will concerning homosexuality, and they vigorously condemn it on the basis of biblical fundamentalism and a conservative acceptance of certain cultural mores.”⁶⁹ This may be from a critic of the conservative side, but is valid, because it aligns with the conservatives’ view of the Bible. The conservative side uses passages from the Bible that focus on the fact that relationships should be ones composed of a male and a female and no other combination.

⁶⁵ The Associated Press, “Beginnings of New Lutheran Body Form After split Over Gay Clergy,” *The Free Press*, November 19, 2009.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ The term “fundamentalist” here does refer back to the beliefs of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. It is just one example of how even though the heated aspects of the controversy ended, it left lasting influences on what we see today in the Christian church as a whole.

⁶⁹ John J. McNeill, “Homosexuality: Challenging the Church to Grow,” in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, 51.

Conservatives use the Bible in a couple of ways. The Bible has a handful of passages that condemn homosexuality. These passages are what are used when it comes to homosexuality being a sin, which will be discussed later. These passages of Scripture are crucial for this side of the debate, because they look at these passages in a literal sense. The basis, on the literal interpretation of these few passages of Scripture, is what provides the foundation for why they disagree with the ELCA decision. They use the view from prominent figures in the church like Martin Luther. “Luther wrote, ‘No violence is to be done to the words of God, whether by man or angel; but [the Scriptures] are to be trained in their simplest meaning wherever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids.’”⁷⁰ They fully rely on the literal interpretation and the simple meaning of those key passages. This is why “‘There are many people within the ELCA who are very unhappy with what has happened,’ said the Rev. Paull Spring, chairman of Lutheran CORE and a retired ELCA bishop from State College, Pa.”⁷¹ The people who did not approve are a full range and are not just ones that held high positions or ones that are just congregants, which is significant because it shows that it is a large enough group to make an impact. They are large enough because they are composed of “nearly 1,200 people from 41 states and three Canadian provinces.”⁷² This is enough individuals to offer support to have a movement happen, and once a movement starts it will continue to grow and have a greater impact.

Conservatives also look beyond individual verses. They go back to the Genesis stories of God making male and female. And since God made male and female, the Bible then goes on to

⁷⁰ Merton P. Strommen, “The Church & Homosexuality: Searching for a Middle Ground,” (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Kirk House Publishers, 2001), 69.

⁷¹ The Associated Press, “Beginnings of New Lutheran Body Form After split Over Gay Clergy.”

⁷² Bob Hulteen, “Lutheran Reform Movement Ratifies its Future,” Metro Lutheran, http://news.mywebpal.com/news_tool_v2.cfm?npid=380&show=archivedetails&ArchiveID=1426216&om=1 (accessed December 1, 2009).

say that the man should be joined with his wife.⁷³ For the conservatives the passages of scripture like these two, where it speaks of our “traditional” view of a male and female being bound together in flesh or in marriage are essential in their belief. This belief utilizes the natural law quite extensively for this part. Here Marc Kolden refers to natural law meaning “a law that governs the behavior of natural phenomena.”⁷⁴ It is a way that they look at the scriptures in a literal sense to support the belief that homosexuality within the church should not be accepted. This is not the only way that Marc Kolden, a professor at Luther seminary, explains this stance either. This is Kolden’s stance as well, because he believes in the more conservative view when it comes to homosexuality and the church.⁷⁵ He also looks at homosexual relations as ones that “have failed to properly distinguish law from gospel.”⁷⁶ The Bible is what allows for us to determine what is law and gospel and that is why it is essential to know the difference because it relates to our relationship with God.

Sin

Sin is linked with the Bible and provides another section to the conservatives’ side of the controversy. The Bible is filled with many laws that Christians are to follow. As followers we do not always succeed, which results in us sinning. In both the Old and New Testament there are passages about same-sex sexual behavior. These passages, such as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as well as 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10, are all laws against same-sex sexual behaviors.⁷⁷ Since gay

⁷³ Marc Kolden, “Homosexuality and the Church’s Witness in the ELCA’s Current Struggle,” *Dialog* 44 (Sum 2005): 138.

⁷⁴ *Encarta World English Dictionary*, North American e.d., s.v. “Natural Law,” http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_1861696705/natural_law.html

⁷⁵ Marc Kolden, “Traditional Christian Views—on Homosexuality and the ELCA’s Struggle,” Word Alone Network, <http://www.wordalone.org/docs/wa-marc-kolden-2004.shtml> (accessed December 1, 2009).

⁷⁶ Marc Kolden, “Homosexuality and the Church’s Witness in the ELCA’s Current Struggle,” 138.

and lesbian individuals would break these laws found in scripture and because that would result in a sin, conservatives are not in favor of the vote. The conservatives never say that they are free of sin themselves, but what makes this different is that gays and lesbians are breaking the same law continually and not striving to keep the law that is given in scripture.

Not only is it breaking the law for this side of the debate, but it is also unnatural. Marc Kolden finds this when looking at the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:26-27, and Kolden states, “that same-sex intercourse and same-sex unions are unnatural.”⁷⁸ Some may argue that it is “natural” for the liberal side, but in God’s eyes “natural” is between a male and female. God’s intent of what is natural is present throughout the Bible. The conservatives find the entire idea of homosexuality within the church wrong. This is one factor in why the controversy erupted like it did after the 2009 vote of the Churchwide Assembly.

Liberal Side

Just as the conservative side takes a stance on the issue of homosexuality in the ELCA the liberals⁷⁹ do the same. The liberals are the individuals who support the votes of the ELCA and are supportive across the board when it comes to the issues linked with homosexuality. Support on these issues comes from the fact that liberals are supportive of homosexuals. This is also the side of the debate where the gay and lesbian community falls as well. This side of the controversy has based its belief and support on a number of different things, but one of

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁷⁹ The term “liberals” in the ELCA controversy on homosexuality does not mean the exact same thing as the liberals did within the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. There may be similarities with the types of beliefs within the groups, but they are not the same group of individuals. This is due to the controversies taking place in different denominations and time periods.

foundations that they base it on is the Bible. The Bible is important, but along with scripture the liberals' belief and stance is based on tradition, theological concepts, and community.

The Bible

The Bible plays a crucial role in the controversy on both sides. This makes logical sense due to the Bible being essential in the ELCA. Liberals use the Bible to support homosexuality in many ways. The social statement of the ELCA fully embraces how the Bible and scripture can be utilized in making a case for the acceptance of homosexuality. The focus is taken away from the laws of the Bible that state that same-sex relations are wrong, and put more emphasis on acceptance and other laws. Acceptance focuses on the idea that God created everything and that it was "good, good, and very good."⁸⁰ When they state that everything is good they are saying that all humans are good no matter if they are homosexual or heterosexual because God made them, and what God has made is good. What the liberals do that helps their case is that they look at the law in a different way rather than conservatives. It is different than conservatives because they look at the laws with an understanding that everyone is equal and important.

They use the laws of the Ten Commandments to help demonstrate what they believe. The first three commandments look at us as humans being sinful and needing God in our lives. Then commandments four through ten all work on building up the community and loving the neighbor.⁸¹ The focus on loving the neighbor is crucial in the liberals' use of law because it does not differentiate who specifically you are to love, but rather it focuses on loving all neighbors unconditionally. It also does not differentiate between types of sin, but rather asserts that as humans we are all sinners and need to be in relationship with God.

⁸⁰ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "'Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust': A Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Adopted August 19, 2009," 3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Sin

The conservative side of the debate is not the only side that has a point of view on sin. The liberals look at sin as well, but it is looked at in a different light. They do not say that sin does not happen, but rather focus on the concept of being “saved by faith in Christ.”⁸² Liberals do not put the focus on the works of the law as much, which leads to a very different understanding when it comes to sin. The focus is on faith and being saved. This allows for gays and lesbians to be a part of the community that is saved from their sins because of the faith they have in Christ and to not be singled out due to their sexual orientation. They also look at the fact that sin enters into “all relationships, both within and outside the institution of marriage.”⁸³

The statement does not look at whether being homosexual is a sin, but rather places the focus on the fact that we are all sinners. When the focus is placed on the fact that we are all sinners it puts everyone no matter their orientation on an equal level. That equal level is further expanded upon when it comes to relationships. The statement does not say that there is a specific make up of what a relationship has to be, allowing for male-female, female-female, or male-male relationships to all be equal. They are equal because they can all be determined relationships and not a single one is better than the other.

Gifts

According to liberals, there are theological concepts taken right from the Bible. Within these concepts from the Bible comes the idea of gifts. Gifts are something that God gives each of us as humans and our sexuality is one that is given to us by our Creator. McNeill expresses his view on this by stating “...that human beings do not choose their sexual orientation; they

⁸² Marc Kolden, "Homosexuality and the Church's Witness in the ELCA's Current Struggle," 143.

⁸³ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “‘Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust’: A Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Adopted August 19, 2009,” 9.

discover it as something given.”⁸⁴ McNeill is not the only individual that thought this way, because the ELCA made sure to include it in the social statement. The idea of gender and sexuality being gifts was included under “Sexuality and Trust in Relationships: Sexuality and Self,” which demonstrates the ELCA’s commitment to trying to cover all areas of the controversy in the statement.⁸⁵ Within the social statement they leave it open saying that there are continuing studies of science on understanding this more. The first and more crucial line where this is spoken about makes it clear that “sexuality and gender are features of each person’s very being. This is both a discovery and a gift, and a perplexity and a challenge at all life stages and in all relational situations.”⁸⁶ The concept of sexuality being a gift is one that has ties back into the scripture with the Psalms. Psalm 139 has this as part of it when it says “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”⁸⁷ For the ELCA they found this section of the Psalm to be important in helping understand how sexuality is a gift from God that it was included in the statement.

Community

The social statement of the ELCA makes it quite clear that the church wants the central focus of the homosexuality controversy to be on the idea of community and what that community should look like with its actions towards others. The community that the statement talks about is one that is loving towards all members and whose actions benefit everyone. The benefit for the community comes across in the belief with this passage from the social statement,

⁸⁴ John J. McNeill, “Homosexuality: Challenging the Church to Grow,” in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, 50.

⁸⁵ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “‘Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust’: A Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Adopted August 19, 2009,” 15.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

“they believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are honored and held to high standards and public accountability.”⁸⁸ Another passage that is an example of this is, “they believe that the neighbor and community are best served when same-gender relationships are lived out with lifelong and monogamous commitments that are held to the same rigorous standards, sexual ethics, and status as heterosexual marriage.”⁸⁹ These passages are both very similar in many ways, but are essential in demonstrating how important the entire community is and how much it is the central focus. Family also comes into the idea of community as well, being defined as “immediate family members, relatives, and others.”⁹⁰ Defining it with others at the end allows for family to be inclusive and include all members of the community as well.

Summary

The ELCA attempted for many years to bring homosexuality into a conversation and figure out where it was going to stand when it came to making a decision. This was not an easy process though, and took many years. They attempted this with many church statements that sought “to place the discussion of homosexuality within the larger context of deliberations about human sexuality in general”⁹¹ Through the years many attempts were unsuccessful, but eventually in 2009 acceptance of a statement happened. Acceptance of a statement led to the conservative and liberal sides on the issue of homosexuality becoming very pronounced. Both sides had views and beliefs on the statement based on the Bible, sin, gifts, and tradition. These beliefs either aligned with the stance or did not, which allowed for the controversy to emerge.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹¹ Jeffery S. Siker, “Appendix,” in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. Jeffery S. Siker (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 197.

The Bible is important when looking at this controversy even when it comes to sin, which is very much the same as was present in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The Bible has provided a firm foundation for both sides in both controversies and is essential in how this controversy can be put into the framework of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.

CAN A FRAMEWORK BE CONSTRUCTED OR NOT?

Whether it is possible to develop a framework or not framework is the question at hand after looking at the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the ELCA and homosexuality controversy separately. The question can be answered but the predictions that it offers are not definitive by any means. Part of the reason the predictions are not definitive is because the ELCA controversy is still developing, and it is not possible to know or predict the future. Parallels and differences between the two controversies will help in attempting to predict answers to the question. Once these similarities and differences are found it will be possible to analyze whether they are substantial enough and point clearly enough in a certain direction to offer the framework or if they are too different to even consider it.

Similarities

Creating a framework will only be possible if there are similarities to draw upon. One of those large similarities is the Bible. The Bible was a crucial component within the controversy between the fundamentalists and modernists as well as now in the ELCA controversy. The controversies both show a similar split in how the sides interpret the Bible. The fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the ELCA controversy have a side that interprets the Bible very literally and a side that has a more flexible view. “Flexible” means that for them the Bible can be true in some sections, but there are others that have to be viewed as less than literal to relate to the current time. This side looks at the Bible as an essential aspect in their foundation, but uses

the Bible in a way that allows for science to factor in, or for the focus to be on a different idea than what the literal interpretation may be. The liberal side allows for the more flexible interpretation. They use passages that do not say that something is specifically wrong, but rather use passages of scripture that allow them to place specific commandments in a larger biblical context. This interpretation is where the flexible nature of the liberal side comes into effect. The Bible has many uses, but both of these controversies seem to use the Bible in very similar ways. The passages that are utilized are different but the processes of interpretation are essentially the same or very close to the same.

The Bible is far from the only parallel that can be drawn from the 1920s controversy to the current controversy. Another parallel is the tendency to develop a split due to the polarization of the controversies. This was indirectly stated throughout the two previous sections when looking at the belief systems they have in place on the issues. The tendency to split was present in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy with the unwillingness of the fundamentalists to compromise. Machen makes this very clear in his statement of “there can be no ‘peace without victory’; one side or the other must win.”⁹² This statement is from Machen, but it encompasses the fundamentalists’ view very clearly. One side or the other has to win; it is not a win-win situation. That is what made the split of the 1920s controversy inevitable. It was not so much that the modernists were opposed to finding a compromise, but rather how opposed the fundamentalists were that led to it.

This is also the case with the current controversy in the ELCA. The splitting tendencies of the current controversy on homosexuality are more difficult to see at times, mainly because the controversy is still continuing to form. We do not know what the outcome will be whereas

⁹² George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 4.

we do know what happened in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. But splitting tendencies are already becoming evident. They can be seen in congregations that do not agree with the stance taken by the ELCA and now have a desire to break away. “Rev. Richard Mahan, pastor at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Charleston, West Virginia,” had a church that was likely to hold this view, and “Mahan said he believed a majority of his congregation would want to now break away from the ELCA.”⁹³ This splitting tendency was noticed right from the start once the vote was made. “ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson said after the vote that he would commit himself to keeping opponents of the new policy within the ELCA fold.”⁹⁴ This statement by the bishop was important because the possibility of people leaving was acknowledged from the beginning.

Along with the splitting tendency is the idea that middle ground is not an option. This was clearly the case in Machen’s statement used above. When it comes to the ELCA, the possibility of common ground being found is still to be determined by what unfolds in the future. As one writer puts it, the “Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will either show how a church can stand together amid differences, or become another casualty of division over sexual morality and the Bible....”⁹⁵ The decisions that face the ELCA on whether middle ground can be met are not yet determined, but due to the polarized nature of the topic it seems highly unlikely that middle ground will be found. There are mixed views on this that make the idea of a common ground difficult. Mark Jordan, who is a professor at Harvard Divinity School, states that “I think we’re coming up on an epic reorganization of religion in the United States,” which

⁹³ “Lutherans Split on Whether to Leave Over Gay Clergy,” *Associated Press*, 22 August 2009.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Eric Gorski, “Lutheran Gay Clergy Vote Tests Mainline Churches: Stand Together or Fall Apart: Lutheran Gay Clergy Vote Poses Test for Mainline Protestants,” *The Associated Press*, 2009.

he stated when discussing the issue of homosexuality.⁹⁶ While Rev. Conrad Braaten, pastor of a congregation in Washington, D.C., “is optimistic the ELCA can hold together through the sexuality tensions.”⁹⁷ These two individuals do not have the same idea on what is going to happen. These are just two examples, and when more people start to voice what they think common ground may become farther away.

Another aspect that is similar between the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the ELCA controversy is how denominations factor in. Both of these controversies have been contained mainly within the denomination they start in. They all have aspects that stretch further out, but the main parts of the controversies have been within the Baptists, Presbyterians, and ELCA Lutherans. They tend to keep the issues that arise within the controversies within the realm of the denomination and do not pull other denominations into them. This is important, because with the issues remaining in the denominations they start in help in containing the controversies.

There is one aspect that may be a similarity and that is how urban and rural locations factor into the controversies. This may be a similarity, but there is not much data and information on the ELCA and whether it is more urban or rural. When looking to what is viewed in the general public on the issue of homosexuality, it seems to make sense that homosexuality is generally more accepted and common in urban areas, while in rural areas is seen less present and any case is much less accepted. I would think that this would translate into the case of the ELCA, but that is just a prediction due to the lack of information and data on the issue currently. The fundamentalist-modernist controversy has data on the issue being urban or rural. When it comes to the fundamentalists not only were they greatly contained in the North, but they were

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

also found in a higher percentage in smaller towns. “Fundamentalists seemed to be trying to recreate the religious culture of earlier small-town America,” according to historian Joel Carpenter.⁹⁸ This was greatly because the “fundamentals” fit in well with what rural communities thought, while urban communities focused more on the modern society and changing with the times. The changing with the times allowed for modernists while still located in the North to have more of an urban impact. The fundamentalist-modernist debate was also a rural-urban debate as well. Despite the fact that there is no conclusive data about the current debate there are aspects that lean towards a rural-urban debate now as well, but it will be interesting to see as things continue to unfold.

Differences

Just as there are similarities in any two things differences are also present and the fundamental-modernist debate and ELCA controversy are no exception to this rule. One of the most obvious differences, but also an important one to note, is that they have happened during different time periods. Life in America in the 1920s and in 2009 is very different. In the 1920s America was coming out of World War I as one of the victors and was economically doing very well. Looking at the current situation in America the economy is less than flourishing and is in the midst of a war. It is not the same caliber of war as seen in World War I but it is a war none the less. Wealth, economics, and war all factor into how the people react to different situations that arise. So when looking at the differences in time period it becomes very clear why it is important, because reactions of people are very different when it comes to times being good or times being trying.

⁹⁸ Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10.

The status that the Christian church as a whole was sitting at was highly different. The church is impacted greatly by what is happening in the world and all around even when it is viewed as separate at times. The booming economy in the 1920s and coming off the high of the victory in the war allowed for every aspect of life to be going much better. The sciences were starting to really pick up and the church had to confront new issues related to sciences. These challenges are partially what lead to the controversy between the fundamentalists and modernists. Today the church has already dealt with many challenges in regard to science. The church has figured out where the different denominations stand in regard to many of the issues sciences pose, but now is being faced with moral issues tied within the science questions. The church is currently sitting with more sound understanding of their beliefs, while in the 1920s those beliefs were present but still developing. The more sound understand may be that they know responding to new developments is normal, while in the 1920s responding to new developments was something that was new because it had not been done much until then.

Who is involved was a similarity, but is also a difference. This is due to how we look at who is involved. The controversies stayed within denominations, but the three denominations that are involved in the two controversies are all very different. Presbyterians, Baptists⁹⁹, and ELCA Lutherans all have very different belief systems. Different belief systems also factor into how the controversies play out, and how the people involved respond. The fundamentalist-modernist controversy was fought mainly within two different denominations. This allowed for there to be many different beliefs from the start because it was two denominations coming together and debating. While on the other hand the ELCA controversy is being fought within one denomination allowing for the beliefs at the start to be the same and just one issue to be the dividing factor. Being fought within one denomination makes this challenging because

⁹⁹ The northern Presbyterians and Baptists

depending on what the outcome is, it could mean some difficult things for the denomination as a whole. If any form of a split were to happen the denomination would split as well. Who is involved plays a huge part in the differences here, because it factors greatly into what may be at stake for the denominations and how outcomes can impact the denominations as a whole. This whole splitting of denominations and challenges is because of different belief systems.

Another difference that is present within the debates, which is seen somewhat through the arguments and discussions, is geographical location. Geographical location may seem as though it is something that is not all that big of a deal, but when it comes to comparing the fundamentalist-modernist controversy to the ELCA controversy it is important. The important aspect to look at is the size of the controversy and how geographical location can aid in telling us that. The fundamentalist-modernist debate was contained mainly in the North. It is not to say that because the brunt of the debate took place in the North that nothing happened anywhere else that impacted the debate. There were aspects that trickled down into the South as well. Not only did it trickle to the South, but the lasting effects that are seen today are present across the country and not just in the North. The ELCA controversy, on the other hand, is not one that is limited to just one region of the country. Instead, the ELCA controversy is one that is present from coast to coast and north to south. The issue of homosexuality and the church coming together is one that covers the spectrum on location as well as opinions. Any issue that is being dealt with especially on a nation wide level will have some trickling effects outside of the denomination. Another reason there are some effects outside the structure of the denomination is because of people referencing other denominations. There have been other denominations, such as the Methodists, that have dealt with homosexuality and have taken a stance.

Predictions

The question of whether there is a framework that can be established from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy to be used in the ELCA debate is the question that started this paper. So to make an attempt at starting to answer this question and to offer predictions of what may happen in the ELCA is essential. It is also important to remember that predictions are not answers, because only time will really give us the answers to what is going to happen in the current ELCA controversy. My predictions of what may happen in the ELCA are:

- That there will be a split within the ELCA.
 - The ELCA will split as was seen in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. This means that the denomination will be split essentially down the middle with some people staying on one side and those on the opposite side leaving, resulting in some staying with the church and others joining different denominations that are already established.
 - A new denomination will form, due to the unwillingness to compromise. This would happen with the conservative side of the ELCA controversy breaking away and forming a denomination that has almost identical views as the ELCA except for the views on the issue of homosexuality. It would be a denomination much like the ELCA was until it took an official stance on homosexuality.
 - A decrease in the size of the ELCA, resulting in the denomination being a less substantial player when it comes to the Christian church as a whole. This could be due to a number of reasons from the list above or from members just leaving organized religion as a whole, because they do not have similar enough views with any particular denomination.

- That the ELCA will not split.
 - The ELCA will find a middle ground of accepting each other's differences within the denomination. Here finding the middle ground will allow for the denomination to remain as a single united denomination.
 - The ELCA will still have disagreements, but some congregations will hold to the new beliefs while others will hold to the old beliefs. This would allow for everyone to find a congregation that they support and believe in the same beliefs.

It is important to know that these are just some predictions that from looking at the two controversies seem possible, but are far from being the only possibilities within the context of the ELCA will or will not split.

With these as possibilities that I have developed through research of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy and the ELCA controversy there is a possibility that seems likely to me. The possibility that seems most likely to me is based off the framework I have discovered by looking at the similarities and differences in the controversies is a combination of a few possibilities. I think that a split of some sort in the ELCA seems most likely, because finding middle ground or agreeing to disagree seem unlikely with such a polarized controversy. The split for me may mean people leaving, a new denomination, or two branches of the ELCA. What the split looks like to me in my prediction is not the most important part, but rather that a split of some sort seems the most likely, due to the content of the controversy and the framework that is established by looking at the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. The framework that is developed from the similarities and differences is telling, because looking at them as a whole, the similarities seem to hold more weight. I think this because the foundations of the arguments fall in that category where the differences are more of secondary elements like geography and

denominations. It is not to say that the differences are not important, because that is what makes each controversy unique and for the framework to only offer predictions and not answers. These differences are what allows for the uncertainty of the future and makes every controversy unique within the Christian church.

CONCLUSION

The answer to the question, whether the fundamentalist-modernist debate offers a framework for the ELCA controversy is “yes it does,” but it is not a simple “yes” by any means. The fundamentalist-modernist controversy does offer a framework for the ELCA controversy. This framework is established through interpretation of the Bible, using the key concepts of sin and salvation, and the general divisiveness of the controversies. Through these the framework is established and similarities and differences are pulled out. The answer is yes, that there is a framework established and the presence of this framework suggests that understanding the history of the church can still have substantial meaning to us even today.

Who would have known how essential the fundamentalist-modernist controversy would have proved to be, when it was playing out in the 1920s? Machen and Fosdick may have played crucial roles then, but because the controversy has had so many lasting impacts they still are crucial today. Those lasting impacts have outcomes that are sometimes planned, but other times happen and have great importance. The outcomes are essential in the framework, but every element that goes into the framework is a factor, making every element of history essential. The framework that the fundamentalist-modernist controversy establishes for us to look at the homosexuality controversy in the ELCA through may not have been planned, but is helpful in forming predictions. Some of the predictions formulated from this framework seem more likely than others, which is why I find the prediction of a split of some nature most likely; this is not

the important part, but rather the framework is. The issue of homosexuality was not the basis for the 1920s controversy, but somehow we are able to draw inferences from what they said and their outcomes through the framework. Therefore, what we do and say today will have impacts on the years to come through frameworks that will continue to help predict what will happen in the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carpenter, Joel A. *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Chiarelli, Charles. "Proudly Presents the Pioneering Books of John J. McNeill: The Landmark Trilogy of Books on Gay and Lesbian Liberation, Self-Acceptance and Spiritual Maturity." The Owls Nest. <http://www.johnjmcneill.com/> (accessed November 30, 2009).
- "ELCA Decides to Delay Statement." *Christianity Today* 38 (November 14, 1994): 64.
- "ELCA to maintain stance on homosexuality." *Christian Century* 116 (September 8, 1999): 843-844.
- Encarta World English Dictionary*, North American ed., s.v. "Natural Law," http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_1861696705/natural_law.html
- Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Harry Emerson Fosdick." <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/214485/Harry-Emerson-Fosdick>
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Brief Summary of Actions Eleventh Churchwide Assembly • Aug. 17-23, 2009 • Minneapolis, Minn.," <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly/Actions/Voting.aspx#MP> (accessed October 16, 2009).
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "'Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust': A Social Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Adopted August 19, 2009," <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Proposed-Social-Statement.aspx> (accessed October 16, 2009).
- Fosdick, Harry Emerson. "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" *Christian Work* 102 (June 10, 1922): 716–722. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>
- "Frequently Asked Questions About the 2009 Churchwide Assembly Actions Regarding Human Sexuality," Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements/JTF-Human-Sexuality/cwafaqs.aspx> (accessed Nov. 15, 2009).
- Gorski, Eric. "Lutheran Gay Clergy Vote Tests Mainline Churches: Stand together or fall apart: Lutheran Gay Clergy Vote Poses Test for Mainline Protestants." The Associated Press, 2009.
- "History of the ELCA: A Union of Common Beliefs." Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/History.aspx> (accessed Nov. 30, 2009).
- "Homosexuality and the ELCA." Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/New-or-Returning-to-Church/Dig-Deeper/Homosexuality-and-the-ELCA.aspx> (accessed Oct. 16, 2009).

- Hulteen, Bob. "Lutheran Reform Movement Ratifies its Future." *Metro Lutheran*.
http://news.mywebpal.com/news_tool_v2.cfm?pnpid=380&show=archivedetails&ArchiveID=1426216&om=1 (accessed December 1, 2009).
- Hutchison, William R. *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1976.
- Kniss, Fred. "Listening to the Disenfranchised: Toward a Multiparty Conception of American Religion." In *Re-forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, edited by Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr., 72-89. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.
- Kolden, Marc. "Homosexuality and the church's witness in the ELCA's current struggle." *Dialog* 44 (Sum 2005): 137-145.
- . "Traditional Christian Views—on Homosexuality and the ELCA's Struggle." Word Alone Network. <http://www.wordalone.org/docs/wa-marc-kolden-2004.shtml> (accessed December 1, 2009).
- Lippmann, Walter. *American Inquisitors: A Commentary on Dayton and Chicago*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928.
- Lutheran CORE Coalition for Renewal. "Lutheran CORE organizes as free-standing synod, begins work toward reconfiguration of Lutheranism." Lutheran CORE Coalition for Renewal. Available from <http://www.lutherancore.org/index.shtml>. Internet; accessed 23 November 2009.
- "Lutherans Split on Whether to Leave Over Gay Clergy," *Associated Press*, 22 August 2009.
- Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity and Liberalism* Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999.
- Marsden, George M. *Fundamentalism and American Culture: New Edition*. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- McNeill, John J. "Homosexuality: Challenging the Church to Grow." *Christian Century* 104, (March 11, 1987): 242-246. reprinted in Jeffery S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, edited by Jeffery S. Siker, 49-58. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.
- Moyer, Elgin S. *The Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1982.
- Siker, Jeffery S. "Appendix," in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. Jeffery S. Siker, 195-208. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.
- Strommen, Merton P. "The Church & Homosexuality: Searching for a Middle Ground." Minneapolis, Minnesota: Kirk House Publishers, 2001.

The Associated Press. "Beginnings of New Lutheran Body Form After Split Over Gay Clergy." *The Free Press*. November 19, 2009.

Utzinger, J. Michael. *Yet Saints Their Watch Are Keeping: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and the Development of Evangelical Ecclesiology, 1887-1937*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2006.

Williams, Peter W. *America's Religions: Traditions & Cultures*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

"2009 Assembly Voting Results." Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Office-of-the-Secretary/ELCA-Governance/Churchwide-Assembly/Actions.aspx> (accessed Oct. 16, 2009).