

# ELCA Draft Social Statement: My Response to “Women and Justice”

by Pr. Cathy Ammlung, Lutheran CORE Secretary

I was tasked by the Board of Lutheran CORE to formulate a response to the [ELCA draft social statement, “Women and Justice.”](#) These are my own impressions and thoughts, however, and ought not to be construed as The Official Stance of Lutheran CORE on this statement.

## Observations

I begin with two editorial observations. First: For a statement that is centered on justice, and which mentions the word justice several hundred times, it’d have been helpful to put the definition right up front at the beginning, not simply hyperlinked to the glossary entry. After the first few dozen repetitions, “justice” becomes a blur-word.

Second: The brief section on immigration touches on timely concerns but is almost perfunctory.

Next, I have a few observations that don’t fit neatly in the categories I’ll use shortly.

### Interchangeable or Not?

The document rightly complains that female bodies and physiology were often ignored in medical studies. But transgenderism, which it supports as a related “justice category,” posits an almost ontological change, as if male and female bodies *are* interchangeable. The document wants to have it both ways. If women are assumed to be “just like men” but that doesn’t fit a narrative, it is a sign of sin and injustice. If women are discerned to be “not just like men” but *that* doesn’t fit a narrative, it’s also a sign of sin and injustice.

Next: Although “justice” becomes a blur-word, there are a few exceptions. In lines 999-1025, the discussion of “gender justice” speaks of living out our faith in God by love for neighbor, with God’s grace healing and covering all our brokenness. Similarly, in lines 522-530 there’s a reasonable description of “neighbor justice.” (Although how this differs from the

Golden Rule, aside from trendier language, is unclear). It’s hard, though, to see in this draft how God’s revealed Word is greater than the sum of feminist, intersectional, and “gender/sexual justice” lan-

**The document wants to have it both ways.**

**It’s as if ELCA is trying to improve on what God SHOULD have said and commanded, if he’d just been as “woke” as This Church.**

guage. It’s as if the ELCA is trying to improve on what God SHOULD have said and commanded, if he’d just been as “woke” as the This Church.



### Explicit Silence?

In the list of sins and injustices committed primarily against women, sex trafficking and sexual abuse are rightly condemned. Oddly, neither prostitution nor pornography are explicitly mentioned.

Granted, they are specific examples of the objectification, abuse, and commodification of women’s bodies, but they are also the most lucrative, widespread, and pernicious examples thereof. Perhaps the drafters wrestled with how they might have to treat a pronouncement of This Church’s

“public theologian,” Nadia Bolz-Weber, who recently opined that there is such a thing as “ethically sourced porn” which can be enjoyed and commended.

**Perhaps the drafters wrestled with how they might have to treat a pronouncement of This Church’s “public theologian.”**

### Scriptural Imposition

The draft statement names real evils that injure real people. Lines 1013-1014 properly state, “Being freed in Christ involves being freed from all that tries to replace Jesus Christ as Lord in our lives....” The document then names “systems of patriarchy,” apparently all of them, as examples of sinful bondage. It lifts up, as an example of the justifying freedom in Christ, being “freed to recognize God’s work in creation through... human expression through gender. We are enabled to see that humans are not simply gender-based opposites and that we are not created in a hierarchy.” Elsewhere (Section 3) the document states: “We believe God creates humanity in diversi-

**There is no citation from Scripture explaining how “God’s diversity in creation” includes multiple sexual orientations or gender identities. This notion is being imposed on Scripture for ideological purposes.**

# ELCA Draft Social Statement ...

*continued from page 1*

ty, encompassing a wide variety of experiences, identities, and expressions, *including sex and gender*” (emphasis added). “Contemporary science” and “neurological research” are trotted out to debunk “idolatrous” distortions of Scripture, especially a binary interpretation of “male and female He created them.” There is no citation from Scripture explaining how “God’s diversity in creation” includes multiple sexual orientations or gender identities. This notion is being imposed on Scripture for ideological purposes.



## Stand Under Scripture

This leads to the final section of this essay: more “thematic” critiques. A fine theologian and churchman (can I still say that?), the late Lou Smith, warned of the perils of simply trying to understand Scripture, rather than to “stand under” it. The *former* puts us in control, using our own criteria for dissecting, analyzing and judging Scripture. We treat it as a “dead letter,” or as a merely human document, subject to our standards for approval, critique, and judgment. The *latter* reminds us that Scripture is God’s Word, sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing heart and soul, mind and flesh, revealing our sinfulness and God’s remedy. It’s therefore something that has authority over us, whether we approve of it or not.

**“Women and Justice” belongs firmly in the former camp.**

**The former [trying to understand scripture] puts us in control, using our own criteria for dissecting, analyzing and judging Scripture.**

“Women and Justice” belongs firmly in the *former* camp.

## Problems within the Scriptures?

Section 16 states: “While God’s Word of Law and Gospel speaks through the Scriptures, there are words and images, social patterns, and moral beliefs in them that reflect the patriarchal values of the cultures and societies in which they arose. Their continued misuse contributes to maintaining hierarchies and patterns of inequity and harm.... Our tradition’s

complicity in patriarchy and sexism is connected to such biblical interpretation and to the nature and focus of some of the Lutheran theological tradition. *We confess that there are problems within the Scriptures themselves* and that our theological tradition has led to a theological understanding of humankind that is overly male-identified. These problems even become idolatrous as deeply rooted but false beliefs” (emphasis added).



The statement comes perilously close to declaring much of Scripture to be sinful, or at least to aiding and abetting the sins of idolatry and patriarchalism. It doesn’t quite cross the line, as it identifies sinful material as the product (and hobby-horse) of misogynistic males, intent on preserving their privilege and thereby contaminating, obscuring, or defying God’s intent.

**The statement comes perilously close to declaring much of Scripture to be sinful.**

## Scriptural Authority

This does considerable violence, though, to any notion of Scriptural authority. Section 16 continues: “The Word of God is first and foremost Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Secondly, we encounter the Word as Law and Gospel in preaching and teaching. The Canonical Scriptures are the written Word of God, which proclaims God’s grace and sustains faith in Jesus Christ.... The Word of God is living and active, and we take the written form of the Word of God as the authoritative source and norm for faith. In its use as Law, it provides guidance and reveals human brokenness. In its use as Gospel, it reveals God’s love and promise.”

**This does considerable violence, though, to any notion of Scriptural authority.**

## Jiggering the Parameters

Once again, the statement tries to have it both ways. Yes, Scripture is held “within the ELCA” as authoritative. But apparently the only way to discern “authoritative Scripture” is to jigger the parameters. God’s Word *speaks through* Scripture. Law is contrasted with Gospel love. “Guidance” soft-

**Once again, the statement tries to have it both ways.**

*continued on [page 3](#)*

## ELCA Draft Social Statement ...

continued from [page 2](#)

tens “God’s will.” Sin is recast as “brokenness.” In this diminished and muted framework, the Gospel is reduced from “forgiveness of sin, and life from death” to “God’s love and promise.” The upshot is that the social statement jettisons anything that a feminist/intersectional arbiter might declare to be offensive, misogynistic chaff from the “real” Word of God. This is [Marcionism](#) for the Woke Generation.

### Shockingly Incurious

There is another problem with the philosophical and theological underpinnings of this social statement. The drafters are shockingly incurious. They show no interest in asking, “If patriarchy is universally evil, why did God routinely work within it? God *explicitly* condemned many evil practices. Why not this one?” They do not wonder if at times, patriarchy might be “the best of a bad lot” of options for sinful and broken human beings to live as a community of men, women, and children.

They insist the scandal of Jesus’ particularity as a male has no bearing on his work. They do not ponder why Jesus routinely used “Father” language. There is no engagement with any rationale for “male images” for God the Father, except to warn of abuse and misuse by those who are so in bondage to the sins of patriarchy and sexism that they clearly think of God the Father as literally male: genitalia, patriarchal privilege, and all: “When Christians rely almost exclusively on male images and language for God, the images and language become literal understandings of God. This is poor theology because God always exceeds human understanding. Taking male images of God literally can also lead to idolatry, meaning we idolize or hold onto only the male images” (lines 966-973).

### God is Opposed to Idolatry

There is no discussion of how God’s self-

**... the social statement jettisons anything that a feminist/intersectional arbiter might declare to be offensive, misogynistic chaff from the “real” Word of God.**

**They show no interest in asking, “If patriarchy is universally evil, why did God routinely work within it?”**

revelation in Scripture repudiates the blatantly sexual, copulating deities of surrounding cultures, or of how the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” stands adamantly opposed to the [idolatry](#), fertility cults, and sacred prostitution that were rampant in the Middle East and entirely too seductive to the people of Israel.

No one examines how relationships within the Trinity help us learn right relationships with others, male or female. There is no discussion of the nuptial imagery used for the relationship between God and Israel, or Christ and the Church, except to tie it to oppression, sexism, and patriarchy. The possibility that this divine/human intimate relationship could challenge, purify, and be a model for marriage and family life is not on This Church’s radar.

### Victimhood Instead of Justice?

There is no exploration of how Father language for God might transform the sinful ways human fatherhood and masculinity are sometimes expressed. No thought is spared for how matriarchies might foster other, equally harmful pathologies, or how intersectional feminism might be a form of idolatry, detrimental to women and men. No one seems to wonder whether [intersectionality](#) perpetuates victimhood instead of promoting justice.

### Still Idolatry

There is no interest in exploring why sexual sins in Scripture *are* deemed real, even deadly sins. In the Bible, rape, incest, fornication, adultery, homosexual activity, and prostitution are flatly condemned. They are linked to idolatry. Why? Surely this is not simply another instance of male hegemony!

In lines 570-575, we read, “We must continue the task of embracing our unity and diversity so we welcome and uplift people of every sex and gender—indeed, every body—in our work together as the Body of Christ in the world. God’s love feeds the Body of Christ so that it might live in love.” No one questions whether gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction should ever be considered anything other than God’s intention and good gifts, to be celebrated and incorporated into the Body of Christ without comment except “it’s all good.” No one

**No one examines how relationships within the Trinity help us learn right relationships with others, male or female.**

**No interest in exploring why sexual sins in Scripture are deemed real, even deadly ...**

continued on [page 4](#)

# ELCA Draft Social Statement ...

continued from [page 3](#)

wrestles with the possibility that “God’s love” be more than sheer affirmation and welcome, with no dying to self, repentance, forgiveness, or transformation involved (except for the sins of male privilege and the failure to rejoice in the marvelous diversity of sexes and genders in God’s wondrous creation). I ask what, apparently, none of the drafters or leadership in the ELCA has asked: *what if This Church has gotten this all wrong?*

## “De-privileged” Scripture

It may be a lack of curiosity. Or it may be the determined resolve to brand such questions as dangerous manifestations of patriarchal privilege. There’s certainly no attempt to wrestle with difficult passages of Scripture, much less to consider whether any of them might reflect the will of God. They’re merely “de-privileged.”

**No one questions whether gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction should ever be considered anything other than God’s intention and good gifts.**

## Egregious Examples

Additionally, only egregious examples of sexism are cited as entirely representative of most of the early church fathers. Church history, liturgy, and ministry are seemingly unrelieved by non-misogynistic practices and pronouncements. “The Christian Church as an institution, including the Lutheran tradition, has been complicit in these sins” (lines 440-441). Even the classically Lutheran notion of the “theology of the cross” is deemed problematic because it might be perceived as abusive, demanding subservience and suffering - especially by women.

## Blanket Condemnation

As far as I can tell, there is not one “positive” citation from the early church fathers, the history of the Western church, the theological “Great Tradition” that encompasses orthodox Christian thought, or much of Lutheranism (except for the somewhat convoluted parsing of Law and Gospel, and of justification by grace through faith, mentioned earlier). Even

**The “theology of the cross” is deemed problematic because it might be perceived as abusive, demanding subservience and suffering - especially by women.**

with qualifying phrases (“continued misuse;” “can also lead to”), it’s not hard to read the statement as a thoroughgoing condemnation of Scripture and Tradition from the earliest stories of the Old Testament until the #metoo moment.

## Contradictions

This leads to some genuinely contradictory statements. For example, in lines 367-372, a perfectly fine observation is made: *“The differentiation of humankind into male and female, expressed in Genesis 2, communicates the joy found in humans having true partners, true peers: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23a). God creates community and family, not a hierarchy...”*

**What if This Church has gotten this all wrong?**

## Dishonesty

But then it goes awry: ... “not a hierarchy based on race and ethnicity, ability, social or economic status, or sex (*what our bodies look like biologically*) or gender (*how people express themselves*)” (emphasis added). The document rightly states that the very possibility of family is grounded in God-given sexual differentiation between peers. *But didn’t the writers remember that they’d identified science as the proper arbiter of sexual and gender identity and insisted that both are fluid human constructs?* God’s Word, or science: which is given precedence? And is it not simplistic and misleading – to the point of intellectual and scientific dishonesty – to state that sex is defined as “what our bodies *look like*” and gender as “how people express themselves?”

Additionally, there are two sidebar graphics (see lines 727-747 and 1048-1060), illustrating how societal attitudes, religious beliefs, and laws, policies and practices lead either to gender injustice or justice. It’s presupposed that societal attitudes precede and shape religious beliefs. Together, they shape unjust or just laws and politics which create communities of injustice or justice for women and sexual minorities. Referring to lines 1048-1060, on forming a just society: “Working together, we can begin to transform the circle of injustice.... Individuals and groups can challenge harmful social attitudes and practices, reject sexist religious beliefs, and work to change laws and policies that justify and reinforce patriarchy.”

**Why is the revelation of God’s word never ... the starting point for transformation of society?**

continued on [page 5](#)

# ELCA Draft Social Statement ...

continued from [page 4](#)

## The Obvious Question

Nobody seems interested in what to me was an obvious question: If we believe that God's Word truly is "lively and active," the "source and norm of faith and life," as this document states, *then why is the revelation of God's word never considered the starting point for transformation of society?* Why is "religious belief" always secondary? How does all This Church's earnest language about Scripture as foundational allow the Word of God to COME FIRST to challenge, forgive, and transform sinful human attitudes, and then to change unjust laws and create a just community?

Let me conclude with this: If the Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice is approved by the ELCA, then This Church neither understands, nor stands under Scripture. And the tragedy is, it seems incurious and unconcerned about what that means for the very real women and men it purports to care about, and for.

**If the Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice is approved by the ELCA, then This Church neither understands, nor stands under Scripture.**