



**Understanding of Scripture and
Use of Scripture
with Particular Reference to the
Issue of Homosexuality**

**Statement by the Doctrinal Commission of the
Church of Norway on a matter raised by the
Bishop of Møre**

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SUMMARY

Excerpts from the Preface

The Doctrinal Commission of the Church of Norway hereby presents its statement on a matter raised by the Bishop of Møre, Odd Bondevik. The Commission has defined the matter as: “Understanding of Scripture and Use of Scripture with Particular Reference to the Issue of Homosexuality.” The statement is addressed primarily to the person who raised the matter, but is at the same time a public statement.

The Doctrinal Commission is an autonomous body within the Church of Norway. Its mandate, composition and working method is described in § 27 of Act relating to the Church of Norway.²

The Commission provides statements, when requested, on matters which concern Evangelical Lutheran teaching. In order for the Commission to be able to consider a request it must be made clear that the matter at stake does in fact concern Evangelical Lutheran teaching, and that the particular topic is a core issue of a serious and far-reaching character. The Commission does not give attention to possible institutional follow-up of matters that are dealt with.

¹ This English version is a translation of excerpts from the preface and the full summary of the official Norwegian text. The footnotes are not a part of the statement, but are added for explanation in the English translation. The full statement in Norwegian totals 140 pages and is available at www.kirken.no

² The Doctrinal Commission is composed of the church’s eleven bishops, three theological experts by appointment of the three theological faculties and two theological experts and four lay persons by appointment of the Church of Norway National Council.

Chapter 4

Summary

1. In a letter dated August 20th 2002, the bishop of Møre, *Odd Bondevik*, requested a more detailed doctrinal clarification of the issue of homosexuality by the Doctrinal Commission of the Church of Norway. The bishop stated that the issue needs a doctrinal clarification since the opposing sides in the church debate often claim the authority of Scripture as a basis for their views. The bishop drew particular attention to the issues of the understanding and the use of Scripture and the lack of clarity in the understanding of human dignity in the debate. He referred to the statutes of the Commission, which states in § 7, second subsection, that a doctrinal investigation can only be requested "in cases where a particularly weighty matter is at stake, and where the doctrinal issue in question is of a serious and far-reaching character".

At its meeting on October 2nd 2002, the Doctrinal Commission discussed the request from the Bishop of Møre. The Commission considered the understanding of Scripture and use of Scripture in the debate on homosexuality as being such an important doctrinal question that it meets the criteria for an investigation by the Commission.

The Commission wished, however, to consider the issue in the broader perspective of ethics related to *living-together* ("samliv")³ and took the following unanimous action:

Requested by Bishop Odd Bondevik of the Møre diocese in a letter dated 20 August 2002 the Doctrinal Commission of the Church of Norway decides to investigate the issue of the understanding of Scripture and the use of Scripture with particular reference to the issue of homosexuality.

With this specification of its task the Commission chose to focus its attention on the understanding of Scripture and the use of Scripture with particular reference to the issue of homosexuality. By "understanding of Scripture" the Commission means an overall understanding of Scripture which includes the process of interpretation, and by "use of Scripture" the Commission refers to the actual use of Scripture (subchapter 3.1). With this focus the Commission has dealt with the homosexuality issue in the perspective of the ethics of *living-together*, with a view to the current church situation.

2. Throughout the process, the Commission has kept the life situation of homosexuals in mind. It has been important to listen to their experiences, which form part of the

³ The Norwegian concept "samliv" is central in this statement. It refers to life together as a couple and implies a shared household and usually sexual intimacy. It is a broad notion that can be used with reference both to married and unmarried couples. It can also be used for same-sex couples. It is normally the chosen concept when discussing ethical challenges related to living as a couple. The concept does not have an exact English equivalent. As the notion of "living together" is often used in English to designate unmarried cohabitation, the Norwegian noun "samliv" is translated here by *living-together* (italicized and hyphenated) to remind the reader of the broader significance of the concept in Norwegian and in the usage of the Doctrinal Commission.

context for our interpretation of the biblical texts concerned. The organization "Open Church-Group for Lesbians and Homosexuals" has told the Commission that many Christian homosexuals have encountered rejection and condemnation in individual congregations as well and in the church at large. This has left a strong impression. The whole Commission is concerned that homosexuals in the church - like all people - should feel embraced by God's love. The Commission has not, however, been able to delve into the many psychological, social and political questions connected to homosexuality, due to the fact that it is a doctrinal commission. According to its mandate, it can only consider doctrinal issues of a serious and far-reaching character, which in this case is the question of the understanding and use of Scripture with a particular view to the homosexuality issue. The central question for the Commission's work has been: Can one, on the basis of Scripture, argue in support of homosexual couples *living-together*? Or does Scripture speak of homosexual acts in such a way that the church must reject *living-together* by homosexuals?

It is necessary to specify that the Commission, according to its statutes § 15, does not make recommendations for administrative follow-up of the doctrinal matter at stake. Other church bodies are in place whose mandate it would be to pursue possible administrative implications of a doctrinal statement from the Commission. A doctrinal statement may, however, contain views and reflections which in substance pertain to issues being debated publicly.

3. The Commission has outlined some perspectives on the cultural and societal situation of today, particularly with a view to questions of *living-together*. This belongs to the description of the reality that Christian ethics must relate to. In connection with this, the Commission has provided an assessment of the consequences of individualism and consumerism. It is pointed out that the basis for marriage today, to a much larger degree than before, is based on the personal and mutual choices of the partners. The increasing number of break-ups often leads to agonizing conflicts. Even though most parents in such situations wish to protect the children, one cannot ignore the fact that children are the most vulnerable and at the highest risk of being victimized in the process. Commission member *Hafstad* expresses a more positive view on the development of cohabitation, marriage and divorce, and emphasizes the generous sides of the individualism of today's society. In his assessment of the positive sides of individualism and of change through conflict, *Hafstad* is supported by the members *Lappegard* and *Karlsen Seim* (cf. subchapter 3.2).

In an overview of recent gender theory the Commission refers to how the experience of gender and sexuality is woven into cultural patterns of understanding and marked by historical traditions in the interpretation of given biological characteristics. Gender and sexuality should not be seen as "objective" descriptions of biological facts. Definitions of gender are therefore more fluid and malleable than previously assumed (subchapter 3.2).

As part of the deliberations on the understanding and use of Scripture, the Commission has given a brief introduction to the Lutheran view of marriage, and considered the question of married order and personal relations. In its deliberations on unmarried cohabitation,⁴ the Commission concludes that marriage, by virtue of its reciprocal consent and the public contract between the two partners, is the appropriate framework for love and sexual *living-together*. This is important for stability and good living conditions, especially for the children. The church does not affirm unmarried cohabitation in the same way that it affirms marriage.

The Commission members *Riksaasen Dahl, Gullaksen, Hafstad, Kjølås, Krogseth, Lappegard, Larsen, Laupsa, Karlsen Seim og Wagle* view current civil legislation on (same-sex) “registered partnership”⁵ positively, and claim that it regulates as well as facilitates mutual commitment and responsibility in an intimate, loving and reciprocal personal relationship. The Commission members *Austad, Bergem, Bondevik, Baasland, G. Hagesæther, O. D. Hagesæther, Kvarme, Sandvik, Skjævesland og Ådna* state that although registered partnership may be evaluated positively at the level of society, as a civil structure, it can still not be given a positive evaluation according to the ideals and criteria which the church holds out for sexual *living-together*. According to these members, a form of *living-together* that includes homosexual acts breaks with the framework for sexual *living-together* that is outlined in Scripture (cf. subchapter 3.7).

There has been some disparity of views within the Commission on whether or not to make a statement on ethical premises in the debate about possible equal status between marriage and registered partnership. A large majority of the Commission sees it as important to emphasize marriage between a man and a woman as an expression of an order in Creation that follows from sexual differentiation. This puts the relation between mother, father and child in a unique position and makes it a basic cell in society. The biological and social conditions for marriage differ from those of homosexual partnership. It is therefore legitimate to maintain, both linguistically and legally, that marriage is something different from a registered partnership between two persons of the same sex. The members *Kjølås, Lappegard* and *Karlsen Seim* point out that the legal aspects fall beyond what the Commission has defined as its task, but they indicate, as a second option, the possibility of a comprehensive form of legislation on marriage, registered partnership and marriage-like cohabitation. This could be based on common principles, without considering the different forms of *living-together* as being identical with each other. Commission member *Hafstad* would also be critical to the Commission making a statement on gender-neutral

⁴ While there is no particular law in Norway regulating cohabitation of unmarried (heterosexual or homosexual) persons, there is legislation in certain areas pertaining to children, property and taxation, which couples living in such arrangements can draw upon. Such legislation does not always apply in equal ways to heterosexual and homosexual partners.

⁵ The Norwegian law on registered partnership, adopted in 1993, gives two persons of the same sex the right to establish registered partnership with each other. Such partnership provides the same civil rights and obligations as marriage, except for the right to wed and adopt children.

marriage law without having investigated this area more substantially. He would, however, for his own part, tend to view the possibility of such legislation positively (subchapter 3.7).

4. Scripture is always subject to interpretation. The Commission therefore underlines the fact that biblical texts must be understood both in light of their historical meaning and with reference to our own time. The perspectives and the questions one brings into one's approach to texts influence what one sees, and what one emphasizes. Therefore the interpretation of Scripture tends to vary over time. Whether one is conscious of it or not, one always reads a text according to certain pre-suppositions, be they cultural, social, knowledge-based or biographical. This necessitates a discussion of main principles of scriptural interpretation in a church context. The Commission has especially highlighted three such principles: the distinction between center and periphery, the relationship between the Old and the New Testament, and the clarity of Scripture (cf. subchapter 3.4). Human beings can also reach ethical insights through reason and nature, combined with experience and understanding of life's basic conditions. However, insight gleaned from these sources must always be considered in light of Scripture as the highest norm for church life and doctrine (cf. subchapter 3.3).

When considering ethical questions it is particularly important to emphasize the perspective that human beings are created in the image of God, and that human dignity, the person of Jesus and his teaching, the call to discipleship and the commandment to love one's neighbor are central themes. It is essential for the church to assert that every human being has an inviolable worth and to draw the proper consequences of this. Scripture focuses on a number of ideals, such as love and willingness to serve, honesty and humility. These ideals are relevant in many different life situations, including those that involve the ethics of *living-together*. To specify these ideals, Christians will in many cases have to use their own discernment and sense of judgment (cf. subchapter 3.4).

The recognition of human dignity sets ideals for how human beings should be treated. To harm people physically or psychologically, or to behave in ways that are degrading to them, violates their human dignity (cf. subchapter 3.4). Many homosexuals can recount experiences of having been spoken to, or spoken about, in ways they felt to be degrading. Regardless of how one ethically evaluates homosexual *living-together*, it is necessary to take such experiences seriously. When the church teaches, presents its doctrine or discusses issues that relate to homosexuals, it must bear in mind how homosexuals' experience of their own worth may be affected. Some will argue that recognition of human dignity may contribute to accepting homosexual *living-together*. Others do not perceive the acceptance of homosexual *living-together* as a precondition for affirming the full human dignity of homosexuals. There is broad support within the Commission for stating that the different sets of arguments presented by the Commission members in the present statement do not represent positions violating the human dignity of homosexuals. Commission member *Hafstad*, however, strongly

objects to this conclusion.

5. The Commission has examined those biblical passages that deal explicitly with homosexual acts (Leviticus 18,22; 20,13; 1 Corinthians 6,9-11; 1 Timothy 1,9-10 and Romans 1,26-27). The Commission agrees that the wording of these passages clearly rejects homosexual acts, and that they do not only refer to temple prostitution, pederasty or pedophilia. The remaining terminological obscurities do not provide a basis for any other conclusion. The New Testament texts represent a framework of understanding where the differentiation between women and men, as given in Creation, implies that homosexual acts and homosexual desire are understood as being in breach of God's will in creation, and as symptoms of apostasy and idolatry. The agreement on the historical meaning of the texts, does not, however, mean that there is agreement in the Commission as to how the texts should be interpreted in the present context (cf. subchapters 3.5 and 3.6).

For the interpretation of New Testament texts addressing homosexual acts, and for the evaluation of homosexual *living-together* today, knowledge about homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world is of importance. In the Commission's statement, two accounts of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world are presented. One is written by *Karlsen Seim*, the other by *Baasland* and *Ådna*. Both accounts point out that homosexual practices were widespread, and that erotic relationships between an active adult male, and a passive young boy (pederasty), was quite common, especially in Greek culture. *Karlsen Seim* emphasizes that only sexual relations where the partners were not equals, were considered "natural", and that this principle governed the evaluation of all such relations. *Baasland* and *Ådna* claim that there is also evidence of homosexual *living-together* between mature men of equal standing, of homosexual relations between women, and of the acceptance and support for such relations in the Greco-Roman world. Based on the two different assessments within the Commission of the practices in the Greco-Roman world, one party highlights the differences between then and now in terms of how sexual relations are socially organized and culturally interpreted, whilst the other party believes there are grounds to assume that homosexuality today is not essentially different from homosexuality in antiquity. However, both parties agree that Paul, in accordance with Jewish tradition, rejected same-sex relations (cf. subchapter 3.5).

6. When it comes to the interpretation of biblical passages which speak of homosexual acts, there is agreement that they must be understood in the light of Scripture as a whole, and in relation to today's reality (cf. subchapters 3.3 and 3.4). The Commission identifies a number of overarching biblical perspectives which must be taken into account. However, in the process of scriptural interpretation, the passages which address homosexual acts on the one hand, and the significance of the overarching ideals and norms in Scripture in relation to the realities of today on the other hand, are weighted so differently in relation to each other that it has not been possible for the Commission to come to a consensus. The Commission is divided in two groups regarding the basis for evaluating homosexual *living-together* today. In the statement

each group has briefly explained its set of arguments (cf. subchapter 3.6).

The Commission members who argue that the church should recognize homosexual *living-together* - *Riksaasen Dahl, Gullaksen, Hafstad, Kjølås, Krogseth, Lappgard, Larsen, Laupsa, Karlsen Seim and Wagle* - emphasize as crucial for the interpretation and use of Scripture that the Gospel of Jesus Christ represents the testing ground for any statement or attitude. The challenge is to discern what an adequate understanding would be of the Christ-event today in encountering the question of homosexual *living-together*. According to the principle of interpretation whereby *Christ is the center of Scripture*, the role model and example of Jesus is given high importance. The example of Jesus Christ commits the church to meeting all human beings with neighborly love, compassion and respect so that their dignity is affirmed. This also applies to the encounter with homosexuals.

These Commission members believe that Jesus in his teaching – like Paul in his – uses the commandment to love one's neighbor generically in such a way that it is given a critical testing function with regard to the application of individual commandments. Based on this understanding of the commandment to love one's neighbor, they are reluctant to accept that there should be a particular ethical code for homosexual persons, demarcating their lives in ways which do not apply to other people.

According to these members' understanding, the creation stories cannot be used to make good case for marriage between a man and a woman as an "order of creation" to the exclusion of other forms of *living-together*. Despite diversity in race, appearance, ability, age, gender and sexuality, everyone is created in God's image. There is a unity in creation whereby all human beings are subjected to the same challenges, demands and possibilities to realize their potential as created in the image of God. Therefore the same ethical requirements must apply to all. At the same time we are called, as baptized, and as believers, to follow Christ with the self-sacrifice that this might require. The ethical goal is nonetheless the same for all, which is to realize what human beings are created for – in God's image.

It is decisive for these Commission members' understanding of Scripture that the cultural context of the Bible and the knowledge of homosexuality at the time are very different from ours. According to these Commission members, homosexual *living-together* today with mutual commitment and equity by persons with a basic homosexual orientation is not within the horizon of the biblical texts addressing homosexuality.

All people are called to live their sexuality responsibly. The practice of such a responsibility does not require general abstention on the part of heterosexuals. If general abstention should be required of homosexuals, it would need to be made good that this served an overarching purpose within the ethics of *living-together*. However, the threat against marriage today comes rather from heterosexual practices than from the church accepting that homosexual women and men might express their love in

faithful and responsible relationships. The church proves itself credible in the area of sexual ethics only if it unambiguously asserts the same ethical principles for all forms of *living-together*. Marriage between a woman and a man and registered partnership between homosexuals are accountable to the same norms regarding conduct of life. When these Commission members have a positive attitude to recognizing homosexual partnerships, they wish to uphold the norms for *living-together* which include, among other things, fidelity, love, mutual commitment, willingness to sacrifice and care for each other in the vulnerability of self-exposure.

The Commission members who do not find that the church has biblical grounds for recognizing homosexual *living-together* - *Austad, Bergem, Bondevik, Baasland, G. Hagesæther, O. D. Hagesæther, Kvarme, Sandvik, Skjævesland and Ådna* - emphasize that the biblical texts addressing homosexual acts must be seen in conjunction with central themes in the Bible as a whole. The relevant texts have their background in the understanding of creation in Genesis chapters 1-2. God has created human beings as male and female. Sexual differentiation expresses an order of creation, which also implies that man and woman exist for each other (sexual complementarity), and are responsible for continuing the family line. For these reasons, the biblical texts reject homosexual *living-together*. In his proclamation and teaching, Jesus goes back to the first creation and refers to the difference between and belonging together of a man and a woman from the beginning as the basis for monogamous marriage. It is in this context that sexual *living-together* belongs. Paul's rejection of homosexual acts should be understood in light of his understanding of creation and marriage. Homosexuality was widespread in the era of Jesus and Paul. There are no likely grounds for claiming that homosexuality today is essentially different from what one associated with homosexuality in antiquity. The view that the New Testament addresses only certain forms of homosexuality, such as cultic prostitution, pederasty, pedophilia or heterosexual experimentation with other forms of sexuality, is based on an interpretation largely abandoned by the most recent research.

These Commission members underscore that all human beings are created in the image of God, and that the unique worth of each human being is not conditioned by age, gender, race, religion, social status and ability, sexual orientation or form of *living-together*. However, this does not relieve individuals of the responsibility for their own lives, or for their responsibility toward their fellow human beings. Proclamation of the good instructions in Scripture for individual lives and for Christian congregations is not a violation of the human dignity of certain groups, even though the one who receives such instructions may feel hurt. Jesus' encounter with the rich man (Mark 10,17-22) demonstrates that clarity can be combined with love. By stressing human dignity we take on a responsibility to meet our neighbor with respect. The church needs to confront attitudes and actions which violate the human dignity of homosexuals, in its midst as well as in society in general. It is of vital importance for every human being to feel loved by God, and to belong to communities that provide security and courage to live.

Also these Commission members emphasize that the texts addressing homosexual acts must be seen in conjunction with overarching principles in the biblical texts, primarily the commandment to love one's neighbor. However, this commandment does not annul all other commandments in Scripture. In the Pauline texts there is no suggestion that the commandment to love one's neighbor undermines the prohibition on homosexual acts. One should remember that the apostle, in one and the same letter, 1 Corinthians, both retains his rejection of homosexual acts, and writes about love as the greatest of all things (cf. subchapter 3.6).

These Commission members underscore that the church cannot set aside biblical commandments and orders that are based on the ethical teaching of Jesus and the apostles, without undermining the basis for claiming Scripture as the highest norm for life and teaching.

7. There is agreement in the Commission that changes in cultural and social situations affect the ethical questions that are addressed to Scripture. This has contributed to the church' changing its position on certain issues. The Commission has analyzed changes in attitude that have taken place in the church regarding slavery, regarding women's position in the family, in church and in society, and regarding divorce and remarriage. The question is whether these changes represent relevant parallels to the question of homosexual *living-together*. The Commission is aware that biblical passages rejecting homosexual acts have been used in ways that have offended homosexuals. This has, among other things, raised the question whether, in light of the situation for homosexuals in today's culture and society, overarching perspectives are available that might alter the church's traditional interpretation.

Although the whole Commission agrees that there are certain parallels between the question of homosexuality and the changes in attitudes which have taken place in the church in the three areas examined earlier (sc. slavery, the role of women, and divorce and remarriage), there is nevertheless not a full agreement on the parallelism and therefore also not on the weight of the comparison (cf. subchapter 3.8).

The Commission members who do not find biblical ground for recognizing homosexual *living-together* put strong emphasis on the clear, unanimous and consistent rejection of homosexual acts in Scripture (cf. these members' argumentation in subchapter 3.6). The rejection is founded on an order of creation which implies that human beings were created male and female from the beginning and that Jesus has confirmed marriage between women and men as lifelong fellowship and as the context for continuing the family line. Where there are indications, themes or openings within Scripture for re-interpreting texts and breaking with broadly established traditions in the church, there will also be more room for emphasizing overarching perspectives and values pointing in a direction different from what individual texts would otherwise indicate. Such conditions are, however, not present in the question of homosexual *living-together*, and therefore there are no grounds for making comparative arguments between this question and the question of

attitudes to slavery, to women's position in the family, the congregation and society, and in relation to divorce and remarriage.

The Commission members who argue for the recognition of homosexual *living-together* emphasize to a greater extent overarching principles and various forms of insight in Scripture that affect the understanding of the passages addressing homosexual acts (cf. these members' reasoning in subchapter 3.6). A comprehensive interpretation must also relate to the contemporary context within which the interpretation takes place. Such interpretative effort, in the tension between Scripture and the contemporary context, has previously led the church to change its position on the other issues discussed above (cf. subchapter 3.8). The fact that those passages which particularly address homosexual acts are considered more unambiguous in relation to the question of homosexual *living-together* than for example texts addressing slavery and the role of women, cannot be disconnected from the fact that the church already has an established critical reading on these latter issues. These members therefore consider the changes which have taken place in certain other areas, as constituting relevant parallels to the question of homosexual *living-together*.

8. Both parties in the Commission point out that they profess Scripture as testimony to God's revelation and as the highest norm for our church's proclamation and teaching. The Commission is in agreement in stating that the biblical passages addressing homosexual acts must be seen in light of their historical context and that according to their wording, they reject such acts. To a great extent, the Commission also agrees that these texts must be interpreted in a broader biblical perspective, and that in the process of interpretation it is important to reflect upon the difference in time and setting between then and now. The disagreement within the Commission is apparent when it comes to the relative argumentative weight that the biblical passages addressing homosexual acts should be given, and whether overarching biblical themes point in the same or in a different direction than the texts about homosexual acts (cf. subchapter 3.9). This results in differing usages of Scripture. The Commission members do not agree on how Scripture should actually be used in the evaluation of homosexual *living-together*.

The disagreement about the use of Scripture with regard to homosexual acts also manifests itself in the understanding of Scripture as a comprehensive understanding which includes the process of interpretation. Even though the Commission is to a large extent in agreement about which texts and which overarching biblical themes are relevant for the case in point, it is divided over the understanding and the use of more overriding perspectives of interpretation. The disagreement revolves around the understanding of creation, marriage, references to the person of Jesus and his teaching, the relationship between Jesus and Paul, and main ideals and norms for people's lives. The disagreement concerns both how the texts addressing homosexual acts should be understood in relation to other biblical texts and how they should be understood in our contemporary context (cf. subchapter 3.9).

Commission member *Ådna* states that parts of the argumentation used by the members who accept homosexual *living-together*, undermine Scripture as a credible witness to revelation.

In an addendum, Commission members *Austad, Bergem, Bondevik, Baasland, G. Hagesæther, O. D. Hagesæther, Kvarme, Sandvik, Skjevesland*, and *Ådna* state that the disagreement on homosexual *living-together* is not just a matter of disagreement on one particular ethical question, but a matter of Scripture's authority in ethical questions. Even if it is important to show respect for each other's views in the public debate, this does not imply that all viewpoints must be regarded as equally valid. These members also point out that there are two irreconcilable views in the church and that both cannot be authoritative for the church's teaching, orders and liturgy. It would without doubt, be an ecumenical burden if the Church of Norway should alter its view on homosexual *living-together*.

9. The Commission wishes to stress that Scripture as the testimony to God's revelation in Jesus Christ is the highest norm for our church's doctrine, life and proclamation. The Commission has jointly discussed and presented certain principles for interpretation of Scripture in the church. But when it comes to the understanding of Scripture, considered as a comprehensive understanding, which includes the interpretative practice, the Commission is divided. Even though both parties express a commitment to the testimony of Scripture, agreement has not been achieved when it comes to the assessment of homosexual *living-together*. The disagreement on this doctrinal issue, is over how the passages addressing homosexual acts should be interpreted as still valid or binding today, and how they should be considered in light of other biblical texts and perspectives in Scripture.

The question is whether this disagreement is of such a nature that it threatens the unity of the church. According to the confession of our church (CA VII) it is required for "true unity in the church" that there be agreement about "the teaching of the gospel" and "the administration of the sacraments". For the unity of the church it is not necessary to have one particular understanding of Scripture. The decisive question is what consequences a particular understanding of Scripture has for the proclamation of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments. The "teaching of the gospel" in the confessional writings refers to the proclamation of both law and gospel. When it comes to the assessment of homosexual *living-together*, the disagreement does not necessarily hide or distort the core of the gospel. But the homosexuality issue affects the understanding of God's law, and on this point there is disagreement in the Commission (cf. subchapter 3.9).

The Commission considers this disagreement to be a strain on the unity of the church, but is divided concerning the gravity of this strain, and the consequences it might have. The disagreement about the understanding and use of Scripture expressed here should not be underestimated. It may not necessarily lead to church division in the sense that one can no longer worship together. On the other hand, one cannot rule out

that a division of that kind might occur. The Commission is aware that the disagreement may also complicate ecumenical fellowship in Norway and the search for Christian unity. In any case it is a challenge for the whole church to reflect on how one can handle a profound disagreement on a doctrinal issue – respecting those who have a different view than oneself, and respecting also those who are most directly affected by the doctrinal issue in question.

Oslo, 8 December 2005