
HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH

(reflections in process)

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The following study is a revised and updated version of the presentation I made to the people of the University Baptist Church (UBC) in 1994 when we began a serious conversation (which continues to this day) about how the church understands the issue of sexual orientation and how it ministers with gay and lesbian persons and their families. The remarks below represent my thoughts alone. As a pastor, I am a generalist. I am not an expert on human psychology or sexuality. I am not a professional ethicist or systematic theologian. My professional training is in scriptural study, Old and New Testaments. UBC is a Baptist Church; we respect not only the freedom of the pulpit but the freedom of the pew. Each person is free to make up his or her mind and responsible to make up his or her life before God. This document represents the beginning of a dialogue which continues in our church to this day. It is not comprehensive to the widespread debate taking place in the church and in the society in our time. We encourage the participation of our gay and lesbian members and their families in this dialogue. As professing followers of Christ, they are equal participants in the life of our church. This study is offered here by request of our church council as a resource to encourage a continuing search for truth and a compassionate ministry to all persons. Moreover, this study represents a compilation of many resources. Because it was originally prepared as a pastoral presentation, it has not been footnoted in scholarly fashion. Later revision might offer such annotation, but at present I refer the reader to the bibliography at the end, which, while by no means exhaustive, offers a good introduction to thoughts on the several sides of the debate.

From time to time over more than two decades of biblical and theological study I have read a large number of books and monographs on the subject of homosexuality and the church. Some of it is scholarly, scientific, and technical. Some of it purports to be, but is not. I urge caution in what material you choose to trust in this debate, and urge you to read original

sources for yourselves rather than just reviews. Recently I have revisited these works, and find formidable the task of digesting and presenting to you the mass of material produced in response to the debate raging in the Christian church today.

Recognizing that homosexuality is an issue facing many churches today, and coming first to those open churches which preach a gospel of God's love for all persons, I have been prepared to address it for some time, but have waited for the moment to arrive when the issue was raised from within the congregation, when it became our issue. That moment has arrived. In June of 1994 the church ordained six men and women as deacons according to the normal democratic process set forth in our bylaws. There were no dissenting votes, and the question of sexual orientation was not discussed. Rather, the church set aside persons whose lives among us demonstrated spiritual focus, discipleship in Christ, a commitment to the church, and a lifestyle of Christian service.

Several months after the ordination questions were raised concerning the sexual orientation of one of these deacons. The issue was intentionally planted in the wider association to the point that your Austin Baptist Association (ABA) representatives, Deacon Chair, and Pastor were invited to meet with the ABA Credentials Committee regarding our church policy towards homosexual persons. We informed them that we have no official policy regarding the issue, that our people hold a diverse set of opinions on this issue as they do on many others. This response did not satisfy certain people within the ABA given that they had passed a resolution at the annual meeting the following fall which rejects as illegitimate, unbiblical, and unchristian churches which have homosexual persons in their leadership or membership. Subsequently, the Austin Baptist Association voted to withdraw fellowship from UBC.

Given that the issue has been raised for us from both within and beyond our congregation, I wish you to be informed about the issues in the debate and the positions taken by a variety of sincere and faithful Christians on all sides of this controversial issue. And I want you to know where I stand on the issue as well, though I will insist from the outset that you do not have to agree with me about anything. Sexuality and homosexuality are uncomfortable topics for many people. I apologize from the outset for places where my presentation embarrasses or offends you, for my intention is neither. (And I apologize for beginning with so many apologies!)

I want to begin with two pastoral concerns. If you have strong feelings of sexual attraction to persons of your own gender and are wrestling with why that is so and what it means and what you should do, or if you have ever engaged in homosexual behavior, you need to know first of all that God loves you and longs for you to find life through faith in Jesus Christ. Trust in Christ and follow him. I would urge you not to act upon your sexual urges until you clarify your identity and calling before God. Find a community that will love and support you as you work out your salvation with fear and trembling. And as you listen to my observations and those of others, please understand that none of us are condemning you as a person, but seeking together to know the best way to support you and each other towards salvation and the Christian discipleship that leads to life.

Second, if you are a person who has strong convictions or feelings about this issue, or have had personal pain over this issue because of the experience of close friends or family members, we respect you and want to hear you as a member of the faith. We all see through a glass darkly. We are all sinners, like the Pharisees, with an astounding capacity to be wrong but sure we are right in God's name. We must live by the convictions the Spirit and the Word give us, but we must also remain open, teachable, ready to be corrected by the Lord. If our minds are so made up we cannot possibly change, there is no useful purpose to discussion, and we are dangerously vulnerable to taking the Lord's name in vain by attaching God to our human opinions. Let us be loving and listening to one another, sensitive to the winds of the Spirit and our highest calling to care for one another in the body of Christ.

Finally, because I have been personally attacked beforehand by people who disagree with what they think I think without having heard what I think and why I think it, I want to say something about my understanding of the role of pastor in a Baptist church. I am responsible before God and the people to study the scripture and proclaim what I consider to be the truth. But we believe in the high priesthood of Jesus Christ alone. We believe in the priesthood and equality of all believers before God. We believe in the autonomy and freedom of the individual soul. While recognizing the influence and responsibility of the pastor, we do not believe a pastor has authority over any other believer. I may be wrong in what I think or the way I interpret scripture. You do not have to agree with me on any issue, and the majority of our people disagree with me on one issue or another. Our church has a long standing identity as a Baptist church in this regard: we welcome a

diversity of people with a diversity of ideas. We have a free pulpit, where the preacher is free to speak as the Lord leads him or her. But we also have a free people, who are responsible to listen and decide for themselves what they believe God's truth is. All of us seeking to submit to the Lordship and leadership of Christ, we openly discuss issues, and recognize that sincere believing Christians may have convictions on either side of these issues. We do not have to be unanimous in order to be unified, because our unity is in the Lordship of Jesus Christ rather than the realm of ideas.

Therefore, the opinions I express on this issue are mine. They are interim opinions because I am a seeker. They are the result of personal biblical study and research, theological reflection, and pastoral experience surrounded by prayer and a deep desire to be led by the Spirit of Christ. I am not perfect, and I hope your faith would never be placed blindly upon me or any other spiritual leader, for there is only one perfect Savior who is our salvation. I share my opinions on this issue in the personal trust that we are mature enough to talk honestly and seek God's truth together in the spirit of Christ's love.

Our church members are not in agreement on this issue, and I doubt they ever will be. The church has made no official policy and has no agenda about this issue. If my beliefs about homosexuality are a fellowship issue for you such that you feel led to leave the church if you disagree with me on this one issue, I regret that deeply. But I recognize your freedom in Christ to believe and behave as you feel led, and I have no judgment against you.

Few issues are so deeply emotional or politically polarized in the church and society as the issue of homosexuality. It is an identifying issue. Just as a self-identified homosexual person is likely to be treated as if that were his or her whole identity, so a person who takes a stand on one side of the issue or the other is apt to become so identified with the issue, no other conviction or commitment will be heard. For this reason, many churches and many persons refuse to take any stand, preferring silence to the labeling and condemnation which accompany this issue on both extremes. It is a legitimate choice, because sexuality is personal and private. A church is well within its rights not to take a stand on the question but to leave such matters to the soul autonomy and individual conscience of the community members. Moreover, in a polarized context where debate is so oversimplified you are branded as either for or against with no middle ground allowed, reasonable people are forced to join one extreme or the other or be silent.

Therefore a prior question must be answered before meaningful discussion can begin; namely, is meaningful discussion of this issue even possible? Can we trust one another enough to question, research, listen, open our minds and hearts to be changed by God through the honest search for truth? Perhaps every individual must answer that for him- or herself. But if we enter a debate with minds so closed we are searching for ammunition rather than information, the debate will be decided by prejudice rather than truth and by power rather than persuasion.

Some would argue on either side that there is no room for debate on an issue that is already clear. They would say there is no room for discussion because all forms of homosexuality are a sin. Or they would argue that all arguments against homosexuality are homophobic, judgmental, and un-Christian. I would argue that the presence of the two extremes in the society and among Christians makes the debate both necessary and legitimate. A recent article in *The Christian Century* (not addressing this issue) spoke of Christians reclaiming "the radical middle." I believe it is possible and courageous to reject the pressures from either extreme while listening to all sides and to make up your own mind on the issue as you are led by the Spirit in prayer.

Martin Luther spoke of agreeing on the essentials while agreeing to disagree on the nonessentials. That begs the question for either extreme because some people see agreement on the question of homosexuality as an essential to the Christian faith. I question that on biblical grounds, and on biblical grounds I wish at least to demonstrate that the issue of homosexuality is neither central to the biblical message nor is homosexuality as we understand it today clearly rejected or anywhere condoned by the biblical authors.

This debate is not the church against modern society as some would present it, but a division within the church and within the secular society as well. The issue of homosexuality is actually many issues, not one, and like many such polarizing issues of our day, it raises other issues along the way. For instance, in a free and democratic society do we have the right to discriminate against citizens on moral or religious grounds? A person may well enjoin the fight for civil liberties who detests homosexuality but believes in personal freedom. This complexity is true for the debate in the church as well. Is homosexuality a sin in its every expression? What does the scripture actually say? How do we interpret and apply scripture as an authority for our arguments, and are we consistent? How should we treat

homosexual persons in the church? What is the nature of the church as a moral community? What is the nature of leadership in the church?

Sexuality and the Church

Before we can answer these questions, we have to place them in the context of the Christian view of human sexuality, which is by no means well addressed or clearly defined by the scripture or the church. At the risk of oversimplification let me summarize what I understand as a majority Christian understanding of our sexual ethic.

First, we affirm that human sexuality was created by God and a part of the goodness of God's original creation. We are sexual creatures by God's design, and in our sexuality as much as anywhere else we see the unique tension humanity experiences according to the Genesis accounts. We are simultaneously the highest animal form God created and little lower than the angels. We are both creature and spirit. Because we are sexual creatures, our sexuality is involved in every level of our relating.

The church has often preached the goodness of sexuality while practicing the opposite in its prohibitions. A pastor friend of mine summarizes what he was taught by the church where he was raised as "Sex is dirty; save it for someone you love." As a parent I understand the reason for the attitude of the church in this regard. Sexuality is a deep and mysterious power within our being. It is difficult to control and disastrous when it is not. We would protect our children, ourselves, and our community from the suffering caused by uncontrolled, undisciplined, or predatory sexuality.

Second, we recognize that sexuality is more than just genital intercourse. It includes aspects of our entire being. We are sexual creatures in our thoughts and our emotions as well as our bodies. Sexual expression includes what we say to one another as well as what we think and feel. It may be as innocuous as a glance or a wink. It includes many forms of affection and physical touching such as hugs, kisses, hand-holding, cuddling, massage, and much more besides genital sexuality. Our own culture (including most of the church) has been much more permissive than most cultures about forms of sexual expression other than genital sexuality, allowing them to be expressed publicly and outside of marriage. Such behavior between unmarried persons was taboo in most of the cultures of the Bible, but we have accepted them as part of the mixture of modern notions of romance with our spiritual ethic.

Simultaneously, our culture is obsessed with genital sexuality, and that is part of the reason so much emotion is generated around this topic. But it is important in thinking about homosexual orientation and behavior not to limit our reflection to genital sexuality alone. Like heterosexuality, homosexuality is primarily about relationships and not simply sexual behavior.

Third, we affirm that sexuality has not one, but several functions in God's intention for creation. This is more controversial because historically large segments of the church have claimed procreation to be the only legitimate purpose of sexuality. But significant portions of the church have also regarded human sexuality to have the relational purpose of mutuality in the giving and receiving of pleasure on the model of the highly erotic Song of Solomon (which more inhibited sectors of the church have interpreted figuratively to avoid embarrassment). For instance, we recognize an appropriate relational purpose of sexuality other than procreation for couples who are infertile, past childbearing age, or those who for other reasons do not feel led to have children at a given time. Of course, that raises all the issues concerning birth control, which we will save for another time.

Fourth, we affirm that all expressions of sexuality, like all expressions of human relationship, should be made in subject-to-subject mutuality recognizing the freedom, dignity, and soul autonomy of the other as equal to one's own. Any expression of relationship that treats another solely as an object for personal gratification we would regard as abusive and sinful (even among heterosexual married couples).

Finally, we affirm that the physical expression of sexuality in relationship to another person should be appropriate to the level of loving commitment present in that relationship. Therefore, as the most profound expression of the sharing of self, genital intercourse belongs solely and exclusively to the committed covenant partnership of marriage. While some would argue marital monogamy is contrary to human nature and sections of the Bible which uphold a different model (the polygamy of patriarchs and kings, or the permission granted by the Old Testament to use slaves for sex), the church has traditionally upheld monogamy as God's intention for the fullest expression of human sexuality.

Unquestionably the Bible (and human experience itself) identifies monogamous, procreative male/female partnership as the norm of human sexuality. But it is not normative, in the sense of being an exclusive

standard. It also recognizes exceptions, to the degree that Paul actually encourages celibacy as the norm for Christians, with marriage permitted as a control for sexual passion (1 Cor 7:13-30).

This overview is simplistic, but I believe a fair summary of our modern Christian sexual ethic, based upon scripture, tradition, and the church's continuing engagement with society across centuries of change. No one can argue that the Christian ethic has changed through the centuries and been affected by the changing circumstances and understandings of wider society. For instance, in Jesus' day, marriages were contracted by parents often without prior contact between the partners. Women were the property of their fathers until they became the property of their husbands and typically had no say in the arrangement of marital contracts. Mary was probably as young as twelve years old when espoused to Joseph (Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*) and "great with child." The unchaperoned dating, hand holding, hugging and kissing widely accepted among Christians today would have been considered immoral by the standards of Jewish and Christian culture in the first century.

As social patterns of courtship and marriage have changed to reflect gender equality in modern society so have Christian ethical standards, based on an unchanging underlying relational ethic of mutuality. Thus the church has rethought its ethic regarding divorce and remarriage, masturbation, celibacy, appropriate attire, dating, romance, love, etc. Regrettably, the personal sexual ethic of most Christians is an unreflected combination of the popular societal patterns of courtship and the prohibitions of the church.

What Is Homosexuality?

Homosexual persons have been treated by the church and the society the same way other minorities have been treated in the past. They have been linked to one another by a single factor (skin color, gender, sexual orientation), assumed to behave exactly alike, and all alike condemned. They have been the subject of stereotypes which are anecdotally only occasionally true. Much of the debate regarding homosexuality reflects the ignorance of this prejudice and stereotyping. For instance, there is no such thing as "the homosexual lifestyle," or "the homosexual agenda," because there are as many homosexual lifestyles, behaviors, and agendas as there are heterosexual lifestyles, behaviors and agendas. A "practicing" homosexual is the same as a "practicing" heterosexual - he or she may engage in any

number of sexual behaviors from chastity to promiscuity. Such language is demeaning and dehumanizing, the first step towards persecution. Whatever the Bible may say about homosexuality, it calls such unjust false witness sin. What is the truth about homosexuality? Let us explore the stereotypes and consider what we know and don't know about homosexual orientation.

Homosexuality is, in a sense, a modern issue. The word was not coined until the 1860's when modern Western medicine developed an interest in the topic. It refers to an internal predisposition and attraction to persons of the same gender, male for male or female for female. The much touted Kinsey report on human sexuality estimated that ten percent of the general human population are constitutionally homosexual. More recent, more reliable studies with larger samples have suggested the number is more like 2 or 3 per cent, still a significant number of people identified as being exclusively homosexual in orientation.

We do not understand what causes this orientation. The old Freudian view that homosexuality is caused by a dominant mother and weak father has been widely discredited, though it is still a popular myth. Another popular but untrue myth is that all homosexual persons have been seduced into homosexuality by other homosexuals. This is based on the unfair assumption that all homosexual persons are pedophiles, lustful towards children. By far the majority of pedophiles are heterosexual persons, and the majority of homosexual persons are not pedophiles. But let me add, some heterosexual persons are seduced into homosexual behavior by homosexual persons just as some heterosexual persons are seduced into promiscuity by other heterosexual persons. Some homosexual persons are seduced into heterosexual behavior by heterosexual persons. All of these forms of seduction are sexual abuse, demeaning and depersonalizing, as subject to object of pleasure, and therefore considered sinful by scripture. Some homosexual persons are seduced into heterosexual behavior by the pressures of church and society, and many lives have been wrecked by homosexual persons who entered heterosexual marriage hoping to change or at least to hide an identity cursed by others. The responsibility for this destruction must be shared by church and society as well as the persons who decided to "live a lie."

Recent studies have suggested a possible genetic cause for homosexual orientation, but this research is preliminary and unsubstantiated. Further research is essential. Developmental psychologists suggest that most persons

go through a homosexual stage in their psychosexual development: typically, boys prefer to be with boys and girls with girls in preadolescence. Most people discover heterosexual attraction at puberty, but some do not. We do not know why. Homosexuality is found randomly among some animals in nature, but people are not animals.

Increasingly, psychologists have found that people are somewhere on a continuum where it comes to sexual orientation. They are not all simply either homosexual or heterosexual. We all have aspects of both genders in our spiritual, psychological, and physical being. Physiologically, males have some female hormones within their bodies; these increase with age. Females have some level of male hormone as well. Many people have occasional feelings of sexual attraction to members of the same gender. Some people act upon those feelings as they do upon their heterosexual feelings, often sometime during adolescence. These experiences create shame and fear which may feed the hostility with which they react to homosexual persons later in life. And there are those people on extreme ends of the scale who never have anything but heterosexual attraction or homosexual attraction during their entire lifetimes.

Some people clearly choose homosexual behavior. Sexual adventurers and experimenters, they engage freely in all kinds of behavior. Other people are lonely. Unable to find someone of the opposite gender to meet their need for intimacy, they become involved in same gender relationships. Others because of a history of abuse have rejected heterosexuality. Some women cannot trust themselves with any man because of the abuse they have endured, and therefore choose lesbian relationship to meet their intimacy needs. Most of these people are heterosexual in orientation but for whatever reasons have chosen homosexual behavior. They should be treated with compassion. They can be healed of their hurts. They can be changed back to healthy heterosexuality.

What is increasingly recognized by researchers and therapists on both sides of the issue is that homosexuality as a psychosexual orientation is not a choice for some people. We don't know why it is so, but a small percentage of people enter adulthood with an exclusive sexual attraction to their own gender, regardless of whether they are sexually experienced or not. It is a mistake to speak of their homosexuality as a "preference." The great majority of them would prefer not to be homosexual because of the condemnation and in some cases, persecution, with which they must live.

Not all gay men are effeminate; some are. Not all lesbian women are masculine; some are. And not all effeminate males or masculine females are homosexual in their orientation. One man I know spoke with deep emotion of being persecuted much of his life because he was a little effeminate and people assumed he was gay.

Homosexual behavior, like heterosexual behavior, takes a variety of forms. It includes a wide range of behavior: words of affection, acts of support, glances, hand holding, hugs, kisses, and others, including oral and manual stimulation and genital intercourse. Homosexual persons do not engage in all forms of homosexual behavior. Not all homosexual persons are sado-masochists. Some homosexual persons have no partners, some have multiple partners, some have single partners in long term relationships. Partners may be active initiators or passive recipients or both, the same as in heterosexual behavior and relationships. Scientific studies of homosexuality continue to reveal great differentiation in the sexual drives and behavior of homosexual persons, and some significant differences between female and male homosexual persons. More studies are needed.

Some people still argue that homosexuality is a choice, because God can change the homosexual person who is willing to repent. Groups have formed to support "recovering homosexuals." People share testimonies of deliverance. But these are anecdotal. We have no way of knowing whether they are heterosexual people who for the other reasons I mentioned earlier took up a homosexual lifestyle. And there are many failures in these groups to go with the successes, as is true of all recovery groups.

As biblical Christians we certainly believe God can change a person. But God does not always do so. I can ask God to change my appetite and help me control my eating. And my will cooperating with God's will will change me. I can ask God to change my eyes from hazel to blue, and God can. But in my experience, God will not, because God made me through a genetic process to have hazel eyes. Many homosexual persons would gladly choose not to be homosexual in orientation because of the struggle and abuse they face in church and society. Thus, there are also testimonies of many Christian homosexual persons who have prayed with deep devotion over a long period of time, and found their orientation unchanged. Are we to take this as the will of God? Some do, but argue it is God's call to celibacy, no other option permitted. If indeed God has made a person homosexual or allowed them to become so, some argue, it is God's way of saying you may

have no sexually intimate human partner. It is not God's will for you. While argued with more complexity, this has become the official position of the Roman Catholic church. Their position is based more on theological than biblical arguments.

Generally speaking, the church has recognized that some people are constitutionally homosexual in orientation. And this presents one of the greatest problems for Christians in dealing with this issue. The people of the Bible made no differentiation between homosexual *orientation* and homosexual *behavior*, and they had an entirely different world view about human psychology and identity. The Bible does not condemn homosexual *orientation*; it does not speak of it at all because it does not know it. We have the burden of translating the scripture faithfully from an ancient world with its concepts into our own modern world.

What do we do with homosexual orientation? Some would view it as a kind of birth defect, such as a tendency towards illness. For instance, just as we accept and recognize some people have a tendency towards alcoholism, some people have a tendency towards homosexuality. We do not condemn alcoholics, but we do not condone alcoholic behavior which will result in their self-destruction. This comparison assumes *a priori* all homosexual behavior to be destructive and therefore sinful. Homosexual orientation is treated as a psychosocial disorder, a form of mental illness. (The American Psychiatric Association dropped "homosexuality" from its list of mental illnesses several years ago.) And it cannot be questioned that some homosexual persons have severe mental stress, disorder, and illness in relation to their sexual orientation. Is that disorder a result of their orientation or of society's attitude towards it? This question has to be raised in relation to all the evidence which suggests that suicide, depression, difficulty with intimacy or long term relationship is more prevalent among homosexual than heterosexual persons. Of course! But whose fault is it?

Let us consider the homosexual person in church or society with some degree of Christian compassion. Imagine things the other way around. Let us say you are heterosexual, not by choice but by nature. Imagine how it would be to live in a society where homosexuality was the norm, and heterosexual persons were regarded with disgust. How would you feel about yourself if all the messages you received from the pulpit, from jokes your friends told, from images in the way the media portrayed heterosexuals were negative? How would you feel about God if you were told on the one hand that God

made you and on the other that God hates you the way you are? Regardless of the opinions we may hold about homosexuality, there is no excuse for the hatred and abuse homosexual persons have received in the name of Christ.

Others would argue that homosexual orientation is neutral, an accident of birth and of differentiation in creation like being left-handed or blue-eyed. It seems to me the safest and most logical comparison to make with homosexual orientation is heterosexual orientation, which is morally neutral and may lead to destructive or constructive behavior. That simply leaves the question open: biblically, theologically, spiritually - is there any homosexual behavior which might be acceptable before God and helpful to those who practice it, a blessing to the covenant people of God and the society at large?

One more observation: the word *homosexual* is not a noun, but an adjective. When used as a noun, it becomes an all defining label used simplistically to describe a large and far from homogeneous group of people. When used as a noun it becomes a basis for gross stereotyping as when the adjective "black" is used as a noun. Homosexual persons are just that - persons. Their sexual orientation is a significant element of their identity; it is not comprehensive. Homosexual persons are not all alike. They do not all behave alike, think alike, look alike, or act in unity. For many people the word "homosexual" raises images of effeminate males dressed in leather marching in a political rally screaming curses at Christian pickets along the parade route. But it is as incorrect to form your opinion of all homosexuals from the unbalanced press coverage of the extremists as it would be to form your opinion of all heterosexuals from Heidi Fleiss or Joey Buttafuoco.

For every offensive homosexual extremist one side can name, the other side can name a gifted homosexual person who has made a significant positive impact on the world. We have been hypocritical in this regard. We are far more harsh with homosexual sin than we are with heterosexual sin or nonsexual sin. As we shall see, the New Testament includes a particular expression of homosexuality in a list of sins which includes greed, drunkenness, those who slander, those who gossip, and others. Can you imagine so much emotion generated, our meeting three Wednesday nights in a row, or the Association threatening to kick us out because we have a deacon who is greedy or because one of our members passed on damaging information he or she didn't know to be fact?

Homosexual persons hold jobs in every field. They have the same fears and hopes heterosexuals do: among them, a desire to have meaningful relationships, community, health, peace, and prosperity. They do not feel sexually attracted to every person of their gender. Their sexuality is not comprehensive to their identity. They are spiritual beings, waging the same spiritual warfare as heterosexual persons, not only in regard to dealing with their sexuality, but in every area of their lives. They have the same hunger for God and for salvation and for relationship and intimacy that all persons have. They have the additional problem of working out their salvation with fear and trembling in a frighteningly hostile environment. We must never forget that the word "faggot" originated from the Medieval practice of burning homosexual persons at the stake. Even if we regard homosexual acts as a sin, Christians deal with sinners redemptively, with mercy, compassion, and encouragement to righteousness as we understand it, leaving the judgment to God. We should all regret the persecution, vandalism, slander, and unchristian hate that has been expressed in the name of Christ against homosexual persons, persons suspected of being homosexual, even against persons who hold the "wrong opinion" about the issue. Homophobia is real; it is not Christian.

I am reminded of Moritz Goldstein's words regarding anti-semitism, which apply in the case of any social prejudice, including homophobia:

We can easily reduce our detractors to absurdity and show them their hostility is groundless. But what does this prove? That their hatred is real. When every slander has been rebutted, every misconception cleared up, every false opinion about us overcome, intolerance itself will remain finally irrefutable ("Deutsch-judischer Parnass")

Christians are not a people of hate.

I grew up in Texas playing football. I learned early by the harsh rejection of homosexuality in my church and the cruel jokes leveled at homosexuals by my friends that at least verbally it was acceptable to persecute gays and lesbians, that they were to be despised and feared. I find the thought of homosexual lovemaking uncomfortable. In other words I recognize that by virtue of my socialization and culture I am homophobic, just as I am racist and sexist. I do not want to be any of these, but it is only by recognizing the seeds of hate and the emotions of prejudice within as well as my participation in the structures of church and society which have

institutionalized homophobia, racism, and sexism that I can fight against them within myself. We are not bound by society, by church tradition, by the authority of any other person, but by the Spirit of God illuminating the word of God and the way of Christ. This is my search on this issue.

The Bible and Homosexuality

Because we believe God has spoken and still speaks to us through the scripture, the Bible is our starting point for belief and practice. We interpret scripture by faith; the illumination of the Spirit by the interpreter is as important as the original inspiration of the author in our hearing the Word. The Bible was written in cultures and languages foreign to our own. We must hear it in its own words and in its own time to understand what it actually says. To read it as if it were written last week in the United States is not only naive, but destructive to the text. As New Testament scholar Robin Scroggs suggests: "Christian statements about homosexuality in the New Testament are responses to that cultural scene. Until we know what the biblical authors were against, we cannot begin to reflect upon the relevance of those writings for contemporary issues" (Scroggs, p. 1).

We would all submit to the authority of scripture. But scripture must be interpreted by reasonable, consistent methods of interpretation. Exegesis and hermeneutics cannot be simply distinguished from one another. The very act of translation is interpretive because words do not have scientifically precise meanings consistent from one context to another over space and time. The Bible was written in at least three languages across 21 centuries and numerous cultures. How do we decide what these words mean? To what ancient practices do they refer?

Which texts address the issue of homosexuality? I would answer: no scripture and all scripture. The sexual disposition of some persons to be attracted to persons of the same gender is a modern psycho-social understanding totally foreign to the ancient world. Thus, the Bible nowhere condemns homosexuality as an *orientation*. Five specific texts have been interpreted specifically to condemn some form of homosexual *behavior*. The broader principles of the Bible as a whole are the foundation of our moral and ethical life and give us the general principles upon which we decide specific ethical issues. Let us begin with those texts which specifically address homosexual behavior and inquire: What specific behavior does the text address? What is the context of the prohibition? How do we appropriate

this text to our lives under the grace and Lordship of Christ today? Then let us think biblically, theologically, and pastorally on how the church should minister to homosexual persons.

Let me begin by ruling out a text. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 is a story about homosexual rape, a form of humiliation and domination that has been used by conquering armies or hostile enemies through the ages. In the biblical period the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was interpreted in terms of their breach of the ancient laws of hospitality - that sojourners in a person's home were guaranteed protection. Their sin was inhospitality to the stranger, and a disregard for justice. Says Ezekiel: *This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy* (16:48-49). No word about homosexuality there. In Matthew 5 Jesus tells the apostles that those who do not welcome them or receive their words will be treated worse than Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment (5-15), presumably because (like Sodom and Gomorrah) they repeat the sin of inhospitality. At the most, the only homosexual behavior we can honestly say Genesis 19 prohibits is homosexual rape.

Five texts are generally agreed specifically to address homosexual behavior. They are: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10. I say "generally agreed" because some scholars do not believe the Bible addresses homosexuality at all as we understand it today. Other scholars believe these texts deal with specific forms of homosexual behavior which are still current today, but not inclusive of all forms of homosexual behavior. Still others believe these texts sufficient to condemn all forms of homosexual expression as we know it today.

Jesus and the gospels never mention homosexuality, and while that fact and the infrequent reference to homosexuality in the Bible as a whole suggest that homosexuality is not a major ethical or moral concern of scripture, there are many things which Jesus and the gospels never mention which Christians would find morally repugnant in our own day. There are also many things never mentioned in the Bible which Christians find morally acceptable and still others prohibited by scripture which most Christians nevertheless accept today. One of the background issues here is how the church's definitions of right and wrong change from community to community and through time. The Bible has not changed, but our ethic has. On what basis? It must be added that the Bible nowhere explicitly condones homosexual behavior,

although some interpreters argue for the relationship between Anomie and Ruth or David and Jonathan as models of homosexual relationship. I find those arguments unconvincing.

The first text which clearly addresses homosexual behavior is found in the so-called "Holiness Code," a list of laws in Leviticus 17-26 dating from various times and situations but added to the covenant law from Sinai by levitical priests especially concerned with ritual purity and holiness, Israel's distinctive identity over against the Gentiles. In a list of commands regarding sexual purity Leviticus 18:22 says: *v-eth zakar lo tishkav mishkave 'isha toevah hi* "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." The command is repeated with the addition of a punishment in Leviticus 20:13: *v'ish 'asher yishkav 'eth zakar mishkave 'isha toevah `ashi sh-nehem moth yumathu d-mehem bam* "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them."

The Hebrew is awkward, reading literally "You shall not lie the lyings of a woman with a man" and again "A man shall not lie with a man with the lyings of a woman." This wording reflects the patriarchal culture of the day. It assumes that the male is the active initiator of sexual contact and that the female is the passive recipient. As feminist theologian Reuther Radford suggests, it also reflects the dread of a man being reduced to the inferior status of a woman in a highly patriarchal culture. Nothing is said here about lesbianism; it does not matter. Men and their behavior matter. The only reference to lesbianism I encountered in background texts relevant to biblical texts was a rabbinical debate of the first century. Surprisingly, the first century rabbis actually debated whether a woman who had sexual relationship with another woman could still marry. One prominent rabbi (Hillel) said yes and another (Shammei) said no. But it may be argued from the Hebrew wording that Leviticus prohibits homosexual behavior as an abuse of power by a superior over an inferior, but says nothing about a mutual sexual expression between equal partners.

The Hebrew word *toevah* translated "abomination" refers to ritual impurity, and is often translated simply "idolatry" or "uncleanness." It is especially used in distinguishing between the Hebrews and the other Ancient Near Eastern peoples. The same word is used in connection with *kosher* laws in Lev 11:13, 20:25, and 19:7 (which prohibits eating three day leftovers, making my refrigerator an "abomination" to be sure!) The Septuagint (the

Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible dating from about 200 BCE), differentiates between moral and ritual impurity by using *anomia* for the first and *bdelugma* for the second. The Apostle Paul, whose Bible is the Septuagint, continues the moral/cultic distinction of these two words, but uses neither directly in connection to homosexual behavior. In the Septuagint version of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, *bdelugma*, the word for ritual impurity is used (Boswell, p.101). Whether the ancient Levites would have made this later Hellenistic distinction between ritual and moral law is highly debatable.

Some would argue nevertheless that the Levitical prohibition is simply a matter of ritual purity separating the Hebrews from the cultic practices of the Egyptians and the Canaanites, who included homoerotic acts in their idolatrous worship. They note most of these cultic laws (such as the prohibitions against adultery and incest) are repeated elsewhere as moral commandments, but the prohibition against homosexual behavior is not. In Leviticus 18-20, they argue, separation and purity for participation in worship are the essential issue. Hence, in a context which prohibits the mixing of the male and female roles, we also find prohibitions against crossbreeding cattle, planting two kinds of seed in the same field, or wearing clothes made of two different kinds of cloth (Lev 19:19).

Others argue that fertility is the issue in Leviticus 18-20. In a primitive and patriarchal society, male seed is not to be wasted anywhere but reserved exclusively for the marriage bed, and even there not to be wasted on a woman during her menstrual cycle (which is also equally prohibited by the immediate context, Lev. 18:19).

Still others note that Old Testament laws have been fulfilled and their authority overruled or at least redefined by Christ and the New Testament. Others note the harshness of many of the Old Testament laws and read them as a harsh but necessary interim ethic for an earlier time before Christ came, no longer binding *in toto* upon Christians today. The ancient Hebrews made no distinction between the moral, spiritual, or cultic laws. They were all the Torah of God. Modern Christians pick and choose among these laws according to the sensitivities of their contemporary society or values. For instance, few seriously would follow the law which suggests a rebellious child who strikes or curses mother or father should be executed (Ex 21:15,17). Few Christians keep kosher and few think it an abomination on spiritual grounds to eat a rare steak, "flesh with the blood in it," as prohibited

by Leviticus 19:26. The same passage assumes the rights of a man to have sexual intercourse with a female slave, but prohibits a man from doing so with the slave which belongs to another (Lev 19:20). This is not a capital offense, as the text explains, because she is property. In the light of these considerations, many would argue (even scholars conservative on this issue, such as John Hays) that the prohibition of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 cannot be considered binding without further biblical support.

Others insist the text should be taken at face value as prohibiting at least homosexual genital intercourse if not all forms of homosexual behavior. They would argue further that persons caught engaging in such behavior should be put to death. While this is harsh, it is consistent if you choose to read this text as applying to Christians today. Since the Levitical laws apply specifically only to the people of God, it would be safer to argue that only Christians found engaging in such behavior should be put to death. And some have used the harshness of Leviticus 20:13 as permission for murder.

Leviticus 18:20 and 20:13 are the only texts in the Hebrew scripture which apply specifically to homosexual behavior. The New Testament addresses homosexual behavior in three places, all of them from the Pauline tradition. Before we consider these texts, New Testament scholar Robin Scroggs insists, we have to understand the Hellenistic context of the New Testament. According to his (and others) review of the extant ancient literature from the fifth century BCE to the third century of the Christian era, the only form of homosexuality recognized by the Graeco-Roman culture was *pederasty*, sexual intercourse between an adult male and a preadolescent or young adolescent male.

The ancient Hellenistic culture was extremely patriarchal. From the time men left their homes it was not unusual for them to be only with men until the end of the day. The beauty of the male body was extolled as the supreme aesthetic as depicted in art and literature, ironically especially the feminine qualities of the preadolescent male. Only men were educated. Their intellectual and emotional partners were other men. Education often took place in one-on-one relationships, an adult male teacher with a male youth. Many of these relationships were sexual, the boy submitting to the sexual advances of the adult as an expression of gratitude or in payment for services rendered. It was by no means a mutual relationship, and the boy was expected to be a passive and nonresisting partner in such relationships.

Some philosophers argued not only for the appropriateness but the healthiness of such sexual arrangements. They considered pederasty a natural part of sexual development and training: in youth, as a passive partner; in young adulthood, as the active partner with boys; in maturity, as a heterosexual dominant partner in marriage to a female in the passive role. The arrangement was widely known, widely accepted, and widely practiced, especially in the Hellenistic cities. But the practice was by no means unanimously accepted in Hellenistic society. Other (non-Jewish and non-Christian) Hellenistic ethicists argued against it. They said it was contrary to nature (in Greek, *para phusis* - a phrase to which we shall return) and an inappropriate abuse of power. Plato, in his argument against the practice, insisted that his relationship with Socrates was not sexual. Hence our description of a "nonsexual" intimate friendship as "Platonic" to this day.

But the practice had two sordid spin-offs in Hellenistic society, both forms of pederasty. Boys were bought and sold as slaves to be sexual partners for men, and a healthy slave trade arose to meet the demand. There was no instructional purpose here; slaves were property of their owners to be used as the owners pleased, and shared with whomever they pleased. Other boys who could not afford a teacher or who needed income engaged in male prostitution. They dressed effeminately, wore long hair and make-up. To preserve their livelihood, these effeminate call boys worked hard to preserve their youth. They plucked the hair from their bodies, and some castrated themselves and became eunuchs. Such male prostitution was also practiced as a part of the ritual in idolatrous pagan fertility cults.

These three expressions of homosexual behavior - pederasty between teacher and pupil, pederasty between owner and slave, and pederastic male prostitution between adult customers and effeminate call boys - are the only forms of homosexual behavior known to the Hellenistic culture of the New Testament. According to Robin Scroggs, the chief characteristics of these pederastic practices were threefold: they were relationships of inequality, impermanency, and usually, humiliation. If other forms of homosexual behavior were known, there is no comment on them, either for or against, in all of the ancient literature we have that would bear on the New Testament. Like the ancient Hebrew language, the ancient Greek has no word for homosexual orientation as we know it today. The extant literature comes from the upper class; the lower classes were illiterate and did not produce literature. We do not know what other practices and relationships might have

occurred among the lower class, except where they became involved as slaves or prostitutes to the upper class.

The Hellenistic Jewish forbears of the early Christians were not silent about these pederastic practices. Interestingly they borrowed the argument of the pagan Hellenistic ethicists who said pederasty was *para phusis* (against nature). The rabbis invoked Leviticus, interpreting it to apply to the differentiation between the active and passive partners in pederasty. Philo Juddaeus, the prolific Hellenistic Jew roughly contemporary to Paul also argued vehemently against the practice as being *para phusis*, and differentiated between the active and passive partners involved. But like the Hellenistic sources of the day, the Jewish sources object clearly and solely to the practice of pederasty as the only expression of homosexual behavior they know. No other expression of homosexual behavior is discussed, with the exception of the one rabbinical discussion about lesbianism I mentioned earlier.

It is important to note that all three of the New Testament references to homosexual behavior are written within and to Christians living in Hellenistic cities. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Paul says:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers--none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

The words translated "male prostitutes" and "sodomites" by the New Revised Standard Version are translations of two Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. The basic meaning of *malakos* is "soft, effeminate." As a substantive (an adjective used as a noun), it refers to persons who exhibit these qualities. It is translated in an astounding variety of ways, including "sissies" in the Living Bible. In the Patristic literature, the writings of the early church leaders, *malakoi* was most often translated as "masturbation."

The second term, *arsenokoitai*, is a compound word meaning literally "male liars" (not prevaricators, but those who lie prone). The earliest known appearance of this word is here in 1 Corinthians 6; Paul may have invented the word. More likely, he heard the word in the rabbinical discussions of his

day. The most likely background for the word is Leviticus 20:13 in the Septuagint translation. There the Hebrew phrase *'asher yishkav 'eth zakar mishkave 'isha* (a man who lies with a man with the lyings of a woman) is translated *koimethei meta arsenos koitey gunaikos*. That is, the words *arsenos* and *koitos* appear together in a text regarded by the rabbis of Paul's day as applying to the active/passive, superior/inferior relationship of pederasty. Whether the rabbis or Paul himself coined the word under the influence of the Septuagint, the conjunction in 1 Corinthians 6:9 of the words *malakoi* ("effeminate") and *arsenokoitai* ("male liers") suggest to many interpreters that Paul has in mind the young boys and adult partners of a pederastic relationship. In this case, he is objecting to a particularly abusive and destructive expression of homosexuality, as he is objecting in the same passage to destructive heterosexual behavior.

As an aside, let us consider Paul's statement as a whole: *Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers--none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.* Are we to assume Paul is saying these people cannot be saved? Is he creating a behavioral basis for salvation, works rather than faith? In that case, the larger cause of concern here is the rampant idolatry and greed of our American Christian culture. Taken in relation to wider scripture, Paul is saying these behaviors are not a part of God's rule, not God's will.

1 Timothy 1:8-11 is quite similar:

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Three words appear in order here which seem to be interrelated: *pornois*, *arsenokoitais*, and *andrapodistais* translated by the NRSV as "fornicators, sodomites, slave traders." The word *pornois* was used generically to refer to any kind of inappropriate sexual behavior, and is often translated "pervert." More specifically and most often, it was used to refer to prostitutes. *Arsenokoitais*, as we have already considered, refers to the active partner in a pederastic relationship. The third word *andrapodistais* means "kidnappers,

slave traders." Taken together, the words clearly refer to pederastic prostitution: the effeminate call boys, the men who use their services, and the slave traders who provide them.

Romans 1:26-27 is not as clear:

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

In the first place, Paul is not giving moral instruction to Christians in this passage. It is an incidental part of an extended theological argument in which the apostle seeks to demonstrate that *"there is no distinction: since all (meaning Gentile and Jew) have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...."* (Rom 3:23). We cannot read this passage without hearing ourselves included in the "all" of Paul's argument, for he emphasizes in 2:1: *Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things,* (that is, ignoring the laws of God in patterned ways). Ironically, Paul is trying to show a Jewish Christian audience who looked down their righteous noses at their Gentile Christian brothers and sisters that they were no better and had no right to judge, since it is the same Christ who saves us all from the sin all of us have, not through the righteousness that comes by perfect behavior but through the righteousness that comes by grace alone through faith in Christ.

But what, if anything, is Paul saying about homosexual behavior? Once again the language is awkward. The old King James translates more literally *"for even their women did exchange the natural use for that which is against nature, and likewise also the men leaving the natural use of the woman burned in their lust toward one another, men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet."* This may be our only biblical reference to lesbianism, although it is not clear what Paul has in mind here. He may be suggesting that pederasty was caused by women refusing to participate in intercourse. Or perhaps Paul is being inclusive. As patriarchal as he can be, the apostle is remarkably inclusive of women at several points in the Pauline letters. Perhaps he is doing the same here. But he does not elucidate what he means; the verse by

itself is insufficient to mount an attack against lesbianism. If the Bible speaks against homosexual behavior, we must admit it speaks only against male homosexual behavior. It is still a patriarchal culture; what women did with one another didn't matter much in the ancient society as long as it didn't interfere with men. The verses dealing with men are more direct. Paul clearly has in mind male homosexual behavior. But what kind of behavior does he mean?

Notice the progression in chapter one: Because of their idolatry (v. 23) God gave them up to their lust (v. 24), God gave them up to dishonorable passions (v. 26), God gave them up to a base mind and improper conduct (v. 28). In a typically Jewish fashion similar to the arguments of the rabbis of his day, Paul expresses everything that's wrong with the Gentiles. We have already seen this Jewish critique of the Gentiles included rejection of pederasty on the grounds that it was *para phusis* (against nature). Remember, he is setting up his Jewish Christian audience. Beginning with the argument about the Gentiles they already know and with which they certainly agree, Paul will move to the self-righteous Jewish Christians to demonstrate they are just as sinful as the Gentiles.

Critical for our understanding of Romans is what Paul means by *para phusis*, "against nature." It is wrong to project back into Paul's day the modern theological discussions of natural theology. Several interpreters note that the Greek phrase *para phusis* is commonly used as a synonym for "out of character, abnormal, against one's own inner essence, inconsistent with one's self." Paul's objection is therefore that this is abnormal behavior. Remember Paul argues elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 11:24 that it is contrary to nature (*para phusis*!) for men to have long hair. Is it? One interpreter argues that Paul must be speaking about heterosexual persons who engage in homosexual behavior. If we accept today that some persons by their nature are attracted to persons of the same gender, we cannot argue that it is against their nature to engage in homosexual behavior. In fact, Paul's point would be that it is wrong to act contrary to your nature whether you are heterosexual or homosexual in orientation.

Other scholars suggest the best referent for Paul's argument here is the discussion of Hellenistic Jews concerning the Gentiles. The broader context of Romans 1 invokes several of these widely known Jewish critiques of Gentiles. The context is pagan idolatry. Some interpreters argue Paul is criticizing the male prostitution connected with some of these pagan rites.

But the most likely connection is Paul's use of the words *para phusis* here. He adopts the Hellenistic Jewish argument (which they had adopted from the pagan Hellenistic argument) against the practice of pederasty. It would appear that Paul, like all the other literature of the Graeco-Roman culture and Jewish culture from 500 BCE to 300 CE knows only one form of homosexual behavior, the abusive, dominating, demeaning practice of pederasty. If so, then the New Testament cannot honestly be said explicitly to condemn homosexual orientation or all forms of homosexual behavior, but a specific, perverse kind of homosexual behavior.

To be sure, some interpreters prefer to read not only Romans 1, but also 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 as prohibitions of all homosexual sexual expression. But given the range of homosexual behaviors, surely the texts must be more specific than that. It falls to any interpreter to define precisely what these texts mean, and then reflect on the consequences. For instance, if these texts condemn only homosexual intercourse, then on what basis would we condemn homosexual hand holding, cuddling, kissing, emotional intimacy, committed partnership, and so on?

Imagine if the opposite were true, and from three brief passages, all heterosexual behavior were prohibited. How would you feel? How would you deal with that? Where would we draw the line? In fact, we do recognize some heterosexual behaviors as appropriate, some as condemned by the Bible, and others as not addressed by the Bible. The debate continues and has changed over the centuries about what forms of heterosexual behavior are allowed outside of marriage and what forms belong only to marriage. There has also been much debate over what expressions of heterosexuality are acceptable within marriage. What are the limits of Christian sexual expression within marriage? Some would say there are no limits between consenting married adults. Some would say only vaginal intercourse, only for procreation. The Bible doesn't explicitly answer this question for us.

Some interpreters read these texts generally to refer to any homosexual behavior, but remind us of how the Bible itself has led us to move beyond the scientific and cultural limitations of the Bible. For instance, slavery is condoned and even legislated by the Bible. Until the nineteenth century slavery was widely regarded as a moral and biblical institution. But many would argue that the principles derived from the Bible led us to abolish slavery. The Bible reflects in many places a culture so sexist women matter only as bearers of children. But many believe the Bible has led us to oppose

sexism. Some interpreters would say the Bible reflects a culture opposed to an expression of sexuality they did not understand as natural to some people, but the Bible would lead us to justice and mercy in our treatment of the homosexual person today.

Thus, the biblical texts regarding specific homosexual behavior are neither precise nor clear in what they oppose. There is reasonable room for interpreters to stand in different places on the issue regarding these texts. But what about the wider biblical text, not dealing with homosexuality *per se*, but with human sexuality, spirituality, and relationship? Some would argue from Genesis 1 and 2 that God created only male and female to be partners. "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," they say (begging the question of who created Steve). They argue that the only form of sexual partnership the Bible knows is male/female in heterosexual relationship. Therefore this is God's exclusive plan for all humans. Other interpreters would argue that Genesis 1 and 2 are not comprehensive, that both scripture and nature refer to great diversity in God's creation. Celibacy is not only recognized but preferred by Paul in the New Testament (1 Cor 7). They would argue that homosexual orientation is a part of the diversity God created within humanity, and should not be condemned, but celebrated as one aspect of God's creation, though homosexual persons should be encouraged to follow the same Christian sexual ethic as heterosexual persons.

Some interpreters argue that a loving God would not leave us without clear guidance on this issue, that if the Bible does not condemn, it still does not condone homosexual behavior, and therefore, neither should we. Others observe there are many modern issues and experiences the Bible does not address directly. The Bible says very little or is silent about abortion, euthanasia, organ transplants, and many other issues of biomedical ethics. The Bible nowhere seems to anticipate cars, airplanes, endangered species, competing economic systems, or genocide. These modern issues must be decided upon the general principles of grace and justice outlined by scripture, but not in relation to specific biblical proof texts.

There are some other texts that have a bearing on the discussion of homosexuality. Some have suggested Matthew 19:10-12 as possibly referring to homosexual orientation and/or behavior. After a severe teaching regarding divorce, the following exchange takes place:

His disciples said to him, If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.

In the first place, eunuchs were a class of males castrated for service to the female members of the court in order that they might be sexually safe. The book of Deuteronomy prohibits such from participating in the kingdom of God, setting the stage for their inclusion in the gospel in the book of Acts, the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 7, where a man who was sexually disqualified from being a member of God's people according to Old Testament law discovered the grace of God in Jesus Christ included him, too. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch is one of several in Acts which emphasize the inclusion of those whose membership has been heretofore prohibited or whose participation severely limited in the community of faith: women, Samaritans, and especially, Gentiles. Of particular interest here is the story in Acts 10:1-11:18, where Peter and the early Jewish Christians had to be convinced by a vision from God to break the clear commandments of scripture regarding the exclusion of the Gentiles from the people of God. In short, Peter sees a vision of a sheet descending from heaven filled with animals the Bible declares as unclean for eating (several of which you may have eaten if you had barbecue or Mexican food this week). The voice from heaven tells Peter to eat. He objects because he is kosher, a Jew obedient to the laws of God regarding diet. The voice tells him, "What god has declared clean, you must not call profane." Soon Peter learns that the lesson is not about disobeying scripture to eat non-kosher food; it is about disobeying scripture to include Gentiles in the gospel and among the people of God. Without this event, you and I would not be here tonight. It is not by our perfection or worth that God has included us in the covenant; it is only by the grace of God in Christ. But Peter's vision is soon confirmed by the incontrovertible evidence that the Spirit of Christ is demonstrated in the Gentiles who have trusted in Christ.

I would add several other texts as relevant to the discussion: *"There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:22b-24). "For God so loved the world that he gave his*

only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). And so on.

What I apply these scriptures to say is that regardless of whether you believe homosexual orientation or behavior to be sinful, homosexual persons are included in God's salvation through the grace received by faith. Therefore, it is not us-against-them. Homosexual Christians are our brothers and sisters in Christ, strugglers like us with sin of all kinds, like us working out their salvation with fear and trembling. Regardless of our personal beliefs about what is and isn't sin - and thoughtful, sincere, Spirit-guided Christians have taken stands at different places on this issue - we should treat them as Christian family, and non-Christian homosexual persons as the persons God considered worthy of the blood of Christ. Can we doubt that God loves each and every one? Then shouldn't we?

Even if we believe homosexual orientation or behavior is a sin, we are constrained to respond to sin with compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and encouragement to righteousness. It is never our place to judge or condemn; that belongs to God's sovereignty alone. We are responsible to seek God's guidance into righteousness, to proclaim our understanding of God's call into grace and salvation (which includes a call to Christian ethical and moral behavior). A word from Paul Duke in this regard: Be careful when you say "We hate the sin but love the sinner." The two words people hear most strongly in that sentence are "hate" and "sinner," and there has been very little Christian love shown towards homosexual sinners by those who bear Jesus' name. Besides, if homosexuality is an orientation which people do not choose but simply have, then saying "Love the sinner, hate the sin," is like saying to an African American, "Love the soul but hate the color," or to a woman "Love the person but hate the gender." Indeed, that is precisely the way most homosexual persons have heard it.

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