



Homosexuality and Church Tradition*

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I want to begin by indicating how I understand my role in this discussion. As a teacher of the church with particular expertise in biblical studies, I have been asked to deal with the topic from the perspective of our scriptural and theological tradition. I am not writing to express personal views, and I can assure readers that I have no particular expertise in understanding human sexuality.

I. USING THE BIBLE

There are some preliminary comments I want to make before dealing with the biblical material. If the Bible is important in our conversations, we need to know how to make use of it. Rightly handling the Word of God requires care, thought, and hard work. The language of the Bible is not our own; the narratives and letters were written first for others who lived at different times and places. Listening and understanding requires effort.

Interpreting the Scriptures likewise requires a perspective. As a Lutheran Christian, my perspective—my bias, if you will—is that the intention behind all of Scripture is the gospel. God's Word has as its goal our salvation. It is toward the forgiveness of sins and our liberation from bondage to sin that the Scriptures press.

God works through his Word to redeem creation. He also works to preserve it. If the gospel is the means by which God redeems and liberates, the law is the means by which God preserves life. Both Old Testament and New Testament deal with matters of sexual relations in terms of law, not gospel.

Let me say a bit more about the purpose of law. As children of God, justified by faith in Christ, our relationship to God is defined by the gospel. But because we still remain members of a fallen creation in bondage to sin, our relationship to one another is defined by law. There is need for some structuring of our relationship to

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one another. The weak need protection against the strong; all of us need protection from the effects of our "evil lust and inclinations," as the Augsburg Confession puts it. We mean by "law" the order by which the creation is preserved from destruction and chaos. Our tradition has chosen to speak of a "natural law" rather than a "divine law" to characterize the structures by which evil is restrained and life ordered for the good of all. We do not believe there is a single heavenly code which religious people know better than others. "Natural law," through which God ordains

order, is embodied in human codes—some better, some worse.

It is not accidental that every society has been careful to regulate matters dealing with sexuality, making them matters of law or taboo. The bearing and training of children is essential to the survival of our species. At least as basic is our relationship to one another as males and females. The last twenty years have witnessed revolutions in our view of gender roles, but even for us moderns there are differences between males and females that must be regulated for the sake of our survival and well-being. In speaking of regulating matters of sexuality, we are dealing with society's rights and not individual rights. When sexual relations go wrong, the harm inflicted on society is considerable. And when we speak of such regulations, we are taking seriously the insistence of our tradition that what is native to us as sexual beings is corrupted by sin. Laws are the way society protects itself and its members against the effects of sin and evil. God, as creator, has a stake in that protection as well.

The way we think about homosexuality has first to do with the law. Rules about homosexual practice arise from the need for order in the area of sexual expression, just as do the host of rules about marriage. We define, to some degree, what is "natural" to provide boundaries for our protection and to encourage actions beneficial to society. It is "unnatural" for brothers and sisters to marry. The Old Testament offers few reasons to support such rules. We have enacted such rules into law, not simply because they are in the Bible, but because we can offer good reasons for them: it is genetically unwise to foster such unions. The law protects all of us by ruling out marriages between blood relatives.

In the realm of the law, reason and not revelation is primary. God has not revealed any specific code for life. Yet God wills order for our well-being, and we are given the gift of reason and common sense to derive laws to that end. The question to ask is if there are good reasons to make rules limiting the right to sexual expression. If so, given the public character of pastoral ministry and the exemplary nature of that office, we would be obliged to insist that pastors abide by such rules and that the church do nothing to undermine them for the rest of society. Our specific question has to do with homosexual practice.

II. BIBLICAL DATA AND INTERPRETATION

There are few mysteries about the relevant biblical material. It has been thoroughly discussed in the past. It should suffice to say that there is no basis in the Bible for regarding homosexual intercourse as acceptable behavior—as there is no basis for regarding sexual expression outside marriage as legitimate. While the data is limited, the few passages in the Old Testament and in the New Testament clearly rule homosexual intercourse out of bounds.

In Romans 1, Paul is embarrassingly frank about homosexual acts. When he

wanted to find a way to depict the plight of a world alienated from God, he could find no more graphic example than homosexual acts—specifically, intercourse between males. (His list, of course, includes other sins such as "envy, murder, deceit, strife, etc.")

That is not all Paul has to say about illicit intercourse. Any intercourse outside the bounds of marriage is wrong (1 Cor 7; 1 Thess 4). Such an observation does not make homosexual activity any less unacceptable, and it ought not obscure the fact that by giving his graphic description of male intercourse pride of place in Rom 1, Paul testifies to a view—held by Jews as

well as Christians—that such acts are a most emotionally potent example of alienation from God.

The point deserves some emphasis. While in Greek moral tradition “virtues and vices” had little to do with religion, for Paul sexual improprieties are tied directly to “not knowing God” (1 Thess 4:3-8; Rom 1:18-27).

Interpreting Paul’s advice requires acknowledging that there are matters about which Paul is willing to allow more than one view (e.g., marriage; cf. 1 Cor 7:6-7, 12-16, 25ff). In other instances, what Paul says in one letter must be balanced by what he says in another (1 Cor 11:2-16 and Gal 3:26-28). Comments about sexual immorality are not of this sort, however. Paul is consistent.

I suspect that many people have grown accustomed to expecting a “however” at this point—a sudden shift in the argument that demonstrates the one-sidedness of Paul’s views or their cultural relativity, perhaps contrasting them to what Jesus said. There is little relief in the Gospels, of course, where Jesus’ pronouncements about sexual expression are less compromising than Paul’s (Mark 10:2-12 or Matt 19:10-12).

It is as if what people expect of interpreters is a way around difficult texts, perhaps even a way to make the Bible say the opposite of what it seems to say. There may be some who seek refuge in a divine law that offers absolute clarity and assurance—and a weapon to be used against those who are different. There are others, however, who view the enemy in church and society as a conservative view of marriage and sexuality, who believe teachers in the church need to combat conservatism and legalism in the interests of the “freedom of the gospel.” In fact, the greater danger in our society may well be a nihilism that acknowledges no values outside personal desires and locates the meaning of life in individual gratification. It is possible that the greater danger in our time is the threat to the stable social order that makes it possible for people to live together.

There are grounds for debate here. We may disagree about what constitutes the greatest threat to the well-being of church and society in our time and place. When discussing such matters as sexual expression, however, we ought to begin our conversation by respecting what the Bible says. Both Old Testament and New Testament authors are clear and consistent in maintaining that sexual relations between members of the same sex (and between members of the opposite sex outside marriage) violate God’s will for the creation.

It should be said that a “however” is necessary at some point. Discussions about homosexuality and illicit intercourse must finally give way to dealing with homosexual persons. Jesus taught his followers a stringent view of sexual expression while at the same time displaying an almost breathtaking freedom to associate with sinners of all sorts.

Paul’s dealing with his churches proceeded from an insistence that all have sinned and fallen short, and that God’s saving righteousness has been revealed apart from law. God’s saving grace is for homosexual persons as well as for sinners of all sorts.

In our efforts to understand the gospel, however, we cannot collapse law into gospel. As forgiven sinners, we are freed to serve those for whom Christ has died. Out of respect for our neighbors and concern for the well-being of creation, we must work for a just order of law. For Paul, being saved in no way undermined a traditional view of sexual expression which on the one hand did not limit human sexuality to intercourse and on the other limited intercourse to marriage

between males and females.

In our deliberations, we should be clear about what the biblical evidence is and how it is to be interpreted. There is no discussion of motives or inherited orientations. The issue is sexual expression, and sexual expression is discussed as a matter relating to the well-being of God's creation—a creation that is in bondage to sin and in need of regulation as well as redemption. The consistent testimony of Old Testament and New Testament is that homosexual intercourse is a danger to society. If we agree in that assessment, we must be able to articulate our own reasons for regarding it as “out of bounds” behavior. Given the consistency and the persistence of such testimony, however, our question probably ought to be whether good reasons exist for rejecting those opinions.

In our deliberations, the wisdom of Scripture and the tradition cannot be cited as “God's answer” to the matter, but neither ought that wisdom be summarily dismissed as irrelevant or outdated. And if we cannot find compelling reasons to dismiss such views about homosexual practice, the church is obligated out of concern for the well-being of society to refuse to ordain homosexual persons to public ministry and to refuse to endorse homosexual practice as a legitimate expression of one's sexuality.