

# **Sin or Variation?**

## **The Church's Response to Homosexuality**

### ***Leviticus 20:10-16; Romans 1:18-32***

CWZepp, BWCOB, October 25, 2009

There is perhaps no more volatile issue in our church and our culture today than the debate over homosexuality. In our nation and our communities, our denomination and the larger Christian church, the divisiveness of the issue – and the polarization that often results from it – is very real and very present. I have learned from our circulating congregational profile that 40% of us would rather not deal with the issue at all. And I am very aware that the issue has taken on a magnitude in the church that far exceeds its inherent importance – becoming a litmus test of faithfulness for some, and of compassion and justice for others. It is a loaded topic.

And so I must confess my anxiety in addressing it from the pulpit this morning. It is always easier to avoid conflict than to face a tough issue head on. But after our Annual Conference this summer, where questions concerning homosexuality highlighted the business agenda yet again, we have a mandate to engage and wrestle with this issue over the next several years. That was not the case when I first explored this issue from the pulpit at the Mountville Church of the Brethren three years ago. But I passionately felt then, as I do now, that the church must wrestle with this issue. We cannot be faithful by sticking our heads in the sand and hoping it goes away. Nor can we follow Jesus without being concerned for those who are hurting, those who are oppressed, or those who struggle under the weight of sin. If we are to be faithful in our world today, we need to summon the maturity to speak plainly about homosexuality without becoming preoccupied with the topic; the composure to wrestle with the issues without attacking one another; and the compassion to care deeply about the concerns and struggles of our brothers and sisters whose sexual orientation or identity fall outside of the mainstream. And regardless of our positions on the subject, we must find the courage to stand with them in the face of injustice, cruelty, and hatred and the faith to discern the heart and mind of Christ in this, as in all things.

Today, I hope to lay a strong foundation for our community's renewed engagement with this issue over the next few years. It is abundantly clear that we are not of one mind on this issue. But I hope and trust that we can agree on three basic matters that have to be foundational if we are to move forward and wrestle with the issue in all its complexity:

First, and most importantly – when we talk of homosexuality, we are not dealing with an abstract issue. We are talking about people – our brothers and sisters, our sons and our daughters; friends, neighbors, colleagues – you and me. One of the unfortunate tendencies that we have when we speak of homosexuality is to frame the discussion with “us and them” language, creating a distance that allows us to speak of “homosexuals” as if they are foreign to us. I hope we can agree on the basic human dignity of all persons, regardless of sexual orientation and practice, and that the issue under discussion affects real lives and real people – persons near and dear to us, persons sitting in this sanctuary.

Secondly, in order for us to consider the question with integrity, we need to see the issue of sexual orientation and identity not as an isolated phenomenon affecting only a small minority, but rather in the context of our overall attitude toward and understandings of sexuality in general. Thus this sermon builds on the foundations laid in last week's message – that our sexual natures are good, God-given gifts; that they reach far deeper than our physical activity; and that they must be expressed with discipline, restraint, and commitment. We must also recognize that sexual orientation and identity do not fall neatly into two categories labeled hetero-and homosexuality. We all fall along a continuum of

sexual identity and attraction that includes these two, but also encompasses bisexual and transgender persons and those who are questioning and/or trying to figure out what is going on inside of them. For that reason, we may use the initials LGBT to refer more inclusively to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered persons

Finally, in order to move beyond the polarity, bitterness, and unkindness that has so characterized our engagement with this question in the past, we must recognize that people of good will and deep faith are on all sides of this issue. We accomplish little when we demean, belittle, and caricature those with whom we disagree. All it does is tear the church apart, leaving behind a wake of broken trust, wounded hearts and lives, and a compromised and contorted witness to our world.

Again, my primary goal today is not to give a final word on the topic, but to raise awareness, stimulate dialogue and faithful searching, stand with those who have been marginalized, and hopefully create a strong foundation for more intentional, thoughtful, compassionate, and faithful conversations on the subject in the future.

All that being said, it is time to consider the question of homosexuality more deeply in the light of our faith. To begin, I must clarify the distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity. Anyone can engage in homosexual activity, regardless of their orientation. For instance, teenagers may experiment with same-sex activity out of curiosity or because of a dare. Persons in crisis, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, in prison, or swept away in mob behavior may participate in homosexual acts while feeling little or no emotional involvement.

But as we established last week, our sexual natures are much deeper and more fundamental than our physical activity. They are a part of our very selves – a part that exists and shapes and motivates us regardless of our sexual activity or our lack thereof. So it is with persons who have a homosexual orientation. It is an essential part of their natures – every bit as deep and abiding as any of the characteristics we use to describe ourselves when we say “I am...” (short, male, etc). And we now know that it is a part of the essential nature of approximately 5-10% of the human population – a statistic that appears to be remarkably consistent and stable across cultures and generations.

Recognizing this difference between homosexual activity and orientation is essential when we consider the issue from the perspective of the Christian faith. Because one of the primary authorities for our faith – the Bible – has no concept of homosexual orientation. When our scriptures were being written, it was not understood that some persons experience an ongoing romantic and physical attraction to a person of the same sex. It was not plausible to biblical writers that two men could desire to make a home together or that two women might become lifetime partners and seek to create a family. They could not have imagined the desire of gay or lesbian couples to experience the joy or parenting or the fulfillment of celebrating wedding anniversaries. Instead, within the Bible, homosexual activity is presented as just that – purely physical activity– all sex, no love.

Today, we have a much broader understanding of homosexuality than was possible for the biblical writers. As scientific evidence makes it ever more clear that sexual orientation is a given part of one's biological and psychological identity, established in the womb or in very early childhood, we must recognize the significant difference between our modern, scientific understanding and that of the biblical writers. For them, homosexual activity was a blatant violation of nature – a view we see in the passage that was read from Romans, in which Paul speaks of women and men giving up “natural” intercourse for “unnatural.” It would never have occurred to Paul that someone engaging in homosexual activity, because of their given sexual orientation, may in fact be acting in accordance with their essential nature. All he could see was the physical – two sets of genitals which didn't fit together.

To ignore the significant gap between the way the authors of scripture understood same-sex activity and the way we understand sexual orientation today is to do a severe injustice to both the scriptures and to our LGBT brothers and sisters today. We must be honest about the fact that sexual orientation is a subject that is foreign to our sacred texts, and thus a topic that must be dealt with according to larger biblical principles such as love and fidelity, righteousness and justice.

Some may fear that this admission will imply that the Bible has nothing to say about homosexuality at all. Not at all. The Bible does speak about homosexual activity – seven times – and we will explore all seven in a moment. But we need to be clear about what is and what is not said in these texts. And it is abundantly clear that while the Bible does refer to homosexual activity, it never addresses the subject of sexual orientation.

Now the first biblical reference to homosexual activity occurs during the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 and 19. Here two divine strangers who had visited with Abraham to announce the coming birth of Isaac next travel to Sodom with the intention of confirming that these cities deserved the destruction that God was planning. These strangers were given hospitality by Abraham's nephew Lot, but before they went to bed that evening, all the men and boys of Sodom surrounded Lot's house and demanded that he send out the visitors so that they could "know" them (in the "biblical sense.") An assault was only prevented when the strangers struck all the men of the city blind so that they couldn't find the door to break it down.

So closely associated with homosexuality is this story that the word sodomy has become virtually synonymous with homosexual intercourse. Homosexuality has widely been identified as **the** reason that God destroyed these evil cities. And yet even a superficial reading of the text would suggest that the sin of Sodom was not homosexuality, but violence. Should we assume that every single man and boy in Sodom was homosexuality oriented? Or does it not make more sense to conclude that they were all caught up in the violence of mob behavior, violence which took its form in attempted homosexual rape.

Other biblical references to Sodom and Gomorrah support this conclusion. Passages in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the Gospels all point not to homosexuality, but rather to inhospitality, arrogance, self-indulgence, and indifference to the poor. Ezekiel 16:48 is exemplary: "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." Not a word about homosexuality, but some strong words that could probably be directed against many of us.

Regarding this story and its implications for our consideration of homosexuality today, there is little that is pertinent to the discussion. The fact that the violent behavior of the men of Sodom was directed at other men is clearly a peripheral consideration within the story itself. This is also the case with a strikingly similar narrative in Judges 19, in which the men of Gibeah threaten to gang-rape a visiting foreign man and instead rape a woman to death. Both stories are clear that homosexuality was not really the issue, but rather sexual violence.

The other Old Testament texts that speak explicitly about homosexual behavior are found in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The negative judgment against homosexual behavior is unmistakable in these passages. Homosexual intercourse is labeled as an abomination, a strong word that carries the sense of repulsive evil. This sense is supported within the text by the listing of other "abominable" sexual sins such as adultery, incest, and bestiality, with the death penalty prescribed for all.

These passages are favorites of those who spread hatred and violence against homosexual people in the name of God today. Taken at face value, anyone can quote chapter and verse to offer scriptural

authorization for abhorrence of homosexual behavior as a most heinous sin. But even for those who are not hate-mongers – those who honestly want to be faithful to God and to the scriptures – these verses could appear to provide a pretty open and shut biblical case against homosexual activity, if not homosexual orientation. What else can we say about homosexuality when the Bible is so clear?

Well, as it turns out, the clarity quickly dissolves when we look at these verses in context. They come from the so-called Holiness code encompassing chapters 17-26 of Leviticus. And when we look at these verses in this context, we have reason to question their applicability. For intermingled with these proscriptions against homosexual intercourse are other proscriptions, just as clear, forbidding the planting of two kinds of seed in one field, wearing garments made of two kinds of material, eating meat with blood in it, trimming the edges of a man's beard, or tattooing the body. The death penalty is mandated for anyone who curses their parents. And the label of abomination is the same one applied to a woman who is menstruating.

Given this context, should we really single out homosexual relations as one of the few laws from this list that we should still enforce? Do we really want to cite the Bible in labeling homosexuality as an abomination when that same Bible would apply the same label on a monthly basis to most women? If we are to apply these laws from the Levitical Holiness Code, should we not do so consistently, and not arbitrarily? As our denominational paper suggests, perhaps a better approach is to examine the overarching principles of the total Bible, rather than proof-texting from such problematic contexts.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find two passages in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6 and 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1 which refer to homosexual activity in a list of sins to be condemned. However, both of these references come in the form of a Greek word which most interpreters understand to have clear overtones of lust and cultic prostitution in pagan temples. A third passage from Romans 1, however, is more nuanced and more relevant to our discussion of homosexuality in our modern context. For one thing, this passage contains the only reference to lesbianism in the Bible. Both lesbian and gay sex are cited explicitly by Paul as evidence of the corruption that results from idolatry. Other evidence included in this list is covetousness, gossip, slander, and rebelliousness toward parents. And like the other new testament passages, its context would suggest a connection with the temple prostitution that was a common part of pagan worship. Furthermore, Paul says that such persons “give up” natural relations for unnatural, which implies a willful violation of their sexual nature. And as I mentioned before, neither Paul nor anyone else in the ancient world could conceive of a “natural” homosexual orientation as we do. Peterson's paraphrase of verse 27 is enlightening: “sexually confused, they abused and defiled one another...all lust, no love.” Clearly, this passage is not speaking about same-sex consenting adults who are deeply in love with one another and would become partners for life.

Now, these seven texts are the only explicit words scripture has to offer concerning homosexual behavior. Jesus is recorded as saying nothing on the subject, though we can probably safely assume that he held similar understandings on the subject as did his contemporaries. And taken together, what I find in the scriptures (outside of the Levitical Holiness Code which we have in all other cases accepted as outdated and irrelevant for contemporary discipleship) is not condemnation of homosexual relationships themselves, but rather of particular homosexual behaviors. These behaviors – sexual violence, lust, prostitution, etc – are not fundamental nor unique to a homosexual orientation, but would be corrupt in **any** orientation

Now, it must be consented that the scriptures are clear in affirming heterosexual relationships as the *norm* in and for creation. Biology does the same. Yet if we are willing to accept that the authors of scripture were unaware of the possibility of natural variance in the primary sexual orientation of a consistent minority of people, it seems to me that we should be open to reconsidering how we respond to persons whose essential natures are not heterosexual. To label homosexual orientation sinful

seems not only cruel in light of current understandings of human sexuality, akin to labeling left-handed folks evil, but also arbitrary given the scriptural silence on the issue.

Our denominational paper upholds the modern scientific consensus that people do not simply decide to become homosexual. It recognizes that orientation is much more complex than that. But given that truth, the paper offers only two acceptable options for persons who are homosexually oriented. One option, open equally to homosexuals and heterosexuals, is to refrain from all sexual activity. Yet it recognizes that celibacy cannot be obligatory, and only comes as a special calling from God.

A second option outlined in the paper is for homosexual persons to convert to a heterosexual orientation. While this may be possible for some, particularly for those closer to the middle of the continuum between homosexual and heterosexual orientation, the paper confesses that this choice is extraordinarily difficult and complex; and for some, simply impossible. And while I do not want to deny the power of God to affect change in one's sexual orientation, I join with many others who have deep concerns about advocating this option. We could spend days listening to the testimonies of homosexual persons who prayed deeply and desperately for God to change them, who tried every method of therapy and counseling, yet in the end found that they were still the same homosexually oriented person.

Furthermore, experience has shown that such intentions often lead not to true conversion, but rather to repression. There are countless persons who have tried to repress their homosexuality and have entered into heterosexual relationships only to discover down the road that they cannot continue to deny an essential part of their being. As a result, relationships are shattered, families are torn apart, and an incredible amount of pain comes to pass for all concerned. How much suffering could be avoided if homosexual persons were encouraged to be honest about who they really are, rather than trying to suppress their essential selves and live a life founded on a lie?

A third option discussed by the church during the writing and adoption of the paper is for homosexual persons to pursue and enter into covenantal relationships committed to the same standards of faithfulness, respect, and self-control as heterosexual marriage. The original paper presented at Annual Conference in 1983 offered this option, with the admission that the church is not of one mind on the issue. However, the paper was amended on the floor of conference to say that such an option is not acceptable for Christians.

I must be frank in saying that I believe that the passing of that amendment was a serious mistake, a mistake for which our church, not to mention countless individuals and families, is still paying dearly. Here is why: The paper recognizes the givenness of homosexual orientation, noting that it is not a choice over which individuals have any control. It then tells homosexually oriented people that they have two acceptable choices: convert or be celibate. Yet it asserts that celibacy cannot be obligatory and that it is a gift given by God. And it also confesses that conversion to a heterosexual orientation is impossible for some, if not most, homosexual people. So what then is left for homosexually oriented persons who are not called to a celibate lifestyle and who are not capable of converting to a different orientation? What acceptable options are left for such persons of faith?

As it now stands in our denomination, there are none. We have effectively told the vast majority of LGBT persons that they are not acceptable among us.

In doing so, have we not contributed to the fear, the hatred, and the oppression that have long plagued our homosexual brothers and sisters? By denying them a legitimate place among us and by refusing to welcome them as brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle with sin and pain like the rest of us, have we not contributed to the sense of isolation and hopelessness that rob so many LGBT persons of

abundant life? By refusing to recognize and support homosexual efforts to develop and nurture committed relationships, have we not contributed to the promiscuous and non-committal homosexual lifestyles and behaviors that we would be right to reprove? By resorting to such simple moralisms as “Hate the sin but love the sinner”, have we not contributed to the despair and self-loathing that drive so many LGBT persons to take their own lives? By so often failing to offer even the basic hospitality of human dignity, have we not denied the healing and life-giving love of Christ from some of those who are most in need of it?

Too often, the church has been a source of nothing but judgment, condemnation, and pain for LGBT people. I believe the time has come for the church to be bold in engaging and responding anew to the issue. I believe that we are called to move beyond our fear, beyond our silence, beyond our troubled past, beyond our preoccupations and proof texts, to offer hope and healing and Christian love to our homosexual sisters and brothers. I believe that we must stand with our LGBT neighbors as they struggle against hatred, fear, and violence in our community and our world, and in our church. And I believe that the Spirit of the Lord that was upon Jesus’ to proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free calls us now today to *finally* proclaim some **good** news to all those who struggle to discern or to accept their sexual orientation and identity.

This is what I believe. Now we must begin the process of discerning what **we** believe.

## Prayers of Intercession

O God, into the light of your love and the embrace of your spirit, we raise these thoughts and prayers of intercession:

- For those who are wrestling with their sexual orientation or identity
- For those who live a closeted existence, and those who lead double lives
- For those who are victims of homophobic injustice, discrimination, and hate crimes, and those who perpetrate such violence and spread such fear
- For those who feel trapped in relationships entered into before they were able to accept their true sexual orientation or identity.
- For those who have experienced rejection by their family, friends, or faith community after coming out.
- For parents who wrestle with mixed feelings after learning their child is gay or lesbian, especially those who feel alone in their struggle to come to terms with their child’s sexual orientation.
- For LGBT youth who experience bullying and homophobia in their schools and peer groups, and for whom friends and advocates are hard to come by
- For those who feel torn between accepting who they really are and being faithful to what they believe or have been taught is right and wrong.
- For those who feel judged for holding on to what they believe, both conservative and progressive, and those who feel burdened by the weight of labels and stereotypes
- For those who have experimented with homosexual activity and are now feeling ashamed and guilty, and don’t feel like they can talk to anyone.
- For those who contemplate the costs of standing with homosexual friends, family, and neighbors in fighting for justice, peace, and equal rights, and for those who hesitate to become involved.
- For those LGBT persons who battle depression, self-loathing, and thoughts of suicide, and for those who have lost loved ones who just couldn’t take it anymore.

O God, for all of these, and for countless others, we seek your grace, your peace, your love, In Christ’s name. Amen.