

Thinking Biblically About Homosexual Practice
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April 10, 2007

Introduction

We are all aware that this is an increasingly volatile issue, both within the Church and in the wider political arena. It causes deep pain and anguish for some, anger and resentment for others, and very likely a degree of apprehension and anxiety all the way around. As you might guess, I would dearly love not to have to address this at all because none of us wants to be labeled and condemned, either for discrimination and bigotry, on the one hand, or caving in to the culture, on the other. Unfortunately, condemning attitudes do so easily appear when emotions run high. Because this is true, I want to start by creating a wider framework in which to consider the relevant biblical texts. Once we have looked at the texts, I would like to make some observations about interpretive principles. Finally, I hope we can also consider briefly what we need to do in order to be truly a redemptive community.

First, the framework: These are the biblical texts on the matter of homosexual practice. In presenting the traditional reading of these texts, however, it could be perceived that homosexual practice is being singled out as in some way a more reprehensible sin than others. That is not the case. All sin is deserving of death; Paul makes that clear in Romans 3. We could wish, for example, that as much passion would be exerted in addressing the dreadfully destructive effects of lying, greed, and idolatry, all of which plague each one of us.

What has happened, however, is that we in the Church have characteristically responded with a truly reprehensible lack of grace in response to certain sins as opposed to a host of others. Due to fear, anger, and that ugly specter of spiritual pride on our part, those who struggle and agonize over sexual orientation have often been driven away, rather than offered grace. I suspect, by the way, that it has also to do with shame; some sins also have a tragic amount of cultural baggage accompanying them while others do not. I know from numerous personal narratives that I have heard over the years that these experiences are heart-wrenching. This should not be. The church is the one place where forgiveness, restoration and hope are truly possible and we need to be channels of God's grace because we are *all* together in this position of *needing* grace. I would suggest that this is particularly true in regard to sexuality which is an area of life in which *everyone*, regardless of orientation or marital status, faces temptations.

Having said that, grace *is* grace because it deals with sin. To redefine practices so that they are no longer sin is to rob grace of its power. It is no longer wonderful, matchless, and overwhelming; it simply becomes an attitude that we *expect* people and God to have. Rather than humbly pleading with God for forgiveness, mercy, and grace, we end up asking Him and His people for tolerance. There is a world of difference. The first necessitates humility; it is a spirit of brokenness but one from which true and renewed life proceeds.

The Body of Christ, the Church, is an odd place. We are all sinners, so deeply in need of forgiveness that none of us has any reason to be self-righteous and proud. Yet, at the same time, we are called to challenge each other because we are a body and are responsible in a profound way for one another. God made that painfully clear to Ezekiel when He said He would hold Ezekiel responsible for the sins of the people if Ezekiel did not warn them (3:16-19). And why is this? It is because we are a body in transition, in preparation for life in the Presence of God. That entails processes of refining, purifying, self-examination, self-control, self-sacrifice, confession, and repentance so that when we come into the radiance of His holiness and perfection, we are dressed in the righteousness of Christ alone and the Spirit has done the necessary work of preparation. A part of that is that the living Word of God often must do its surgery on us and we all need those who will wield the scalpel with utmost care and grace.

One more part of my framework: There is a deep and wonderful richness to human relationships. My comments are not in any way directed against close and profoundly meaningful same-gender friendships. How could they be? We have evidence of such in the biblical text and it is a testimony to the value of those relationships that Scripture indicates the support and intimacy of them; we need those friendships. What the Bible does address, however, in very strong terms is sexual expression between members of the same gender. And that is where we turn now.

The Biblical Texts

I know these are called “clobber passages” (cf. www.ecinc.org) because it often feels that they are used that way. And that is the danger in focusing solely on particular verses. They are parts of a whole and there are very significant issues in hermeneutics that must be addressed. I will try at least to give a sense of those, both in the course of presenting the texts and afterwards, and I would encourage you to visit the web site (www.harvestusa.org) noted in the resources at the end that gives much more thorough and sensitive attention to each of these issues.

Genesis 19 (with Ezekiel 16:49-50 and Jude 7)

We know the details of the narrative. The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah was great; their sin was grievous (Gen 18:20). In fact, the wickedness of the city was already noted in Gen 13:13. When the two angelic visitors arrived, the men of the city, both young and old, asked to “know” them. As an alternative, Lot offered his two virgin daughters, clearly intended as sexual substitutes. The men of the city were not interested, and we know the rest. God’s judgment was poured out on the city. While *yada*’ is a common Hebrew word and characteristically simply means “to know,” we find that ten times in Genesis it has strong sexual union overtones. Now, this narrative is often dismissed as a case of gang rape which is therefore not reflective at all of what in our contemporary culture are presented as consensual, committed same-sex relationships. In support of that contention, reference is made to Ezekiel 16:49-50 where arrogance and lack of concern for the poor are highlighted as the sole sins of Sodom.

In fact, there are two explicit commentaries on the Genesis narrative later in the biblical canon. The first is indeed provided by Ezekiel, from whom we learn that this was a culture stunningly like our own. Sodom and the surrounding cities were “arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and they did detestable things before me. Therefore [the Lord speaking], I did away with them as you have seen.” The clause “they did detestable things” must be translated that way and not, as some of the literature would make us believe, “it [i.e., the arrogance] was detestable.” The verb is a third person feminine plural (“they did”) and the subject is Sodom and her sisters, the surrounding towns. Clearly, homosexual practice was not one singular sin there. It was one in the midst of a culture shot through with things that were *to’evah*, detestable (or an abomination) to the Lord. *To’evah* is a word used extensively (117x) in the Hebrew Bible of things that run absolutely counter to the nature of God. It appears in Leviticus 18 and 20 associated specifically with the homosexual practices that are addressed in those wider contexts of sexually offensive actions. We will deal with those shortly. Outside Leviticus, the word is used of idolatrous worship, sexually immoral acts, and ethical infractions. In Proverbs it is repeatedly associated with characteristics that are just downright evil, notable among them lying (6:16f). Therefore, activities associated with it cannot be dismissed as simply referring to uncleanness.

The second direct response to the Sodom and Gomorrah incident is in Jude 7 where the author specifically condemns the sexual license in Sodom and Gomorrah, indicating that the towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and [literally] “went after other flesh.”

In sum, it seems that Sodom and Gomorrah became the paradigm for comprehensively destructive evil (Isaiah 1:10; Jeremiah 23:14; Matthew 10:5-15; 11:20-24; Luke 10: 1-15), representing societies entirely shot through with corruption and hardened beyond repentance. This sobering characteristic is particularly evident in Jesus’ references to the cities. It is evident that He was not simply alluding to a lack of hospitality on their part, which is the interpretation presented by those who try to avoid condemning the sexual conduct evident in the passage. Furthermore, what we cannot ignore is that the Genesis *narrative* of that pervasive evil centers on the perversion of sexuality, starting with men wanting men, followed by Lot’s offering his daughters, and then Lot’s daughters engaging their father in sexual activity.

Judges 19 (with Genesis 9)

Tragically, this narrative thread is not isolated in Genesis. We see the same activity repeated again in Judges 19 and what is troubling about that incident is that God’s people (a city of the tribe of Benjamin) had adopted the ways of the debased Canaanite culture around them. I would suggest that this possibly has rather contemporary parallels. In the Israelite context, a Levite stopped for the night in the town of Gibeah. Some men of the city demanded that his host give them access to him, and again a virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine were offered in his place. Human sexuality and, as it turned out, life itself were being abused in the most heinous ways; the narrative is a shocking testimony to the depths to which humankind can descend. There are additional connections as we move way back to the incident of Noah’s drunkenness after he exited

the ark. Ham, the son of Noah, sinned when he “looked upon the nakedness of his father” (Genesis 9:22) whereas the text is careful to repeat that his brothers did not see the nakedness of their father but instead covered it. The term *ervah* (nakedness) is the same used repeatedly in Leviticus 18 in the context of a number of forbidden sexual activities that “uncover the nakedness” of a given individual. Leviticus 18 commences with the warning *not* to do as they do in the land of Canaan. The result of the Genesis incident was the cursing of *Canaan*, the son of Ham.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

I have already several times alluded to the holiness regulations in Leviticus and to those we now turn. The first of these passages forbids a man to “lie with man as with a woman” indicating it is detestable, an abomination (*to'evah*). It is not limited to a particular kind of homosexual activity; it is rather a general and blanket prohibition. The second pronounces the death penalty for that act. Because these are in the “holiness code” (Leviticus 17-25), significant parts of which deal with ritual matters, some interpretations view these statements as merely addressing purity issues, not sin. Furthermore, because the death penalty is indicated, they are dismissed as no longer possibly being relevant for the Church. What is important to note, however, is that the great majority of the other prohibitions in ch 18 and the infractions noted in ch 20 address troubling sexual activities (“uncovering the nakedness [*ervah*] of...”), many of them in the category of incest. These are still clearly recognized as unacceptable, as are adultery and bestiality, both of which also appear here. Furthermore, it should not escape our notice that Leviticus 19 is packed with significant ethical instructions, many of which reiterate the Ten Commandments. Furthermore, among them is “...rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt...you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:17-18). We must not be too hasty to dismiss these texts. In terms of grace, we need to be reminded again that the wages of sin (all sin) *is* death (Romans 3) and that lesson is soberly very evident in Leviticus 20.

Romans 1:24-32

As part of Paul’s comprehensive presentation of the saving work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the book of Romans, he first describes why salvation is necessary. Humankind stands utterly condemned (Romans 1-3). Paul stresses that the order that God intended for all of creation has been turned over because the creatures made in His image neither worship nor obey him. They “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (vs 25). Thus, God gave them over to sexual impurity which explicitly includes homosexual activity on the part of both genders (vss 26-27) and, in keeping with the comprehensive pattern, is an overturning of what has been the order from creation. In addition, the list that follows condemns every reader in every time and place: evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, hating God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventing ways of doing evil, disobedience to parents, senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. In every respect, what is commensurate with the knowledge of God has been intentionally rejected. None of these is in any way restricted in its meaning by cultural assumptions.

In light of the sweep of Paul's statement, it is exegetically indefensible to state that Paul does not mean here to include those who are homosexual by orientation but refers only to women and men who are by nature heterosexual but have chosen to engage in homosexual activity. Further, to claim that this has only to do with certain kinds of sexual offenses (child molestation or ritual pagan rites) or that Paul could not have known about loving, committed relationships is to underestimate Paul's grasp of his own culture. There is a significant body of Hellenistic literature that recognizes nurturing homosexual relationships and explores the possible reasons for homoerotic impulses; Paul most likely knew it well. More significantly, this limited interpretation misreads the intent of Paul in these chapters and again seriously trivializes these matters of sin and grace. The fundamental message toward which Paul moves and which is the source of hope for all of us is, of course, that the terrible price of human sin has been paid in the sacrificial blood of Christ so that God became both just and the One who justifies (3:26).

I Corinthians 6:9-11 (I Timothy 1:10)

The Corinthians passage states that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God and then lists categories of offenders: Sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, "those who are soft" (*malakoi*), homosexual offenders (*arsenokoitai*), thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers. The word *arsenokoitai* is made up of two Greek words that indicate "male" and "to lie with sexually." [You will recognize the root of our English word "coitus."] In fact, because these two words are used in the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 (and 20:13) in the Septuagint, it is quite likely that Paul was specifically interpreting the Leviticus passages for his own audience, indicating that he still saw them as applicable. Note that this clearly indicates that the *behavior* is reprehensible. The same term appears in I Tim 1:10 as well in a list of those who are ungodly and sinful. Again, however, what Paul goes *on* to say is most important in terms of his message of much needed grace: "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Paul expected, by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, that all of these behaviors would change. That does not mean we are promised swift and easy transformation; none of life in our fallen world works that way.

Some Hermeneutical Considerations

What is important is that instruction regarding homosexual practice transcends specific chronological periods and genres of text. It is not only in the narrative and warning parts of the torah; Paul also soberly and repeatedly addresses the issue, particularly as he describes fallen humankind (Romans 1; I Corinthians 6; I Timothy 1). He does not qualify his descriptions to include only certain kinds of homosexual activity; instead they are comprehensive.

Furthermore, homosexual practice is always represented in the text as sin, in other words, that which is morally offensive in God's sight. It is not simply "shameful" which is a cultural judgment. There is no way around it, if we treat the biblical text with integrity, both linguistically and theologically. This is a very important point because this issue is

often presented as analogous to the matter of biblical teaching on women's roles in ministry. It is claimed that the biblical texts in regard to the latter issue have been re-interpreted and so should these texts. The difference, however, is that the restrictive texts regarding women's teaching and speaking are not posed in terms of those activities being sin. Nor are women's roles comprehensively restricted. In fact, the picture is mixed; women served in prophetic and teaching roles in both the Old and New Testaments.

It is often claimed that "Jesus never condemned homosexuality" and therefore, we should not do so. This is, however, an argument from silence. He also never addressed abortion, incest, or a host of other contemporary ills that none of us would condone. On the other hand, He repeatedly affirmed marriage by His references to Genesis 1:27 ("made them male and female") and 2:24 ("a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife") when he was asked about issues of marriage and divorce (Matthew 19:1-12).

Just one more point: It is troubling when we import our own speculations into the silences of the text and then give them greater weight than the words of the text. This is, of course, a temptation that we all face when we have to come to grips with the Living Word of God which has truths in it that are painful for *us*. One current response to all of these biblical data is to claim that in the biblical period, they simply did not have anything that corresponds to our understanding of homosexuality and likewise they did not think in terms of romantic love. Neither of these claims, however, seems to be founded on much else than wishful thinking. On the contrary, it is difficult to conclude that human passions have changed very much, especially when we look at the rest of the emotional spectrum found in biblical narratives and find it painfully like our own experiences. Further, a simple reading of the Song of Songs is sufficient testimony to the fact that romantic love was very much alive.

What Can We Do?

Now, having articulated these things, I am mindful of the deep ethical foundation that *must* shape how we all live. We are to "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8).

How will those qualities shape our responses to the people around us whom God dearly loves? We must never lose sight of the fact that we are to be a redemptive community, and I would focus on both of those words. We are in this enterprise together and we need to foster community by *really* caring for one another, even (and especially) those whom we may find challenging. Being community will mean being good friends with those who wrestle with these issues, not treating them like outcasts. Isn't it a challenging model that Jesus hobnobbed with the proverbial tax collectors, sinners *and* Pharisees without compromising the truth or the moral imperatives whatsoever? It will mean listening and caring about one another's concerns and fears, and being pained about the abuses that they endure. At a very basic level in regard to this issue, it will mean getting rid of all abusive speech. Sadly, I have heard and read a good deal of it from the mouths and pens of Christians, even on this campus. This too is sin; it needs to be confessed. *We all have a long way to go in the matter of practicing love.* Truth can and must be

communicated without being hateful, derogatory, and arrogant. Of course, the challenging part is to speak the truth in love because we are not just any community. We are also called to be a redemptive community. In fact, the truth of the Gospel is a message of hope; it has everything to do with transformation and new life. It may not *always* be an easy “change” of sexual preference that those who struggle with homosexuality long for, but we must trust that faithful living *will*, by God’s grace, transform all of us.

Let me make two additional points in closing. The profound challenge for us is that the Church indeed be different from the rest of the culture, to be light in darkness. We are to be “a peculiar people” as Peter indicates (I Peter 2:9). Once we become like everyone else around us, we have nothing to offer that is redemptive or hopeful. And the biggest challenge is to lovingly and graciously extend that hope. Second, Paul’s undefined “thorn in the flesh” ought to be an encouragement to each one of us. In the face of that “thorn,” Paul perceived God’s grace to be sufficient.

Selected Resources

The titles and sites listed below are only several from a very large corpus of materials. I have tried to include materials that represent both perspectives so that the careful student can evaluate the primary documents from each.

Jones, Stanton L., and Mark A. Yarhouse. *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church’s Moral Debate*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000.

An argument in favor of the traditional interpretation of the biblical texts in the wider context of the scientific literature on the issue.

Via, Dan O., and Robert A.J. Gagnon. *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003.

A very abbreviated treatment but one that clarifies the significant hermeneutical and presuppositional differences that shape the resulting very different interpretations.

Webb, William J. *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001.

A very helpful paradigm for addressing the issues that help us determine whether a biblical prohibition is cultural or transcultural.

Yancey, Philip. *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997

This book is included specifically for chapter 13.

www.cathedralofhope.com

Probably one of the best known organizations that serves homosexuals desirous of being in Christian community. The web site presents a fairly superficial reading of the texts.

www.ecinc.org

The web site of Evangelicals Concerned, the organization of Ralph Blair, which advocates on behalf of consensual, monogamous same-sex relationships. One segment of the site presents some of the biblical texts in a manner that is exegetically very weak.

www.harvestusa.org

Some of the most hermeneutically thorough and sensitive presentations of the primary biblical texts appear on this web site because the author does not simplistically present the traditional interpretations but acknowledges the validity and complexity of the passages.

www.parkstreet.org/pulpit/studyqss.shtml

An open letter from Gordon Hugenberger addressing questions raised following a series of sermons on I Corinthians, one of which dealt with homosexuality.

www.robagnon.net

Includes significant expansions of the material in the above co-authored book as well as arguments against same-sex marriage that are appropriate in the wider secular arena.

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