A Pastoral Perspective on Homosexuality
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We have a relatively new word in our vocabulary: gay. We used it before, but to mean happy and lighthearted. That meaning has been crowded out by its present meaning, namely, homosexual.

But what the word gay now signifies is not new. Homosexuality is found among all peoples in all cultures and in all times of history. It is also found among specific animals, although rarely, and then only among males. I have studied, counseled, read, spoken, and listened to talks on this subject, and my experience has been similar to that of Gerald May, who said, “The truth is that the farther our knowledge of a thing expands, the more mysterious it becomes.” Another of my observations in this area is that the closer it comes to home, the less sure and dogmatic we become. Nevertheless, we have an obligation to take the subject of homosexuality seriously from a pastoral perspective. To do so we begin with Scripture.

I. THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Old Testament times homosexual behavior was described as toevah (abomination or defilement, Lev 18:22 and 20:13). In Israel’s unique calling as God’s people toevah encompasses more than moral evil. It also included the idolatrous practices of the neighboring peoples from whom Israel was to remain totally separate. We know that these idolatrous practices involved temple prostitution, and that while most of these prostitutes were female, males may also have been included. The Leviticus references refer only to male homosexuality.

The other reference in the Old Testament is less specific. Genesis 19 describes the story of Lot’s visitors who were angels but appeared as men. Lot persuaded them to accept his hospitality rather than to stay in the streets. Before they could retire for the night a group of men surrounded the house and demanded he surrender the men to them “that we may know them.” Lot tried to dissuade them, even offering his unmarried daughters to them as a substitute. “Only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” When the men of Sodom were threatening to break down the door, the angels struck them with blindness.

What was attempted here was obviously a gang rape. But the essential sin of Sodom for that day was the breach of hospitality, a much more grievous offense than now. It was not until the middle ages that “sodomy” became associated with homosexual practice. Even then the meaning was inconsistent. For example, the King James Version translates the Hebrew kadesh as sodomite, even though its meaning was cult-prostitute, one who usually was a woman.
Although married and a mother, Sappho is known for her homoerotic poetry and her society of girls.

II. GREEK AND ROMAN CIVILIZATION

From the Greek civilization we have unearthed a vast amount of homoerotic art, literature, pottery design, and other paraphernalia, particularly from Athens. One could get the impression from these artifacts that the majority of the adult population was involved in homosexual practice, but this is highly unlikely. Yet, Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s Symposium actually does express a prejudice against heterosexuality.

Those who love men and rejoice to lie with and be embraced by men are also the finest boys and young men, being naturally the most manly. The people who accuse them of shamelessness lie; they do this not from shamelessness but from courage, manliness and virility, embracing what is like them. A clear proof of this is the fact that as adults they alone acquit themselves as men in public careers.

Classics scholar Eva Keuls describes ancient Athens as “an exclusive men’s club, warlike and misogynist, dominated by phallicism.” In words reminiscent of Aristophanes she writes:

In the case of a society dominated by men who sequester their wives and daughters, denigrate the female role in reproduction, erect monuments to the male genitalia, have sex with the sons of their peers, sponsor public whorehouses, create a mythology of rape, and engage in rampant saber-rattling, it is not inappropriate to refer to a reign of the phallus. Classical Athens was such a society.¹

When I visited the ruins of the city of Ephesus in what is now Turkey, I saw some of these homoerotic artifacts of this civilization. One of these was a statuette of a comical-looking naked male with a garishly huge erect phallus. This might have been a commonly used symbol for a brothel. Since brothels were for male consumers, the appeal of the statuette was obviously to men.

The story of the Roman civilization is similar in this respect to that of the Greeks. Julius Caesar, for example, had homosexual liaisons, as did the emperor Trajan. Gay people were definitely a minority, but their behavior was not regarded as immoral or harmful. Rather they were fully integrated into Roman life and culture. The poet Ovid, for example, influenced by Sappho (the poetess whose home

with younger men and even adolescents.

III. THE NEW TESTAMENT

Might this not be the cultural context to which St. Paul directs his words? When he accuses both men and women of acting contrary to their nature by having homosexual relations (e.g., Rom 1:26-27), he could well have been referring to their own heterosexual nature. Nature as an ideal, with its natural laws, is largely a product of the middle ages, and especially of St. Thomas Aquinas. In the Scriptures nature is fallen, anything but an ideal; it is “subjected to futility,” in “bondage to decay,” and “groaning in travail” (Rom 8:18-25). Consequently, Paul may not have been referring to gay persons as we now understand the term, but rather to homosexual acts committed by heterosexually oriented persons. What about those whose nature is homosexual, who rather than cultivating homosexuality, seem to have been given it? Further, what about those who, in this condition, have developed a relationship based on love rather than lust? These are questions that are probably not dealt with specifically in this passage, and consequently we need to use our understanding of Scripture as a whole to answer them. I say probably because there is so little else in the New Testament to enlighten us on this subject compared to other sexual issues.

Two other specific references to homosexuality remain, 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10. In the former, the word referring to homosexual behavior appears in a list of activities that exclude one from the kingdom of God, and in the latter it is in a list of activities controlled by law. The word in both is arsenokoitus. As a word it is rather rare. In fact some believe St. Paul may have coined it. The word means literally male-bed or male-coitus. So what is it? In the RSV it is translated as “sexual pervert” in 1 Cor 6:9 and “sodomite” in 1 Tim 1:10. (In 1 Cor 6:9, “sexual perversion” includes both malakoi and arsenokoitoi, the former meaning, literally, soft to the touch; it is translated “effeminate” in the KJV.) Arsenokoitus is a difficult word. If we translate it as “males going to bed with males,” then female homosexuality would seem to be excluded. Since in the only other passage in Romans (1:26-27) Paul mentions female homosexuality first in his judgment, it would seem strange that he would choose a word in this context that at least literally would exclude females.

Historian Thomas Boswell believes the word means male prostitute. This may be the closest meaning, for three reasons: (1) the mystery religions, against whose practices St. Paul continually warns, continued the practice of cult prostitution; (2) as has already been noted, the word literally excludes women; (3) for several hundred years after the writing of the New Testament books, no biblical commentator on this subject referred to these passages as applying to homosexuality—not until the Latin Bible took over and a translation that removed the ambiguity was frequently used as a source.

What is conclusive and most clearly evident in these passages and throughout the Bible in the area of sexuality are the dire warnings against promiscuity, infidelity, and prostitution. These are warnings that need to be heeded, since it is promiscuity that is responsible for the terrifying AIDS epidemic, which while largely confined to homosexual practice in our country is largely heterosexual in its transmission in Africa. Jesus offers no words on homosexuality; but in his words on sexuality there is a strong emphasis on fidelity in marriage,
which in the light of the rest of Scripture, would include hetero- and homosexual experience outside of marriage. These are adulterous actions.

In essence promiscuity is seeking sex as an end in itself; relationship, if involved at all, is secondary. In fact, in promiscuity sex becomes a substitute for relationship. The other is used, even if the usage is mutual, to satisfy whatever need the sensation of sexual orgasm symbolizes. Consequently there is no association of sexual experience with love or commitment or fidelity. Such promiscuity characterizes some homosexual behavior, particularly among males. Similarly it characterizes some heterosexual behavior, again particularly among males. Obviously the whole cultural conditioning of maleness has something to do with this. But just as obviously the social isolation in which homosexuals find themselves, particularly males, exacerbates sexual desire as a psycho-physiological substitute for community participation and intimacy.

This use of sex as a psycho-physiological substitute for personal human values such as love and loyalty fits the definition of addiction. As part of our growing awareness of dependency, sexual dependency is finally being recognized. It is a treatable disease, afflicting hetero- and homosexuals alike. A pastoral colleague, after having one sexual affair after another in his years of ministry, was finally unable to escape exposure and was forced to resign from his congregation. He was completely devastated and strongly suicidal until he was referred to a sexual dependency clinic. After he and his wife joined together in the treatment, he found a release he had not known before. The treatment, while marvelously adapted to his particular addiction, was essentially the twelve step program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

There is one other possible allusion to homosexuality in the New Testament: Jude 7, which states that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities “acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust.” The literal meaning for “indulged in unnatural lust” is “having gone after other flesh.” What is “other flesh”? Could it refer to homosexuality? Of course. But it could just as likely refer to bestiality, against which there are more warnings in the Old Testament than against homosexuality. Since Jude used extra-canonical sources in his references to the Old Testament character Enoch, he may have been referring in this instance to an old legend that the women of Sodom had sexual intercourse with angels. There is simply no way of knowing.

IV. CHANGING ATTITUDES THROUGH THE AGES

Since the Roman era there have been different attitudes toward homosexuality in different times and periods of western civilization. Tolerance of homosexual practice ceased with the fall of the empire, only to return in the early middle ages, reaching its peak in the virtual acceptance of homosexuality in the high middle ages. Much homosexually oriented poetry remains from this period, often written by priests. The masculine symbol of this era, King Richard the Lion-Hearted, had known homosexual liaisons. So did specific bishops of the church. During the later middle ages a critical and even rejecting attitude toward homosexual practice developed and continued more or less unchanged until the advent of the gay movement in the latter half of this century—a movement which unfortunately has been associated with promiscuity. Coinciding with these cultural changes, the first general council of the church to deal with homosexual practice was Lateran III.
V. WHAT CAUSES HOMOSEXUALITY?

What is homosexuality? Is it cultivated or a given or both? Some years ago I was contacted by a man who asked for my help in getting a manuscript published. It was his story as a homosexually oriented man who had never experienced a sexual attraction to anybody of the opposite sex, although he longed for that attraction. He titled his book, *I Walk Alone*—and he did! He believed it was wrong to act out his homosexual attractions, and so he has remained celibate. He found his sexual release in masturbation with which he had come to peace. He felt he had made the best of his situation and wanted his story known.

On Alfred Kinsey’s scale this man would be a #6. Kinsey devised a scale which sees sexual orientation on a continuum: #1 would be totally heterosexually oriented; #2, mostly heterosexually oriented but some homosexual orientation; #3, mostly heterosexually oriented but a significant homosexual orientation; #4, mostly homosexually oriented but a significant heterosexual orientation; #5, mostly homosexually oriented but a small heterosexual orientation; and #6, totally homosexually oriented. Kinsey estimated from his studies that 13% of adult males and 7% of adult females were primarily homosexually oriented for at least a part of their lives.

Homosexuality can occur in any family. Those of us in the counseling field know the trauma that can afflict parents when a son or daughter informs them they are gay. The harsh judgments that some of these parents once expressed toward homosexuals are now muted. It has “hit” them! They need to be in touch with other parents with similar experience but who are further along in their adjustment.

What causes homosexual orientation? The most honest answer at this point is that there is no answer. There are theories, but all theories have their problems. Is it inherited? There is little evidence for this. Is it environmentally caused? In this or that individual there may seem to be an environmental causation, such as destructive parental relations or early sexual abuse or accosting. However, another with a similar environmental pattern may be heterosexually oriented. Also, what causes it to occur in one family member and not in another? In fact, what causes heterosexual orientation?

The one thing that stands out in regard to the environment, however, is that early experience of being homosexually exploited can have heavy consequences if not treated therapeutically. For this reason, even among countries relatively tolerant toward homosexuality such as England, it is considered a crime to accost a person in their developing years, whether homosexually or heterosexually.

At the age of 23, I was physically coerced by an older friend who, without any warning as we were together in conversation, exerted physical pressure to engage in a homosexual act. Fortunately I was the stronger and with considerable effort freed myself. To my knowledge this experience had no predisposing influence on my sexuality. I was an adult, sexually stabilized. But suppose I had been a 14- or 15-year-old boy and unable physically to resist. And suppose that in my developing puberty I had experienced some pleasure in that act. And suppose that I felt so ashamed about the whole experience that I never told my parents or other adults who would have helped me work through that trauma. Instead, suppose I had labeled
myself because of that pleasure as homosexual and then allowed that label, with its load of shame, to influence my development.

What that experience did do for me as an adult, however, was to sharpen my awareness of how often this sort of thing happens to girls and to women at the hands of men, and how often the media still portray a woman as meaning “yes” when she says “no” to a heterosexual male’s advances (she therefore needs to be “persuaded,” often by accompanying physical pressure).

We also know that segregation of the sexes leads to an increase in homosexual experience. Segregated schools and prisons are examples. In fact one of the most feared experiences in prison is homosexual rape.

VI. RAISING THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

What about those with a homosexual orientation leading lives of celibacy? This was the solution of the author of the manuscript that I received. I sent that manuscript to eight denominational publishing houses, and it was rejected by all of them. To this day it remains unpublished. Why? The reason most often given was that it did not fit into their publishing plans. I would hazard two reasons for this. First, celibacy is simply not “in” in our time and place, even when voluntarily chosen. In contrast to other times and cultures, celibacy (whether hetero- or homo-) seems unnatural or even unhealthy. Secondly, the author chose to remain anonymous. He believed, and probably correctly, that in “coming out of the closet” he would endanger his job and many of his personal relationships.

What about homosexuality and fidelity? I know of “couples” of both sexes who live together and share life together without making any public ado about it. To all observance they love each other as faithfully as a faithfully married couple. What do we say to them as a church?

What about bisexuality? It is promiscuous bisexuals—Kinsey’s #3 and #4—who provide the potential opportunity for AIDS to cross over from the homosexual to the heterosexual population in our society. And is anyone really a bisexual in an even manner? Kinsey has no such number. In my own observation one side or the other is the more basic orientation. King Edward II of England reigned during the high middle ages when tolerance toward homosexuality had declined. Two of his homosexual lovers were executed largely for this reason. Although his wife, Isabella, bore him four children, Edward, like many bisexuals, was more basically oriented toward homosexuality.

What does the science of medicine have to offer us? The American Psychiatric Association has changed its stance on homosexuality. It is no longer described as an illness or a disorder, or even a deviancy. Rather than being an abnormality, it is a variant. Obviously, then, the APA does not view homosexuality as treatable or changeable, since it is not an illness, nor a disease, nor an abnormality.

Masters and Johnson, perhaps our most famous contemporary sexual therapists, see things differently. They contend that one can change one’s sexual orientation, even if one is a #6 homosexual. However, there are three qualifications for such change. The individual must be highly motivated, must have a significant other of the opposite sex with whom they wish sexually to relate, and must bring this person with them to competent therapy. For Masters and Johnson competent therapy begins with psychotherapy, since they view sex as an expression of the
person. In this phase the individual is helped to work through some of the influences in his or her
development that have related to their sexuality. Then they enter phase two which is behavior
modification. The couple is helped on a step by step basis to relate sexually. The entire program
takes several weeks.

In the Twin Cities area there is a Christian program, called Outposts, that purports to
facilitate this change also. In this program religious resources are used to assist persons in their
change. Jeff Ford, a counselor with Outposts, informed me that one never “has it made” in the
change. It is a day by day controlling of one’s homosexual attractions—like a sober alcoholic. In
this sense one is a recovering homosexual.

VII. A ROLE FOR COMPASSION?

What role does compassion play in the church’s attitude toward persons with homosexual
orientation? Many homosexually oriented persons resent such compassion. Why should one have
compassion toward persons who are “variants” and do not feel sorry for themselves? In fact, they
may speak of “Gay pride.” But when I think of my friend of the manuscript as well as the friend
who accosted me and others whom I have known through the years, I do have compassion.
Perhaps it is due as some would say to my bias. Others would say that I have compassion on such
persons because of the prejudice under which they must live in our society. Whatever the reason,
compassion is the Christian glue that binds us all together as a community of sinners. It was the
motivation of our Lord as he reached out to all who needed him. We all have our pains, and to
recognize and feel with these pains activates the supportive system of the body of Christ. It is the
motivation of the pastoral counselor.

VIII. MY COUNSELING EXPERIENCE

My counseling experience over the years has been primarily with those persons who have
come to me because they were bothered by their homosexual attractions and fantasies. They
chose to identify with the heterosexual side of their nature and wanted my help to do this. They
were obviously bisexuals—perhaps #3. I discovered a rather constant principle in counseling
these persons. When they were in their best morale and confidence, they were heterosexually
oriented. But when they were low in morale, lonely and down on themselves, they inclined
toward homosexuality. Is theirs an arrested development in self-image, and hence in sexual
self-image? The biggest challenge to male self-confidence, for example, is to relate to a female in
an equal and intimate way. When a male is down


in self-confidence, he may feel he can’t meet this challenge. The pain of rejection is too severe.
So he identifies with the easier relationships, those of his own sex.

This of course is theory, not a scientifically established principle. But it is a theory that I
utilized, and it focused my therapy in specific areas:

1. The area of guilt. I attempt to help such persons to realize the gospel in their
homosexual orientation. In both their fantasies and their attitudes they live in the baptismal
coovenant of forgiveness. They are loved as they are—loved by God in their homosexual
attractions.
2. Focus on the gospel, not the law. Thus, when the counselees are aware of their homosexual fantasies and attractions, their response can be gratitude that God has enlightened them as to what is going on, rather than guilt and rejection, which can only focus them more where they are.

3. The role of conditioning. They can perceive this call then to fantasize sexually according to their chosen sexual orientation. I use meditation in pastoral counseling as a spiritual exercise to condition and to fortify this orientation.

4. Focus on spiritual development. If morale and self-image are key factors in a person’s sexual orientation, then these factors need special attention. The counseling, therefore, has its focus on spiritual growth—growing in our consciousness of grace, of God’s presence as unconditional love, and in the realization of the Spirit’s fruit of love, joy, and peace.

5. The role of determination. If one is bothered by homosexual attractions and fantasies, one is also drawn to them. It is important to keep this ambivalence in mind, and facing a divided will, decide which will or mind one desires to affirm.

All of us know the games our doublemindedness moves us to play. Such game playing is essentially a deceptive ruse by which we try to satisfy both sides of the ambivalence. Game playing with sexual ambivalence is common. But there can be no game playing with God or oneself or with the pastoral counselor if any change is to be made. The counselor helps the counselee to keep the ambivalence out in the open so that the inevitability of choice is always present. One can almost predict the outcome of the counseling by how determined the counselee is not to play games.

I find it helpful in my own experience with doublemindedness to view the change I desire not simply as my own idea, but also as the change I am called to make by God. Then I can envision the outstretched arms of Christ beckoning me to follow this call—envision it first in meditation and then in the actual moment of need. I encourage those whom I counsel to utilize this same perception in their desire for change—including those who desire to make a sexual orientation change—and I perceive it to be a powerful unifying influence for one’s sense of self-direction.

Our pastoral concern is not just for the persons with homosexual orientation, but also for the parents and the spouse. What about spouses who realize after being married that their partner’s sexual preference is not just for the opposite sex? Should they stay in the marriage? Do they want to? Since in these situations there is often a bisexual potential, is the other willing to work together in sexual therapy to maintain the marriage and to remain sexually faithful? If there is a desire to work with the problem, pastors need to search with the couple for the best sexual therapy available. The ultimate question is with what limitations we are willing to live in order to maintain the most satisfying arrangement possible for those involved. Or what limitations do we choose not to accept? And most important of all, where do we perceive those beckoning arms of Christ when we are in our gospel frame of mind?

IX. THE CHURCH AS EXTENDED FAMILY

If healthy relationships with people are helpful to children as they develop their sexual identity, then there is no place like the church to provide this environment. The church is
potentially an extended family in which developing children can relate to other adults as well as to their own parents as parental figures. This provides them with a variety of role models which they may well need. It may be asking too much of a single family, even when there are two functioning parents, to meet all the needs of their children. Extended families have largely disappeared in any functional way in our society. The local congregation can take up this slack.

Whether these additional healthy relationships will influence the sexual orientation of these children has yet to be established. It is my understanding, however, that in the Israeli kibbutz (collective farms), where the rearing of children is a community responsibility, the incidence of homosexuality is remarkably low.

People with homosexual orientation are no less persons than people with heterosexual orientation. In our sexual preoccupation we too often identify them by their sexual orientation. Instead of being persons, they are gay. They may be many other things—like clever or dim, kind or mean, sensitive or insensitive—but these all take a back seat to being gay. We do not do this to people of heterosexual orientation. None of our personal qualities or characteristics constitute the person. My heterosexual orientation does not constitute me. In fact, I cannot account for how I became heterosexual. It is the person that God has justified by grace through faith.