



Denominational Teachings about Homosexuality

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FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS IN NEARLY EVERY DENOMINATION ACROSS THE UNITED States find themselves deeply divided over how to evaluate homosexuality and, by implication, heterosexism. Discussions among us about these matters inevitably prompt deliberations about related policies. Should the church advocate gay civil rights or anti-discrimination legislation? Should we offer support for intradenominational gay caucuses? Should we bless gay unions? What should be the eligibility requirements of professional church workers? Specifically, should we ordain persons grateful for and celebrative of their homosexuality?

This last question has become the flash point for many heated disputes. Is it salutary to ordain uncloseted and self-affirming homosexual persons who are open to or engaged in just, loving, and faithful sexual unions? To date, this issue has not become a source of division *between* most churches. Primarily the debate about homosexuality is a source of great tension *within* our churches.

My task in this essay is to profile the current teachings of several denominations regarding homosexuality. I highlight as well their way of coping with the conflict this issue evokes.

Some denominations have declared debates about homosexuality “out of bounds” and thereby blocked further intradenominational deliberation. Some have restricted these to discussions “within certain bounds” and thereby limited the scope of the moral argument possible. Others have pressed prematurely for a resolution of the question. Most wrestle with unstable resolutions. Especially to be applauded are those denominations which courageously invite comprehensive and faithful moral deliberation about homosexuality and heterosexism.

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I. OUT OF BOUNDS

Some denominations view disputes about homosexuality as dangerous. It is feared that they will corrupt communicants by introducing them to harmful cultural mores. The faithful should isolate themselves from even the discussion of such threatening questions. Such debates are “out of bounds.”

There is nothing intrinsically conservative or liberal in this response. That depends upon whether one identifies what is corrupting in the culture with homophilia or heterosexism. Even though no denomination has divided over this issue, two may be typified as “in flight” from intradenominational acrimony about this issue. For both the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (commonly known as the MCC) and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) the issue is “settled” and continued deliberation about it is “off limits.”

The MCC was founded by those committed to a thorough reform of Christian teachings regarding homosexuality. Though not its exclusive focus, this denomination’s primary outreach is to the gay community. It was born in protest against heterosexism. In 1968 Troy Perry, a gay man celebrative of his homosexuality, was ordained to ministry in this church.

The growing number of MCC congregations indicates at least two things. First, their evangelical efforts among the unchurched in the gay community have been successful. Second, an increasing number of gay and lesbian Christians have grown weary of disputes over this issue in their mother churches. They have decided to disassociate themselves from these debates by changing their denominational affiliation. This difficult choice is made for the sake of their spiritual and moral health.

Though many MCC pastors and members regularly engage in *interdenominational* forums on these topics, most found necessary an exodus from deliberations “at home.” Of course all believers are sinners and find life in the church convicting. All of us are touched by this issue, since in many ways homosexuality is a test case for Christian sexual ethics in general. But gay Christians find themselves in a unique way to be the “subject” under debate in arguments about homosexuality. They experience the most intimate depths of their very identity (not merely some of their desires and behaviors) to be under moral scrutiny outside MCC congregations. What is at stake for them is whether as gay people they can be counted among the beloved of God.

Many who are deeply conservative regarding this issue also desire to distance themselves from such discussions for the sake of their spiritual and moral health. Consider the Southern Baptists. The SBC has a longstanding tradition of condemning homosexuality. In 1988 the SBC resolved that homosexuality was an “abomination,” a “perversion of divine standards” and a “violation of nature.”¹ Moreover, in 1992 the SBC took an unprecedented step: it amended its constitution

¹Indeed a proposed amendment to an even more recent statement on AIDS that would have denied unrepentant homosexual people full acceptance in Christian community only narrowly failed to pass, by a vote of 474 to 408, with 71 abstentions.

to define congregations which endorse homosexual behavior out of “friendly cooperation” with their convention. The actions, prior to this convention, of two SBC congregations in North Carolina — one which licensed a gay man to preach and the other which allowed their pastor to bless the union of two gay men — prompted this dramatic move.

Southern Baptists pride themselves on their tradition of congregational autonomy and theological independence. This is the first action ever within the SBC to exclude churches from association over a specific doctrinal or moral dispute.² Other denominations have procedures whereby noncompliant bishops, pastors, congregations, and communicants might be disciplined. However, given its polity, the adoption of such procedures for censure by the SBC is tantamount to a revolution in the denomination’s own ecclesial self-understanding. Such a drastic response suggests that for a majority within the convention the proper evaluation of homosexuality is virtually self-evident and continued debate only contaminating.

II. WITHIN CERTAIN BOUNDS

To be a community of moral deliberation is unquestionably risky business. One may limit the risks (as well as the benefits) of continued moral deliberation by controlling the terms of the debate. For example, one can restrict talk about homosexuality to questions of pastoral care. Both the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod (LC-MS) and the Roman Catholic Church (RC) have policies which redirect conversation about the morality of homosexuality to the pastoral level and thereby preclude the (re)examination of the moral axioms on which pastoral counsel rests.

Of course, moral teachings have pastoral implications, which need to be traced. But the reduction (as distinct from the narrowing) of moral deliberation to the analysis of pastoral applications severely restricts what is open to critical analysis. This is ironic since the inadequacy of some moral arguments often surfaces precisely in pastoral care situations. As important signs of the times, pastoral problems signal the need and foster the energy for inquiry into our moral frameworks. These signals are short-circuited when their impetus is channeled exclusively back into questions of pastoral application.

In a 1973 resolution the LC-MS defined homophile behavior as “intrinsically sinful.” A 1981 report condemned both homosexual lusts and acts.³ Conversation

²“Baptists Oust Churches for Support of Homosexuals,” *Christianity Today* 36/8 (20 July 1992) 46-47.

³“Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective” was drafted by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations. It argued that as a result of original sin a person may have a predisposition apart from any choice to homosexuality. Nevertheless, all people remain morally accountable for every homosexual thought, word, and deed. Though reorientation is the moral ideal, the church must counsel at least sexual abstinence and help individuals bear the burdens (especially of loneliness) associated with such counsel. (Interestingly, according to official LC-MS teachings, moral disagreement among Christians about whether homosexual acts should remain or be made illegal in the civil society is to be expected, given the complexity of the relationship between law and morality.)

about this matter continues in the LC-MS primarily around the “pastoral implications” of this teaching. For example, a 1991 administrative policy focuses on the question of whether it is salutary for a church professional with a homosexual orientation to serve at any level. It notes that between the unrepentant “practicing” homosexual pastor on the one hand and the repentant, celibate homosexual teacher on the other exists a whole spectrum of church workers doing good solid professional ministry. According to this policy judgments about these complex situations should be made by the appropriate supervisor on a case-by-case basis. My point is that the church’s experience with and of these people cannot evoke renewed inquiry into or challenge the moral premises of these guidelines.⁴

Similarly, Vatican teachings on homosexuality have moved in recent decades from moral argument to pastoral instructions.⁵ In 1975 Rome declared homosexual actions to be “intrinsically disordered,” but concluded that the homosexual condition needs to be understood and that individual culpability for such desires “should only be judged with prudence.”⁶ This left unclear the objective moral status of homosexual orientation. The tension inherent in this teaching prompted much study and spirited debate in the church.⁷ This revival of moral deliberation was redirected in 1986 when the Vatican sent a letter to the bishops “On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons.” The letter reiterated the traditional condemnation of homogenital expression as an “intrinsic moral evil” and argued that homosexual inclinations in themselves were “objectively disordered.” Further deliberation was restricted to the implications of these teachings. Six years later

⁴“Guidelines for Ecclesiastical Supervisors of the LC-MS in Addressing Instances of Homosexuality in the Lives of Professional Church Workers” was established by the Council of Presidents.

⁵Officially there is no policy which specifically addresses the ordination of homosexual persons. At present the candidacy screening process focuses only on the commitment to celibacy, regardless of sexual orientation.

This silence was perfectly consistent with a moral framework that condemned only homogenital acts (1975). It cohered as well with a sexual ethic in which a person might not be subjectively blamed for evil desires because it was recognized that he or she had no control over their emergence (1986).

However, this silence is not congruent with arguments that suggest that homosexual persons simply by virtue of their orientation (not their behavior) may be inappropriate mentors for children or jeopardize the family (1992). If such might be the impact of a homosexual neighbor on other tenants, surely the influence of priests is even greater. The Vatican argues that bishops must put the defense of family life above their concern for the civil rights of gay persons when assessing proposed anti-discrimination initiatives. Consistency would suggest that those same priorities should operate in the assessment of candidates for the priesthood.

⁶The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued this “Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics.”

⁷In 1977 the Board of the Catholic Theological Society of America accepted a committee report with quite controversial conclusions about homosexuality. In *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought*, Kosnik et al. argued that homosexuality was probably either (1) only essentially imperfect or (2) best evaluated in terms of its relational significance alone.

In 1983 the San Francisco Senate of Priests developed a pastoral plan for ministry to the gay community which, even though it prohibited homogenital activity, denied that homosexuality stemmed from a truncated psychosexual development. Most significantly in that same year the Catholic bishops of the state of Washington condemned antihomosexual prejudice and called the church to reexamine its moral teachings about homosexuality.

another letter cautioned bishops against supporting most gay civil rights legislation.⁸

Focusing conversation on these pastoral concerns precludes addressing in substantive detail the normative premises about human sexuality that frame these arguments. Pastoral experience with the difficulties evoked by these teachings cannot be channeled in a way to open up moral analysis. The fundamental terms of the moral debate about homosexuality are not subject to review or open to criticism when the parameters of the conversation are fixed in this way.

III. PREMATURE RESOLUTION

Another response to the deep divisions among us about homosexuality and heterosexism is to settle for a premature resolution. This response inevitably proves conservative of the status quo, even if the resolution itself aims to reform the tradition. Even if there are dramatic changes in a church's official teachings, the traditional practice of a denomination may be conserved if the fact of continuing dispute about this issue is not adequately addressed. At present the situation in the United Church of Christ (UCC) illustrates this well.

In 1972 a UCC association approved for ordination William Johnson, a ministerial candidate celebrative of his homosexuality. At the national level the position of the UCC is to accept such candidates for professional church work.⁹ The forma-

⁸The CDF issued "Some Considerations Concerning the Catholic Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons" in 1992. It argued that initiatives which would make discrimination illegal on the basis of sexual orientation may negatively impact or jeopardize the traditional family, and thereby the common good. "There are areas in which it is not unjust discrimination to take sexual orientation into account— for example, in the consignment of children to adoption or foster care, in the employment of teachers or coaches and in military recruitment." The promotion of fair practices regarding housing and employment could promote homosexuality (the letter argued) and encourage the "coming out" process.

⁹Given the enormous variation in polity among Christian denominations, it is not at all self-evident how to represent and then compare church perspectives on homosexuality. For example the organizational structures of one denomination may empower the national leadership to speak with authority. Another denomination's polity gives decisions reached at the national level virtually no binding force or even significant formative power on the decisions of more local church bodies. For example, at least two UCC regional associations explicitly forbid the ordination of gay and lesbian candidates who are celebrative of their sexual orientation.

This issue of where in a denomination the decision-making power regarding ordination resides prompts a related concern. Where should one look for a denomination's authentic teaching regarding the ordination of celebrative gay candidates for ministry? Is it represented by their practice and/or their pronouncements regarding this matter? These may be at enormous variance. Sometimes ecclesial disobedience takes the form of the isolated "maverick" ordination of gay candidates as it has in some Episcopal dioceses and ELCA congregations. As a strategy for change such action is symbolic and designed to prompt deliberation.

At other times, however, ecclesial disobedience takes the form of the widespread refusal to consider for call or to ordain persons judged eligible for pastoral work by other denominational bodies (like synods, seminaries, etc.). This is evidenced in the resistance of some local congregations or regional adjudicators to take seriously the candidacy of women and people of color even though they are officially eligible for the office. This pattern holds true for many gay and lesbian candidates in the UCC.

tive power of this action was reflected in subsequent churchwide teachings and policies.¹⁰

However, deep divisions remain within the UCC on this issue and they have profoundly affected that denomination's actual practice. The UCC has ordained only a few dozen candidates celebrative of their homosexual orientation since 1972. Very few have found employment as local church pastors.¹¹ When people press for the premature resolution of an issue, they must weigh the morally formative and administrative benefits of such pronouncements against the costs of burying arguments and generating unrealistic expectations. Premature resolutions actually prolong conflict and foster increased resentment.

IV. UNSTABLE RESOLUTIONS

When facing head on the deep divisions among Christians over this issue, policies may be forged which by their nature are unstable and will inevitably prompt further moral deliberation down the road. The operative policies of most mainline denominations fall into this category, but it is perhaps best represented at present by the Presbyterians. Since the mid-1970s they have refused as a matter of policy to ordain gay candidates celebrative of their sexual orientation.¹² Yet a homosexual orientation per se is no bar to ordination (at least not theoretically). Of course the difficulty of lifelong sexual abstinence along with the burdens of a significant degree of closeting trigger the constant reassessment of the validity of these requirements. This kind of "resolution" appears inherently unstable.

Perhaps more than any other denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) recognizes that the evaluation of homosexuality is a test case for at least some of the criteria by which the tradition evaluates sexuality (for example, for the norms of gender complementarity and/or procreativity). However the 1991 study, *Keeping Body and Soul Together*, challenged so much of the traditional framework for

¹⁰In its 1977 study of human sexuality, homosexuality was treated as a part of the fabric of human sexuality. A 1983 General Synod resolution declared that with regard to ordination "a person's sexual orientation is not a moral issue." In 1990 the Eastern Association of the UCC's Minnesota Conference received into full standing the "Spirit of the Lakes Ecumenical Community Church," a congregation comprised mostly of gay and lesbian Christians.

¹¹See Gary David Comstock, "Aliens in the Promised Land?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 18/3-4 (1989-1990) 133-144.

¹²In 1976 the United Presbyterian Church called for a study of homosexuality. Their 1978 General Assembly published "The Church and Homosexuality," even while rejecting the policy recommendations found in both its issuing committee's majority and minority reports. The GA adopted a "compromise" which decisively condemned "unrepentant homosexual behavior." While the ordination of openly gay candidates was prohibited, presbyteries were prohibited from asking candidates about their sexual orientation. Thus no bar was established to the ordination of sexually abstinent, closeted persons.

In the south that same year the Presbyterian Church in the United States rejected a proposal to label homosexuality a sin and chose instead to teach that homosexuality "falls short of God's plan." Reoriented and/or sexually abstinent homosexual candidates could be ordained.

doing sexual ethics that its recommendations were overwhelmingly rejected.¹³

Though not included among those statements officially commended for study by the General Assembly, the demand for copies of both the majority and minority reports from the 1991 study has been great. Consequently an edited version of them along with the actions of the 1991 General Assembly continues to be published and made available upon request for study.¹⁴ Presbyterians have a long-standing tradition of boldly wrestling with difficult issues and of being a community willing to undertake the hard work of moral deliberation.

V. MORAL DELIBERATION

While operating on an administrative level with “unstable” resolutions, at least three mainline denominations have chosen to call for and foster continued moral deliberation about this matter among their deeply divided members. Confident that the Spirit will guide such a process, a task force of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has in the first draft of its social statement on human sexuality called the church to further study of homosexuality. Methodists and Episcopalians have officially taken this position as well.

In response to a 1976 call to study the ordination question, the 1979 General Convention of the Episcopal Church concluded that while some sexual conditions bear upon a person’s suitability for ordination, a homosexual orientation poses no barrier to ordination as long as the candidate’s behavior was “wholesome.” Though not fully defined, it was judged inappropriate to ordain sexually active homosexual candidates. Unlike canonical legislation, “resolutions” of the General Convention are never juridically binding given Anglican polity. However, the collegial base and moral authority of that resolution was almost immediately challenged.¹⁵ Differences regarding this matter among Episcopalians grew.

¹³The majority report brought to the foreground and made a brilliant case for the prominence of justice as a sexual norm. It pressed for the full acceptance of same-sex relationships, including the formal church recognition of gay unions, the provision of pension benefits for gay couples, and the ordination of otherwise qualified gay candidates. The Achilles’ heel of the report may have been its abandonment of traditional understandings of sexual fidelity. “Concern for the total well being of the spouse’s partner” may be commendatory, but this redefinition of fidelity seems to have gutted the concept of its traditional emphasis on the moral significance of sexual exclusivity and steadfastness. While a case for such a reformation of the tradition might be established on its own grounds, it is important to note here that there is no inherent link between the celebration of homosexuality and such an argument. Indeed the dismantling of heterosexism could enable just the opposite, that is, a healthy reclamation in our culture of the value of sexual exclusivity and steadfastness for all regardless of their sexual orientation. A precise interpretation of what delegates to the General Assembly were voting to “not adopt” will remain difficult given the complexity of the majority report, and the rejection as well of the minority report.

¹⁴“Presbyterians and Human Sexuality,” 1991

¹⁵At this same convention the House of Bishops issued a minority report with 21 signatories affirming the ministries of ordained persons known to be homosexual and declaring their sexual relationships to be no less a sign of God’s love among humankind than otherwise comparable heterosexual relationships. This report was signed by 29 more bishops in 1989. It is a response not only to the resolutions regarding ordination but also to a report accepted by the House of Bishops in 1977 which states that “homosexual unions witness to incompleteness” and that such a lifestyle is not worthy of emulation.

In 1988 the Standing Committee of Human Affairs and Health challenged the Episcopal General Convention to suspend its ancient judgments in these matters. Instead the General Convention chose to reaffirm the resolution of 1979. However, it also encouraged churchwide study of the question.¹⁶ In the meanwhile some bishops began to ordain candidates celebrative of their homosexuality.¹⁷

The Commission on Human Affairs and Health, in an effort to inform this discussion, submitted a controversial report and list of recommendations to the 1991 General Convention.¹⁸ The commission confessed continued uncertainty and urged openness and prayerful listening. It rejected the notion that conversion always required reorientation and noted that homosexual relationships could exhibit commendable love and commitment. A strong majority recommended that the church develop liturgies appropriate for same-sex unions and that the sexual integrity of homosexual candidates for the priesthood be assessed in accord with the same standards applied to heterosexual candidates.

In response, the 1991 General Convention of the church opted to eschew further legislative reactions to the growing division among Episcopalians over this matter. It neither adopted the recommendations of the strong majority nor censured the other bishops involved in the ordinations. Instead it called for continued study and serious dialogue on both the congregational and diocesan levels. It officially acknowledged for the first time the gap between the church's teachings on this matter and the experience of some members.

The present policy of the United Methodist Church is that homosexual practice is "incompatible" with Christian teaching and therefore persons celebrative of their homosexual orientation cannot be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve. This was included among the church's "Social Principles" in the *Book of Discipline*, first in 1976 and then reaffirmed both in 1984 and 1988.

However, at its 1988 General Conference the delegates also named a committee to study human sexuality. In 1992 this study committee recommended to the General Conference that they (1) remove the condemnation of homosexual practice and (2) replace it with an acknowledgement that the church "has been unable to arrive at a common mind" on this issue. These proposals were linked on the grounds that moral condemnation requires moral certainty; when there is significant doubt one ought not harm by stigmatizing or discriminating against others. Even though the delegates to the 1992 General Conference rejected these recom-

¹⁶Sadly, less than 1/3 of the dioceses even began such a study process at that time.

¹⁷Later that same year, Bishop Spong with the full consent of the Commission on Ministry and the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Newark ordained Robert Williams, a gay candidate celebrative of his sexual identity. In 1990 the House of Bishops reaffirmed the "inappropriateness" of ordaining gay candidates in a manner contrary to the mind of the church. Nevertheless, in 1991 two more quite public and several relatively private ordinations of gay candidates celebrative of their sexual orientation took place under the hands of at least two other bishops.

¹⁸The Commission's report was advisory in nature and its recommendations had no standing unless adopted by the convention.

mendations, they officially commended the bulk of this 1992 report on human sexuality for study across the denomination during the 1992-1996 quadrennium. They also commissioned a major study on the nature of homosexuality and its implications for the church.

A similar response is being encouraged among Lutherans. At the time of its constitution, there was in the ELCA no official church teaching with regard to homosexuality.¹⁹ However, in a 1988 pastoral letter to the ELCA, Bishop Herbert W. Chilstrom noted that even though its predecessor churches had no *policy* about the ordination of homosexual persons, their uniform *practice* was to ordain and/or to retain on the clergy roster persons openly gay if and only if they were committed to total and lifelong sexual abstinence.²⁰

In 1991 the ELCA published a study intended to stimulate reflection and dialogue on a wide range of issues in sexual ethics.²¹ Two years later the ELCA published the first draft of a social statement, *The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective* (1993). At the heart of the firestorm surrounding its publication was the bold recognition of the truth that Christians of good faith hold differing interpretations of the scriptures that address homosexuality. Therefore the draft concludes that the church is called at this juncture to “careful and continuing deliberation” on this issue.²²

¹⁹As is the case with other issues, the social statements of predecessor church bodies served as interim guides until policies could be developed.

In 1970 in a social statement on “Sex, Marriage and Family,” the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) described homosexuality as “a departure from the heterosexual structure of God’s creation.” Nevertheless the “sexual behavior of freely consenting adults in private is not an appropriate subject for legislative or police action.” The American Lutheran Church (ALC) in its 1980 statement “Human Sexuality and Sexual Behavior,” counseled that it was “appropriate to distinguish between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior.” Homosexual erotic behavior is judged “contrary to God’s intent for his children.” Yet “persons who do not practice homosexual erotic preference do not violate our understanding of Christian sexual behavior.” Most important, the statement concluded that the church must “remain open to the possibility of new biblical and theological interpretations.”

In 1986 the LCA, through its Division for Mission in North America, published “A Study of Issues Concerning Homosexuality” to promote dialogue on the topic of homosexuality. According to this study guide, which offers no definitive instruction on homosexuality, the church is in an interim situation in which it would be inappropriate either to condemn, ignore, praise, or affirm it. Therefore at its 1987 convention the LCA directed local synodical authorities to deal individually with the issues surrounding the ordination of homosexual candidates.

²⁰This practice was endorsed that same year by the Conference of Bishops. (It was left unclear whether or not this person could be un closeted or openly gay, and whether or not this matter must be decided on a congregational level or by the entire church.) In 1989 the ELCA Church Council approved a set of guidelines for clergy discipline which precluded “practicing” homosexual persons from the ordained ministry. See also *Vision and Expectations: Ordained Ministers in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, 1990.

²¹*Human Sexuality and the Christian Faith*. This cohered with a 1991 social teaching statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, in which the ELCA affirmed that one of the principal ways the church can be in society is by being a community of moral deliberation. The church is called to be a place where people can talk seriously about morally divisive issues. Part of its mission is to encourage deliberation both within and without the church on the important moral questions of the day.

²²The task force decided early on not to include in its agenda the ordination question per se.

VI. A CASE FOR CONTINUING THE DEBATE

Living with moral conflict is not untraditional for Christians. By and large, disagreements about moral issues have not constituted a source of division for churches over the centuries, with the notable recent exceptions of the disputes about slavery in North America and apartheid in Southern Africa. One could presume there was more cultural homogeneity in the past or perhaps less concern among Christians of earlier generations about orthopraxis. Yet even the briefest historical analysis reveals that neither hypothesis is tenable.

Charles E. Curran notes that the scriptures reveal deep division among even first-century Christians about any number of moral issues.²³ There were bitter disputes about the morality of sharing goods in common, about remarriage, and about relationships with people outside the Christian community. The church canonized these communities which wrestled with deeply divisive issues. Likewise, there were heated debates in the early church about a number of moral questions, such as the legitimacy of the use of force and violence by the faithful.

Indeed even today Christians remain divided over a variety of important moral matters. For example, in their pastoral *The Challenge of Peace*, U.S. Catholic bishops make a case for and apply criteria from the just-war tradition. At the same time they remind the faithful to respect those who are conscientious pacifists. Though quite literally a matter of life and death, conformity to the just-war position they commend is not a litmus test for the faith.

Some believers experience as deeply offensive the call to be a community of continuing moral deliberation. From their point of view at least some moral issues are so central to the life of faith that they require uniform and prompt resolution. These issues are matters constitutive of the believer's identity and of the self-definition of the community. Compliance cannot be post-poned, even temporarily. In contrast, it is my contention that Christians can address divisive issues and live with continuing dialogue because the gospel cannot ultimately be identified with any particular political cause or moral judgment.

Curran suggests that Christians have recognized for a long time that as ethical judgments become more specific and complex, the possibility, indeed the probability, of agreement among all the faithful about such matters diminishes. There is a difference between what Curran aptly describes as "flabby moral pluralism" on the level of general principles and the legitimate diversity of moral judgments that grows from the highly particular character of moral evaluations.

Clear and definite moral boundaries are essential to the Christian life on the level of general principle. It is not enough simply to be nice, sincere, or authentic about one's views. Conversations about divisive matters can rightly be seen as threatening to the community's moral health because such deliberations have the potential to erode our sense of those boundaries. However, such erosion need not accompany moral argument. For example, on the level of principle, both the

²³Charles E. Curran, *The Church and Morality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

just-war theorist and the pacifist are committed to doing good and avoiding harm. Yet their differences about whether and how these values can both be served are legion.

Similarly, it is appropriate to expect all parties to the debate in the church about heterosexism to share a commitment to loving their homosexual neighbor. Yet, it is unrealistic, given the complexities of exegeting the scriptures and tradition in conversation with what we know today about human sexuality through reason and experience, to expect we will all agree about how to express that love.

The present moral teachings of Christian churches have developed out of the historic disagreements of Christians about moral matters.²⁴ In some cases these changes were obviously for the better. For example, charging a reasonable interest on loans is no longer forbidden; more precisely, the church eventually discerned that it was not against nature for money to make money. Similarly, though it was deemed morally permissible for centuries, chattel slavery is now condemned. Of course, change per se does not ensure growth. However, development clearly occurs through the continual correction and adjustment that accompanies debate. Conflict can be instructive as well as divisive. It can be the work of the Spirit among us. A cacophony of moral perspectives may be one form the gift of tongues takes among us.

²⁴John T. Noonan, Jr., "Development in Moral Doctrine," *Theological Studies* 54/4 (December 1993) 662-77.