



## Homosexuality and Social Ethics

RANDOLPH A. NELSON

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

In recent years there has been substantial debate about the nature and meaning of homosexuality. Such discussion has occurred around questions of civil and human rights within the political community and questions of morality and ethics within the religious community.

It is important for the Christian community to study such issues and to bring the resources of the Christian faith to bear on them. A model using three sources of information and a method utilizing that information in a three step process provide the most appropriate way for the Christian community to accomplish that task.<sup>1</sup> The sources of information are culture, especially the human and social sciences; the biblical and theological tradition(s); and the personal and corporate experience of members of the Christian community. The steps in the method are gathering the information, engaging the information in a process of dialogue and assertion that leads to insight, and translating insight into decision and action. What follows here is an effort at ethical reflection on the basis of that model and method.

### I. HOMOSEXUALITY: ATTENDING TO THE PHENOMENA

#### A. *Cultural Data.*

The term, "homosexuality" is relatively new; the reality of homosexuality is not. "Some recognition of homosexual behavior is to be found in most forms of human society, ancient and modern....The written records of all cultures provide this evidence...."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, a significant proportion of heterosexual individuals engage in homosexual behavior at some time in their sexual

<sup>1</sup>See my article, "Theological Foundations for Social Ethics," *Word & World* IV (July, 1984) 248-259, for a fuller description of the model and method being used.

<sup>2</sup>The first use of the term "homosexuality" is attributed to the Swiss doctor, K. M. Benkert, in 1869. Cf. Peter Coleman, *Christian Attitudes to Homosexuality* (London: SPCK, 1980) 2 and 4.

development.<sup>3</sup> This has prompted researchers such as Kinsey and Bell and Weinberg to understand sexual development in terms of a continuum such that

homosexuality-heterosexuality is not necessarily an either-or proposition. Rather, people can be distinguished on the basis of the degree to which their sexual responsiveness and behaviors are limited to persons of a particular sex (male or female).<sup>4</sup>

This evident flexibility of sexual behavior does not deny, however, the more firmly fixed orientation of individuals at either end of the sexual continuum. The distinction can be made, therefore, between behavior and orientation. A homosexual orientation refers to a firmly fixed psycho-social condition in which the exclusive or predominant sexual attraction and activity is to and with individuals of the same sex. Research over the last fifty years has consistently indicated that from 5 to 10 percent of any given population is homosexual by orientation.

The phenomenon of homosexuality is therefore neither new nor restricted to particular cultures or places. Homosexual behavior can be attributed to a far greater proportion of the population than to those who are homosexual by orientation. Of those homosexual by orientation, diversity is the norm. More than twenty years ago Evelyn Hooker noted:

However limited the data now available from the research studies, they suggest that homosexuality is a many-faceted phenomenon not only in its manifestations in individual and social experience and behavior but also, and correspondingly, in its determination by psychodynamic, biological, cultural, situational, and structural variables.<sup>5</sup>

More recently Bell and Weinberg have stated even more emphatically that “there is no such thing as *the* homosexual (or *the* heterosexual for that matter)...statements of any kind which are made about human beings on the basis of their sexual orientation must always be highly qualified.”<sup>6</sup>

Most commonly held stereotypes of homosexuals, whether of men or of women, therefore have only a limited foundation in reality. Evidence does not support attempts to define homosexuality in terms of sickness either. “The least ambiguous finding of our investigation is that homosexuality is not necessarily related to pathology.”<sup>7</sup> As with heterosexual individuals the social and psychological adjustment of homosexuals varies from individual to individual.

Much depends upon the type of homosexual being considered. Many could very well serve as models of social comportment and psychological maturity. Most are indistinguishable from the heterosexual majority with respect to most of the nonsexual aspects of their lives.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup>For example, research conducted by Kinsey indicated that in one group of white American males 37 percent had had at least one overt homosexual experience in their lifetime. *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>4</sup>Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1978) 53.

<sup>5</sup>Evelyn Hooker, “Male Homosexuals and their Worlds,” *Sexual Inversion: the Multiple Roots of Homosexuality* ed. Judd Marmor (New York: Basic Books, 1965) 86.

<sup>6</sup>A. Bell and M. Weinberg, *Homosexualities*, 23.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 230.

Thus as homosexuality is not necessarily related to pathology, neither does it preclude stable, well-adjusted lives measured by the same criteria used to evaluate heterosexual individuals.

Attempts to discover the causes of a homosexual orientation have been largely inconclusive. Judd Marmor has said:

We are probably dealing with a condition that is not only multiply determined by psychodynamic, sociocultural, biological, and situational factors but also reflects the significance of subtle temporal, qualitative, and quantitative variables. For a homosexual orientation to occur, in our time and culture, these factors must combine to (1) create an impaired gender-identity, (2) create a fear of intimate contact with members of the opposite sex, and (3) provide opportunities for sexual release with members of the same sex.<sup>9</sup>

Such an account, while rejecting any simple explanation for homosexuality, nevertheless reflects the psychological/psychoanalytical bias that is represented by the work of Freud. In a Freudian perspective homosexuality is an illness that needs attention and correction. Thus, a whole variety of treatments—psychological, surgical, punitive—have been attempted in order to change what is seen as maladapted development. No matter how sensitive, unusual, or even severe the means of treatment have been, such efforts have been singularly unsuccessful for those homosexual by orientation. What has been demonstrated instead is the inhumanity of such efforts and the inadequacies of the Freudian perspective.

No clear evidence exists to suggest how genetic factors, sociological factors, and/or cultural factors are involved in the development of a homosexual orientation. But such an orientation does not appear to be a matter of choice either. It appears to be much more a matter of discovery; choice has to do only with respect to accepting or rejecting the discovered orientation and how that orientation will be expressed, if at all.

Widespread homophobia has also influenced the assessment of homosexual behavior and is one of the factors contributing to legal restrictions that have been imposed on such behavior. Most often homosexuals are seen as abnormal or deviant members of a sexual minority in a predominantly heterosexual world. Overall the cultural climate in which most homosexuals live is characterized by attitudes of disapproval and rejection that have not infrequently surfaced in acts of violence against them. Such a climate has forced most homosexuals to repress or deny their sexual orientation, seek “conversion” to a heterosexual orientation, or at least lead secret lives in which their true situation is hidden from others and sometimes even from themselves. Increasingly, however, homosexuals have declared themselves unwilling to live in either imposed or self-chosen secrecy.

There is also a growing recognition of the important contributions that have been made by homosexual individuals to the social and cultural history of the human race.<sup>10</sup> Data from the culture—from the social and behavioral sciences

<sup>9</sup>Judd Marmor, “Introduction,” *Sexual Inversion*, 5.

<sup>10</sup>See William Sloan Coffin, *The Courage to Love* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982) 39 for an identification of some gifted and creative homosexuals.

—indicates, therefore, the need for a re-examination of traditional attitudes toward and assessments of homosexuality and heterosexuality.

In defining heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as abnormal, what is the basis for our judgment? The main reason for adopting the standard is the value of

heterosexuality for procreation and therefore for the survival of the species. In the biological sense, intercourse that is heterosexual and genital is an appropriate norm.

But from an ethical point of view such a decision begs the question. The survival of the human species today does not depend on the procreative performance of every man and woman. On the contrary. Our biological survival is now threatened by too much procreation, not by too little.<sup>11</sup>

Such a comment invites us to consider the information that is available from our second source of information, the biblical and theological tradition(s). To that data we now turn.

### B. *Christian Tradition.*

Central in the data from the theological tradition is the biblical material itself. Two considerations influence how such data is to be used in developing a contemporary social ethical position. The first involves the recognition that any reference to biblical material involves interpretation. The second consideration has to do with the meaning and status which biblical material—either specific texts or more general themes and overall perspectives assume in social ethical positions. According to Charles Curran, a leading Roman Catholic moral theologian

The Scriptures do not have a monopoly on ethical wisdom and thus do not constitute the sole way into the ethical problem for the Christian ethicist. Obviously the Christian ethicist derives his [sic] orientation from a scriptural base and realizes the importance of particular attitudes and ways of life which are contained in the Scriptures. However, in the case of specific conclusions about specific actions Christian theologians realize the impossibility of any methodological approach which would develop its argument only in terms of individual biblical texts taken out of the context.<sup>12</sup>

Interpretations of biblical materials have played an important role in grounding opposition to homosexual behavior. Generally, special weight has been given to a number of specific passages. Among the more important have been Genesis 18:16-19:9 (the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah), the Holiness Codes (Lev 18:22-23; 20:13), and statements by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; and 1 Timothy 1:8-10. “The biblical data indicates that the biblical authors in their cultural and historical circumstances deemed homosexual acts wrong and attached a generic gravity to such acts....”<sup>13</sup> Jesus’ silence on the subject has been understood in various ways but the Christian tradition has generally not seen in that silence any relaxation of the dominant biblical perspective.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Szasz, “Legal and Moral Aspects of Homosexuality,” *Sexual Inversion*, 132.

<sup>12</sup>Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1976) 187.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 187.

The command of God shows him [man] irrefutably—in clear contradiction to his own theories—that as a man he can only genuinely be human with a woman, or as a woman with man. In proportion as he accepts this insight, homosexuality can have no place in his life whether in its more refined or cruder forms.<sup>14</sup>

Partly in reaction to Barth, Helmut Thielicke has said that texts need to be interpreted according to their “kerygmatic purpose.” Because in Paul’s references to homosexuality the primary concern is with idolatry, there is for the contemporary Christian “a certain freedom to rethink the subject” of homosexuality itself.<sup>15</sup>

Thielicke’s re-thinking begins with the theological judgment that homosexual behavior is a “perversion” of the created order. It cannot be affirmed in any simple sense. But Thielicke also recognizes a distinction between homosexual behavior and homosexual orientation. For a “constitutional homosexual” that orientation can be understood as a divine dispensation and “as a task to be wrestled with, indeed—paradoxical as it may sound—to think of it as a talent to be invested.”<sup>16</sup> For Thielicke the sublimation of the homosexual drive and desire becomes a primary ethical and pastoral concern but there is openness to the possibility that homosexual individuals can achieve sexual fulfillment in an ethically responsible way with members of their own sex.

Other interpreters have challenged the traditional use of the biblical material in a more radical way. Joseph Weber concluded that “one finds in the Bible no basis for a hostile and absolutistic condemnation of all homosexual expression” and argued for consideration of the subject as part of christological reflection on all of human sexuality.

Homosexuality is not at the center of the creative process. Therefore, it is more vulnerable to misuse and perversion than heterosexuality. But one may not say that homosexuality or every homosexual act is intrinsically perverse or sinful...Christian ethics, if it is based on the fullness of God’s Word, cannot condemn homosexuality in all of its forms and expressions in an absolute manner, but must examine the use made by a person of his or her sexuality in relationship to the sovereignty of God and the good of fellow human beings.<sup>17</sup>

The preceding references to Barth, Thielicke, and Weber suggest the differences that can emerge in the interpretation of biblical texts. Such differences are related to seeing the texts in context, both the context of the full biblical narrative in which the texts are set and the contemporary context in which the texts are read. An awareness of the context in both senses characterizes the reconsideration of the traditional approach to homosexuality argued for by several contemporary theologians.

<sup>14</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh, T and T Clark, 1961) Vol. 3, part 4, 164-166.

<sup>15</sup>Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex* (New York: Harper, 1964) 281.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>17</sup>Joseph Weber, “Does the Bible Condemn Homosexual Acts?” *Engage/Social Action*, 3 (May, 1975) 28.

John McNeill notes an urgent need to apply to Scripture “the new methodologies of biblical scholarship.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, uncertainty about what Scripture actually means, questions

about traditional natural law arguments, new data about homosexuality itself, and the inability of the human and medical sciences to settle questions of origin and treatment lead McNeill to question some traditional assumptions. For example, neither current biblical knowledge nor what is known about human sexuality lead to the conclusion that a homosexual orientation is contrary to the will of God. McNeill suggests instead

that there is the possibility of morally good homosexual relationships and that the love which unites the partners in such a relationship, rather than alienating them from God, can be judged as uniting them more closely with God and as mediating God's presence in our world. The new empirical evidence in support of this thesis is, first of all, the psychological evidence that homosexuality is not necessarily an illness and the empirical evidence that there are many homosexual couples in stable unions whose relationship provides the context for mutual growth and fulfillment.<sup>19</sup>

Of central importance for McNeill is "the value of interpersonal love as the ideal human context for sexual expression."<sup>20</sup> Such interpersonal love is an objective value and moral norm that governs the way in which sexuality is used constructively by all people, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

Norman Pittenger's argument for reconsidering homosexuality is given impetus by an overall theology of human sexuality and his observations about the nature of the homosexual experience gained through dialogue with homosexuals. The biblical material is itself not unambiguous; but even if it were, the contemporary question would not be settled because Christian theology must look to human experience as well as to the Bible for its data.

The genuinely integrating factor in human experience is the capacity to give love and to be loved.

Hence, man [sic] is to be defined or described as a lover 'in the making'—and he is created to love, his deepest intentionality is that he shall love, his manhood is to be expressed in his loving.<sup>21</sup>

For Pittenger, to give and to receive love is a central element in what it means to be human. Accordingly, genital sexual relationship between members of the same sex can give responsible expression to one's created nature if it reflects the characteristics of genuine love and the integrity of the total self. That means that such actions will reflect commitment, mutuality, genuine tenderness, intended faithfulness, hopefulness, and an urgent desire for union. "The homosexual who decides for a long relationship, as he [sic] may hope a life-long one, with another of his own sex, is almost certainly doing the very best thing that is open to him."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup>John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977) 14.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 195.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 196.

<sup>21</sup>Norman Pittenger, *Time for Consent* (London: SCM, 1976) 27-28.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 98.

Homosexuality is to be seen within the context of a theology of sexuality. Such a theology emphasizes that the meaning of human sexuality is to be found in love and it is supportive of all expressions of sexuality which are genuine and authentic.

A sexual theology is the primary concern of James Nelson. Such a theology “must be a genuinely two-directional affair” which is to ask not only “what does the Christian faith have to say about our lives as sexual beings?” but also “what does our experience as sexual human beings mean for the way in which we understand and live out the faith?”<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between homosexual behavior and homosexual orientation, apparently unknown to the biblical writers, is an important one. What the Bible rejects is homosexual behavior from presumably heterosexual persons. Nevertheless, the biblical material’s general disapproval of homosexuality cannot be denied. Neither, however, can the fallible, historically and culturally conditioned character of the judgment.

The central biblical message regarding sexuality is clear enough. Idolatry, the dishonoring of God, inevitably results in the dishonoring of persons. Faithful sexual expression always honors the personhood of the companion. Sexuality is not intended by God as a mysterious and alien force of nature, but as a power to be integrated into one’s personhood and used responsibly in the service of God.<sup>24</sup>

Nelson argues for “the full Christian acceptance of homosexuality and its responsible genital expression,” a position arrived at through “theological-ethical reflection and through personal friendships with some remarkable gay persons.” The issue of homosexuality is of great importance for the church. “At its root, the basic issue is not about ‘them,’ but about us all: what is the nature of that humanity toward which God is pressing us, and what does it mean to be a woman or a man in Jesus Christ?”<sup>25</sup>

Especially within the Roman Catholic tradition the natural law approach and the emphasis on procreation as the proper aim and purpose of human sexuality have reinforced the overt sense of the biblical material that homosexual behavior is to be condemned. It is said to be against nature in two senses. First, it is seen as contrary to the created order. It is an aberration, a distortion, a perversion of how things are meant to be and is a sign of fallen humanity. Second, it is seen as contrary to the intention of nature in a teleological sense. That is, it stands in contradiction and opposition to nature’s goal and purpose for human sexuality inasmuch as procreation is impossible by means of homosexual relationships.

However, the contention that homosexuality is contrary to the created order is increasingly difficult to sustain given the evidence that a homosexual orientation is discovered rather than chosen. Furthermore, “it is clearly to be observed in nature as a biological and psychological fact alongside heterosexual

<sup>23</sup>James B. Nelson, *Embodiment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) 8-9.

<sup>24</sup>James B. Nelson, “Homosexuality and the Church,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 37 (April 4, 1977) 65.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

nature, and in significant numbers.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the awareness that human sexuality has purposes other than procreation has cast doubt on the second sense in which homosexuality is said to be against nature.

Not all theologians are ready to abandon the natural law argument, of course. Curran remains convinced of the validity of its approach.

Despite all methodological shortcomings and the one-sidedness of the natural law approach proposed by Aquinas, it still seems to correspond to a certain connaturality condemning homosexuality as wrong. Also the majority of all the data from the human sciences seems to point to the fact that human sexuality has its proper meaning in terms of the love union of male and female.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, Curran adopts a “theory of compromise” in which he accepts the experiential data of other mediating positions: homosexuality is usually not a matter of choice, therapy aimed at “conversion” is usually not helpful or effective, celibacy and/or sublimation are not always appropriate, and stable homosexual unions do exist and are to be preferred to promiscuity. Therefore, although efforts should be made to overcome the position, for some individuals homosexual unions are the only way in which a satisfying degree of humanity can be found.

Other theologians are prepared to go farther in questioning homosexuality’s assumed unnaturalness.

To question the notion of homosexual incompleteness is not to ignore the preponderance of heterosexuality, or to suggest sexual orientation is as random as the sexual gender fixed at conception but to say that there can be complete homosexuals as well as complete heterosexuals in terms of the teleological understandings of nature’s ideal state.<sup>28</sup>

### *C. Contemporary Experience.*

The contemporary experience of the Christian community is important, not only in understanding and appropriating the biblical texts and the theological tradition. It is an additional source of information for a social ethical perspective in its own right. To that data we now turn.

As a community the church’s awareness of the issue of homosexuality is often related to the increasing openness on the part of gay and lesbian individuals and their desire to be acknowledged and treated justly. More directly, churches have been requested to serve as advocates in the efforts of gay and lesbian individuals to secure their full civil rights. Some churches have also been faced with the question of accepting them into the ordained ministry. Such experiences, both personal and corporate, have become occasions for a reassessment of traditional positions.

In 1972 the Golden Gate Association of the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ became the first major denomination in

<sup>26</sup>P. Coleman, *Christian Attitudes*, 279-280.

<sup>27</sup>C. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology*, 203.

<sup>28</sup>P. Coleman, *Christian Attitudes*, 280.



the United States to ordain an openly acknowledged and publicly identified homosexual. The experience was not an easy one for that Christian community.

The whole local Christian community agonized in the search for truth, with proponents and critics alike a part of the emotional experience. Participants in the drama found the very roots of their Christian belief tested, and the struggle continues.<sup>29</sup>

Biblical material did not settle the issue in the light of data from psychology, psychiatry and other disciplines and the impressions and knowledge that the community had of the particular person involved. What emerged was a conviction about the distinction between the use and abuse of sexuality. Use of one's sexuality is not wrong in itself, but only as it violates or abuses the rights of others.

Since 1972 other denominations have been faced with similar situations. Although most other decisions about ordination of gay or lesbian individuals have been negative, the issue is not settled. The experience of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) is illustrative of what was and is happening in other denominations within the United States.

The first formal comment on the issue by the LCA was contained in the social statement, "Sex, Marriage, and Family," adopted by the 1970 convention of the church. Its judgment—"persons who engage in homosexual behavior are sinners only as are all other persons—alienated from God and neighbor"—has been seen as the rejection of any double standard in understanding or responding to heterosexual or homosexual persons either in the church or society. Furthermore, in indicating that the private behavior of freely consenting adults is not cause for legal action, the statement called for tolerance and justice. On the other hand, in saying that "homosexuality is viewed biblically as a departure from the heterosexual structure of God's creation," the statement has been understood to reject homosexual behavior and to call for repentance, amendment of life, treatment, or at least celibacy as appropriate responses by those so affected.<sup>30</sup>

The statement has thus been helpful in distinguishing between orientation and conduct and between legitimate civil rights and standards for church membership and church leadership. It gave impetus to a much fuller discussion of the issue in the years ahead.

The discussion was carried out at a number of levels. Articles, letters and editorials in the denominational magazine, *The Lutheran*, kept it before the membership at large. The bishops of the church's synods addressed the issue together and as individuals. Notable in this regard was a personal letter written by Dr. Herbert Chilstrom, bishop of the Minnesota Synod, which called for greater acceptance and openness toward gay and lesbian individuals.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup>W. Evan Golder and Henry H. Hayden, "Learning from Experience" (unpublished manuscript) 15.

<sup>30</sup>"Sex, Marriage and Family," Social Statement of the Lutheran Church in America, adopted in convention, 1970.

<sup>31</sup>Herbert W. Chilstrom, "A Pastoral Letter: The Church and the Homosexual Person" (unpublished letter, 1979).

In 1982 the Rev. James Crumley, bishop of the LCA, prepared a memorandum intended to state the mind of the church. In reviewing the various church documents that seemed to bear on the question, he concluded that “homosexuality is not an example to be lifted up in the church as an appropriate style of life. Therefore, homosexual behavior renders a candidate ineligible for ordination.”<sup>32</sup> After the LCA Executive Council confirmed Bishop Crumley’s conclusion, Edgar Trexler, editor of *The Lutheran*, commented: “Most people will agree with the prohibition and nearly everyone, including those who disagree, will be glad the policy is out in the open.” The decision distinguished between homosexuals who are celibate and those who do not make such a commitment. Celibate homosexuals “have been, and are, serving honorably as pastors in the LCA and in other churches.” Accordingly, “the conclusion is not a judgment on the morality of the homosexual *condition* but a standard of *conduct* for clergy.”<sup>33</sup>

A critic of the decision, however, thought it concentrated on the formal character of sexual expression without any consideration of the quality of the relationship that might be involved.

There are persons, including pastors, who can best show or only show their God-given capacities for love through a caring covenantal relationship which most naturally includes sex with a person of their own gender. To insist that such a person either remain celibate or be forced to put on a front of heterosexuality is to cause that person to act in unnatural, self-destructive ways.<sup>34</sup>

The discussion within the LCA has been supplemented by the reflection of related groups such as the Minnesota Council of Churches. A study document prepared by the Council, “Ministry to and with Gay and Lesbian Persons,” argues for an understanding of human sexuality that extends beyond genital relationships. It understands ministry with all people to involve a journey toward wholeness that includes resisting and changing any structure, institution, or system which hinders or prevents such wholeness. As the church works toward securing and enhancing civil rights, it must also welcome gay and lesbian individuals into the church community and accept the gifts which they bring.

Underlying the document and the proposals it makes is an understanding of God’s intentions for humanity.

God’s intended wholeness includes human sexuality as a gift for the expression of love and the generation of life. Human sexuality is broader than that which has expression in biological sexual relations. There may be creative and whole expressions of one’s sexuality at various levels in relationships between men and women, between men and other men, and between women and other women.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup>James Crumley, “Statement to the Bishops” (unpublished letter, 1982).

<sup>33</sup>Edgar Trexler, “No Ordination of Active Homosexuals,” *The Lutheran*, Jan. 5, 1983, 34.

<sup>34</sup>Anonymous, “Now I Think,” *The Lutheran*, Feb. 16, 1983, 32.

<sup>35</sup>Minnesota Council of Churches, “Statement on Ministry to Gay and Lesbian Persons” (Minneapolis: Minnesota Council of Churches) 1-2.

The spirit of such a document troubled those whose “motive is to maintain the traditional Christian doctrine on this matter, as deposited in Scripture” and who see themselves “representing the historic convictions of the Church in conformity with the Scriptures, the Early Church Fathers, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and many modern theologians....” For such a position

The sciences can not tell us how God evaluates homosexual behavior, or how Christians are responsible to deal with homosexual attraction if they experience it. For answers to these questions we must turn to theology and to the Scriptures.<sup>36</sup>

The fact is, however, that no simple appeal to theology or to Scripture can settle the issue. Rather, the question becomes how the data is to be weighed and how information is to be evaluated. The second step in the method, the engagement of the data, is a three cornered conversation necessary because God’s revelation is confined to none of the three sources of information even though present in and through each of them. God’s continuing presence and activity in the world can be discerned only by listening to and engaging the data available to us from each of the sources.

## II. ENGAGING THE DATA

God created and is part of a dynamic process that is not complete or finished. Newness and change are built into creation, giving freedom to both God and human beings. God’s freedom is seen in the incarnation of Jesus Christ as a gracious response to the mis-use of human freedom. God’s freedom is also seen in the fact that in spite of such mis-use, men and women continue to have an important role to play in creation to increase the possibilities of good, to alleviate injustice, and to give impetus to the flourishing of human persons in community. But in order to use the freedom effectively and faithfully the Christian community must seek to discern what God is doing in the world and join in that task.

The pluralism of contemporary life and the corporate nature of the church also demand that the data of the sources be engaged. Insofar as pluralism is an accurate indication of the inevitable insufficiency of anyone position to grasp all of the truth or, conversely, of the fact that some grasp of the truth is possible from different perspectives, then differences call for the examination of the presuppositions and the arguments advanced by each perspective. Pluralism in the Christian community, however, is limited by its underlying unity in the Christ, and any particular viewpoint must be tested by the wisdom of the community just as the community’s wisdom is informed by each of the perspectives that come to expression within it. Dialogue within the community and among the sources, then, is a necessary step in the development of a social ethical perspective on homosexuality.

Essential to such dialogue is an openness to search for and accept whatever insights emerge from the process. Openness means an ability and will-

<sup>36</sup>Letter to Minnesota Ministerium (LCA), Jan. 20, 1983 (unpublished), 3.

ingness to hear the data and to evaluate it on its own terms. Openness and engagement go hand in hand in the process of assertion.

The assertive process does not entail a lack of desire to seek more comprehensive and inclusive perspectives nor an abdication of the commitment to arrive at responsible positions to be advocated and implemented by the total Christian community. Consensus or agreement may be elusive or even impossible, but an obligation to explore the implications of faith in God and to articulate truth as it becomes known and understood remains. Reasoned inquiry is important and for the Christian an emphasis on reasoned inquiry can be seen as one of the primary ways in which the Holy Spirit is active within the Christian community today.

Data gathering began by attending to culture. The cultural source exercises priority in terms of starting point because it is in the cultural milieu that questions of justice and issues of human well-being emerge. The world can with some legitimacy, therefore, set the agenda for the Christian community. At the same time the choice of issues to address is related to the fact that certain issues have existential import because of the specific experience of individuals and communities. Thus, the particular issue with which one begins is related to the priority that is given to the experience of men and women in their daily lives.

But for the Christian how the issue is taken up and how experience is understood have to do with the ways in which the Christian community has taken up such issues in the past and the way in which experience is evaluated and understood in the light of a relationship to God. Thus, the Christian tradition is given priority in terms of providing the framework within which meaningful interaction among the data from the sources can take place. The tradition places the issue and the experience of it in the context of God's on-going creative activity as that is understood through the history of God's people. The tradition, therefore, provides perspective, orientation, and vision.

From the assertive process, then, it can be said that homosexuality as an established sexual orientation is a widespread phenomenon in an historical and cultural sense. Studies suggest that 5 to 10 percent of the population in any given culture is likely to be identified by such an orientation.

Sexual orientation is a complex phenomenon involving a continuum in which most individuals are to be found at neither of the extremes of total heterosexuality or homosexuality. Efforts to attribute a homosexual orientation to some "lack" or "failure" of biology, of the person, or of the social environment are not convincing. Neither homosexual nor heterosexual orientation is chosen in any real sense and individuals, for the most part, do not become aware of their sexual orientation until it is already well established. What can be and is chosen is the manner in which a sexual orientation is given expression.

Well integrated homosexual persons and stable homosexual relationships extending over long periods of time exist and flourish in spite of the intense pressure generated by an antagonistic culture. For those who do seek help the general ineffectiveness of treatment designed to re-orient their sexuality is striking, given the obvious psychological and social benefits that would be achieved if they could, in fact, "go straight." Thus, homosexual orientation involves neither pathology nor illness in any necessary way, but is, for a certain

number of people, natural in the sense that it is essential rather than accidental to who they are.

The data from experience and the Christian tradition seems to stand in some opposition to what has just been said. However, the contrast presented by the experiential data is related in part to what has been identified as homophobia—the fear of homosexuality. Homosexual orientation and gay and lesbian persons represent for most heterosexual persons a dimension of life relatively unknown to them and, in a very real sense, literally unknowable to them. Such inaccessibility can lead to fear and to the perception that homosexuality is a threat to one's own sexual orientation.

At the same time, however, knowledge about and acquaintance with gay and lesbian persons has increased to the point where stereotypical images and unexamined negative presuppositions are not as easy to maintain. Thus, while most heterosexual individuals are unlikely to understand or appreciate homosexuality in any full way, increased knowledge and acquaintance has made a beginning grasp of the phenomenon possible, such that it becomes possible to see homosexuality as a different sexual orientation than heterosexuality but, in itself, neither a better nor a worse one.

The contrast presented by the Christian tradition is more pronounced. Throughout much of church history the opposition to homosexual behavior has been uncompromising. But the biblical material has often been read without regard to its context and what is known about homosexuality from other sources. For example, both the assumption that normal human sexuality is always channeled exclusively in the direction of heterosexual orientation and the assumption that there needs to be or is a direct relationship between sexual activity and procreation are problematic.

At the same time the biblical material has often been read in away that does not take account of its self understanding as a record of faith. The biblical material is not and does not pretend to be a matter of legal norms. It is rather a witness to the God who engenders faith and as such is open to, and representative of, alternative perspectives.

Thus, there is both the opportunity and the necessity for considering the biblical and historical responses of the Christian community to homosexuality in a larger context. As we give attention to that larger context in our own day, two considerations seem especially important.

The first consideration has to do with the variety of ends for which human beings enter into relationship. As more emphasis is given to the intrinsic purposes of relationships, more emphasis is also given to the substance of relationships than to their form. A second consideration has to do with the need for the Christian community to recognize the investment that often exists in strongly held positions. Thus, sensitivity is necessary when changes appear to be necessary in long standing positions.

Nevertheless, the Christian community cannot permit concern for the sensitivities of a majority to result in the continuation of injustice for a minority. Therefore, while openness to differing viewpoints, honest dialogue and confrontation, and loving concern in coming to conclusions are all necessary, so also

is an uncompromising concern for justice and a firm commitment to make and implement the

decisions that are called for.

### III. AND HOW SHALL WE RESPOND?

Attending to the data and letting the data from each source interact with the data from the other sources leads to insight, decisions and accompanying actions. To respond to the gracious activity of God without ignoring the reality of sin is an attempt at the responsible exercise of freedom. As creator, God brings into being a world continually evolving, open to and reliant upon our activity in giving shape to that evolution. As redeemer, God incarnates the reality of grace which makes possible the activity which the dynamic process of creation requires. As spirit, God seeks to make the responsible exercise of freedom the characteristic note of the Christian community and its members.

With respect to homosexuality it is necessary to look beyond the biological dimensions of the phenomenon to the fundamental purposes and intentions of God with respect to human sexuality itself. To see procreation as the self-evident and all important goal of human sexuality does not distinguish sufficiently between God's general purpose and God's specific intention.<sup>37</sup> While God's general purpose can be seen with reference to a world in which sexual activity is related to procreation, God's specific intention for human sexuality does not require procreation as the goal of each act of sexual activity. God's general purpose, in other words, does not depend for its attainment on it being the goal or central feature of every individual act or event.

What God wills is the flourishing of human persons in a community of justice and mercy. With respect to human sexuality the flourishing of human persons in a community of justice and mercy assumes a world in which sexual activity is generally linked to procreation. But such a general purpose does not mean a lack of concern for the content of the relationships through which the biological becomes personalized and the community is built up.

Appropriate sexual activity is expressive of one's total self and is not preoccupied with physical desire or attention. Likewise, appropriate sexual activity under the norm of love is concerned primarily with the growth, well-being, and self-esteem of both partners. Reciprocity, mutuality, the absence of coercion and a commitment to permanence are necessary aspects of any relationship in which the personal growth of the participants is to be advanced.

When human relationships are informed by such an understanding, they become a means through which God's general purpose for human flourishing can be advanced in specific situations. The emphasis is on the quality of the relationships and the growth and well-being of the persons involved rather than on the form of the relationships.

Three sets of actions reasonably follow from such considerations. First, an unequivocal commitment to the preservation and advancement of the civil rights of gay and lesbian persons is to be expected of the Christian community and its

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<sup>37</sup>This distinction was proposed in a public lecture given by Dr. Keith Ward at Cambridge University, Cambridge, England in May, 1983.

members. Political action to effect the repeal of unjust discriminatory laws and the enactment of statutes guaranteeing civil rights is in order and represents the responsibility and freedom of the Christian community to raise its voice in opposition to injustice.

Secondly, ministry with gay and lesbian persons begins with an acknowledgement of a

common and shared humanity. Every individual is on a journey toward wholeness. Each individual is unique with sexual orientation only one form of diversity to be found among human beings. Diversity in sexual orientation does not, in itself, define the ministry that can be given or received by any member of the Christian community.

Finally, sexual orientation and responsible activity consistent with such an orientation does not in itself provide a reason for excluding anyone from seeking to exercise his or her gifts, including the gifts of ministry as an ordained pastor, if no other factors would preclude such consideration. Human sexuality, while rooted in biology, is not primarily a question of biology; it is a question of the total person, of who one is. It is finally with respect to the total person that decisions about ordination are also to be made.