



*ADVANCING THE
CHRISTIAN TRADITION
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*

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"American support for Israel" says nothing about whether our support for Israel is right or wrong.¹

But this of course begs the question: How are we, as Christians, to think about homosexuality? In other words, how are we to think theologically about this compelling issue?

It is important to try to think theologically about these difficult questions. Too many Christians let raw experience serve as their primary or only grid through which they look at these issues. As one homosexual put it, in words repeated all too often, "I know I'm telling the truth about who I am. I know that the people around me are telling the truth. If we're telling the truth, the church's position must be wrong."

This is what I call the Yuri Gagarin method of doing theology. Gagarin was the Soviet cosmonaut who in the early 1960s famously reported from outer space, "I don't see any God, hence there is none." Raw experience, without reflection.

There are better ways of trying to understand life under God. Let me suggest one: that we think first of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus; then of what sexuality means within that framework, and finally what that would mean for homosexuality.

DEFINITIONS

But even before that, we need to agree on terms. What is a homosexual?

It is important to note that for the biblical authors, there are no homosexuals, only human beings made in God's image and likeness, who are now fallen. All human beings are sinners. In fact, if we consider Jesus' words about lust, we all are sexual deviants. With the exception of Jesus, no one is sexually sinless. All of us stand under God's judgment, and we all are in desperate need of God's grace.

The Bible talks about homosexual acts but not a separate class of human beings as homosexuals. Hence, by its lights, to regard a human person—who is an inconceivable mystery involving body and soul and heart and spirit—as defined by

its sexual desires is to reduce the mystery to a hormonal drive. It is to dehumanize the person.

Interestingly, in his magisterial treatment of the history of homosexuality, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (University of Chicago Press, 1988), sociologist David Greenberg suggests that biblical culture was not alone in resisting such essentialism. He argues that until very recently no culture ever conceived of persons as essentially homosexuals, not even ancient Greece. Instead, they saw homosexuality as a phase in life through which some individuals pass before, after, or even alongside heterosexual marriage and parenting. Not until the end of the nineteenth century in the West did cultures begin to think of homosexuality as a condition into which one is born and then stuck with for the rest of one's life.

Sociologically we can say that homosexuality is less common than is commonly reported. Kinsey's figures are now recognized to have been inflated, partly because his research methods were flawed (25 percent of his subjects were prison inmates), and partly because of inaccurate reporting of his conclusions (he is said to have found 10 percent of the male population to be homosexual, but his more telling claim was that only 4 percent are so inclined throughout their lives). Four surveys conducted by the U.S. National Opinion Research Center between 1970 and 1990 (widely regarded as the most comprehensive sex surveys ever conducted), found that while 6 percent of men have had some homosexual experience, and 1.8 percent in the previous year, only .6–.7 percent of the population had adopted a consistently homosexual lifestyle. For men generally in the Western world, fewer than 2 percent are exclusively homosexual in inclination and practice, while the figure for women is less than 1 percent.

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

But theologically, let's look first at what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Jesus made this very clear, just after Peter confessed that he was the Christ and then blurted that the Messiah would never suffer and die. Jesus rebuked him, told

him that Satan was speaking through him, and averred, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:24). Jesus here established the ground rules for discipleship: it involves denial of at least some desires, a certain self-forgetfulness, and following in Jesus' path of suffering and (perhaps even) death.

Paul tells us that we will express and experience the kingdom of God by participating in the *koinonia* of Jesus' sufferings (Philippians 3:10). So the role of the disciple is to obey his call to bear the cross, just as he did. And the promise is that, as we deny ourselves and take up his cross, new life will emerge: "While we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our mortal flesh" (2 Corinthians 4:11).

This pericope from Matthew's gospel, and Paul's reflection on the topic, shed light on Christian discipleship. It suggests that following Jesus means denying some instinctual ideas and desires (Peter said: "God forbid, Lord! This suffering and death shall never happen to you!" But Jesus said, "Whoever would save his life will lose it"). Personal fulfillment for the disciple of Jesus does not come from fulfilling innate desires but from obeying what we do not yet fully understand. Jesus made it clear that Peter did not understand ("Get behind me, Satan!") but suggested just as clearly that, if Peter obeyed, understanding would come ("whoever loses his life for my sake will [future tense] find it"). This illustrates an ancient Christian tradition that, as Augustine put it, we believe so that we might understand. Or, as the Cambridge Platonists improved on it, "We believe *and obey* so that we might understand." Only as Peter entered into Jesus' suffering would he come to understand the meaning of Jesus and being his disciple.

It is only because of the triumph of essentialism—the view that terms like homosexuality capture the real essence of a person's very self—that we have been led to believe that acting on our impulses, attractions, and desires is essential to

personal wholeness and actualization.² To the extent that we have bought into this pagan anthropology, to that extent we have lost touch with real Christian discipleship.

Therefore, Christian discipleship means recognizing that some of our desires and ideas are out of sync with what God wants. We find ourselves with desires radically opposed to God's will revealed in the Scriptures, and as we look back, we don't seem to be able to pinpoint a time when we chose this condition. We seem to have been born into a predisposition *not* to love our neighbor and God—a predisposition that, if we would surrender to it, will destroy others and us.

So being a disciple of Jesus means recognizing that we have a sinful predisposition that we have not chosen, yet at the same time feeling responsible for the choices we make to strengthen that predisposition. And still, at the same time, we are called by Jesus to resist the predisposition and to follow him, which will involve pain and suffering.

Perhaps you ask: Is the cross all there is to Christian discipleship? Doesn't love also enter the picture? Of course. But, as John Stott points out, love is not the only norm in Christian discipleship, so that all moral law is then abolished. Love needs law to guide it. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Paul wrote that "love is the fulfillment [not the abrogation] of the law" (Romans 13:8). If love were the only test, one could justify polygamy. A man could desert his wife on the grounds that the quality of his love for another woman (or man!) is better.³ The early church believed that love is concerned for the highest welfare of the beloved, which always means obedience to God's law and purpose, not revolt against them.

Doesn't love mean welcoming and accepting others just as they are? Well, if we would be disciples, we should welcome others as Jesus did. He condemned those who condemned the woman caught in adultery and welcomed her into his fellowship, but he also bade her to sin no more (John 8:53–9:11). Disciples of Jesus welcome others into a fellowship not only of comfort and encouragement but also of transformation and learning and discipline. Stott is helpful here:

God does indeed accept us just as we are . . . but his “acceptance” means that he fully and freely forgives all who repent and believe, not that he condones our continuance in sin. . . . It is true that we must accept one another, but only as fellow penitents and fellow pilgrims, not as fellow sinners who are resolved to persist in our sinning. . . . [Jesus] welcomes us in order to redeem and transform us, not to leave us alone in our sins. No acceptance, either by God or by the church, is promised to us if we harden our hearts against God’s Word and will. Only judgment.⁴

True Christian discipleship also means having a theology of final redemption. It means realizing that we live in the already (Christ has risen and inaugurated the kingdom!) and not yet (we groan inwardly as we wait for the redemption of our bodies—Romans 8:23). So we presently are situated between the cross and final redemption, the deposit and fulfillment. Now is the time for temptation and *struggle* as we seek to be faithful until the end. Liberation has not arrived, and will not finally arrive until Jesus comes on the clouds.

CHRISTIAN SEXUALITY

The early church regarded sexuality as both insignificant and important.

It was insignificant insofar as sex in the Bible is of secondary importance after other matters. Sexual sin is never as grave as sins of the spirit, such as pride and arrogance. Sexuality is never the basis for finding one’s identity or meaning or fulfillment. Jesus and Paul never had sexual relations and yet are presented as exemplars for Christian disciples.

Yet at the same time, what one does in the privacy of one’s bedroom is never of purely private concern to the disciple of Jesus.⁵ Everything we do is to be unto the Lord and affects the whole body of Christ. Paul considered one Corinthian man’s sexual life so perilous to the community that he needed to be thrown out of the church for the church to survive (1 Corinthians 5:1–8).

To understand why that would be so is to go, for Paul and especially for Jesus, back to the origin of marriage. This is the only context in which the early church conceived of sexuality—its beginning in, and service to, the divine institution of marriage.

When the Pharisees asked Jesus about divorce, Jesus brought them back to the beginning of the Bible and the beginning of marriage: “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female . . . ?” (Matthew 19:4). Jesus was of course referring to Genesis 2, where the biblical author defined the meaning and purpose of both marriage and sexuality.

Here we see a recognition of the deep-seated loneliness that seems to part of the human condition (“it is not good for the human to be alone”), and that a person of the complementary sex is the divine remedy (“I will make him a helping counterpart to him” [Everett Fox]).

We also see a beautiful depiction of the joining of this first man to this first woman in a passage that is clearly intended to depict the meaning of marriage and sexuality.

“Therefore a man [the singular indicates exclusive union between two individuals] leaves his father and mother [in public commitment] and clings to his wife [marriage is a cleaving commitment—heterosexual and permanent], and they become one flesh [marriage is sealed by sexual intercourse, for which there is no shame or embarrassment]” (2:24).⁶

Jesus then endorsed this picture: “The Creator made them male and female, so they are no longer two but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:4).

As Stott has observed, notice that Jesus is here affirming:

1. Heterosexual gender is a divine creation (“God made them male and female”).
2. Heterosexual marriage is a divine institution (this is “what God has joined together”).

3. Heterosexual fidelity is the divine intention ("let not man put asunder").⁷

We will address some of the problem passages shortly, but suffice it for now to say that, for the biblical authors and for the early church, a sexual ethic for a disciple of Jesus would involve (1) an ethic of loyalty—loyalty to a current or future spouse requires chastity, and (2) an ethic of principle—the principle that sex is intended for heterosexual marriage. So when unmarried people engage in this life-uniting act without life-uniting intent, they commit fornication.⁸

HOMOSEXUALITY

What do our reflections on Christian discipleship and Christian sexuality mean for our understanding of homosexuality? I will be succinct.

1. We sometimes hear the following: "If homosexuals cannot help feeling what they feel, especially if the causes are biological or genetic, then the church cannot condemn homosexual activity or the homosexual lifestyle." No matter what the cause of homosexuality—and there is no scientific consensus that gays are all born that way—the condition of gays is not essentially different from the straight population. All of us inherit a set of desires at odds with God's will, and all of us, apart from the grace of Christ, are incapable of getting free from sin (Romans 7).

2. This condition does not, however, render us exempt from responsibility, unless, of course, we all—whether gay or straight—are subhuman robots with no freedom of choice whatsoever. Furthermore, disciples of Jesus are called, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to no longer let "sin therefore reign in [their] mortal bodies, to make [them] obey [their] passions" (Romans 6:12). Hence, "the Bible's anthropology rejects the assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable."⁹

Incidentally, psychologist Stanton Jones adds, there are

plenty of median positions between absolutely free choice and utterly determined behavior. Behavioral genetics has produced abundant evidence of genetic influences that clearly do not render human choice irrelevant. For example, there is significant genetic influence on individual differences in children's television-viewing habits. Yet we believe children can be helped to choose against surrendering to these predispositions.¹⁰ So even if there were a gay gene, it would not rule out human choice.

3. The burden of Christian discipleship is not whatever orientation we have but what we do with that orientation.

4. The cross means not only that we are to choose against desires that conflict with God's order, but also that, by the power of union with the cross of Christ, we no longer have to be slaves of sexual habits. "No one in Christ is locked into the past or into psychological or biological determinism."¹¹

5. Yet we still are in the "not yet," before the end of this age. There is no sexual salvation now. Christian homosexuals have the power in Christ to refuse to continue in the gay lifestyle, but they may not be able to rid themselves of same-sex desires. At the same time, however, they can be powerful signs to the church, as Richard Hays' friend, Gary, was to him, of "God's power made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12).¹²

6. It is difficult to sustain the argument that gay partnerships can be just as healthy as straight ones because of the inherently dangerous and destructive nature of homosexual activity. Thomas Schmidt has shown that gays pay a terrible physical price for their love: doctors are trained to look regularly for at least fifteen common afflictions apart from HIV/AIDS, because seven nonviral and four viral infections are transmitted by oral and anal sex. At least 75 percent of gay men are carrying one or more pathogens, although they may not be infectious or feel sick. Thirty percent have had syphilis, 30 percent have anal warts (strongly linked to anal cancer) and in 65 percent the virus is present. Sixty-five percent of homosexual men have hepatitis B or a history of it, while 75 percent have had an STD at least once and 40 percent in any

given year (the general population has rates of 16.9 and 1.6 percent, respectively). Gays suffer much higher than average rates of mental disorders and alcohol and drug abuse. So too for depression and suicide, the latter of which is twice as high among females and six times as high among males. As a result of all these problems, gay life expectancy is 25–35 years less than average.¹³

7. We must take off the emperor's clothes in this age of sexual obsession: (a) sexual gratification is not a sacred right, and (b) one can be happy and fulfilled without sexual relations. As Hays puts it, celibacy is not a fate worse than death. The monastic and ascetic traditions have something to teach us here—namely, the testimonies of the thousands who, through the ages, have experienced the joy and indeed sometimes even bliss without ever having known “the joy of sex.” The apostle Paul, in fact, said his single, celibate state was better than the married one, and he wished it on others. He claimed that some in the Corinthian church had been involved in homosexual acts but were later washed, sanctified, and justified (1 Corinthians 6). They may not have become married or freed entirely from their desires, but they had apparently been freed from the compulsion to act out on such desires. They had probably learned that one can have intimacy, even with the same sex, without sexual relations—and even more importantly, that intimacy with God brings a new kind of wholeness and fulfillment. And if Christian homosexuals are “deprived” of sexual relations, there are an even greater number of Christian heterosexuals who endure the same deprivation because, for various reasons, they too are unable to marry.

THE PROBLEM PASSAGES

Since good theology is always rooted in the biblical vision, and the texts typically used to discuss this subject are sometimes claimed to support a position opposed to the traditional one, I will treat some of these texts here.

Genesis 19

It is often claimed today that this passage is about a sin against hospitality and not sex, because, in part, the Hebrew word *yāda`*, which traditionalists have interpreted as “know” in the biblical sense, occurs 943 times in the Hebrew Bible but has a sexual meaning in only ten of those instances. Yet six of these ten are in Genesis, and one of these is used of Lot's daughter who had not “known” a man (occurring just three verses after Sodom's men said they wanted to “know” Lot's visitors). While it is true that later Old Testament passages do not refer to sexual sin in Sodom, intertestamental Jewish literature did (Jubilees 16:5–6 and the 12 Patriarchs, both written in the second century B.C., when Jews were alarmed by Hellenistic acceptance of homoeroticism), and Jude's clear reference (v. 7) to the same suggests that New Testament authors understood Sodom's sin in this way.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

These passages are often dismissed because they are found alongside others that are concerned not with moral but rather ritual purity (e.g., as regards the latter, the prohibition of sex during menstruation). Yet the vast majority of the chapters in question (89 of 94 verses in chapters 18 through 20) deal not with ritual purity but moral issues. They command respect for parents and the elderly, concern for the poor, honesty in court, and love for neighbor (including the alien). They condemn child sacrifice, bestiality, adultery, incest, idolatry, theft, deceit, slander, revenge, sorcery, cursing parents, and dishonest business practices. It is therefore likely that the author or editor of these chapters considered homosexual practice to be a moral concern and not a matter of ritual purity.

Besides, in the long list of prohibited practices in these chapters, only one is singled out as *tô`ēibâ* (“abominable”)—namely, same-sex intercourse. The ritually “impure” practices in Leviticus (childbirth, seminal emissions, heterosexual

intercourse, and menstruation) are not punished but purified by bathing and sacrifice.

Romans 1

Revisionists often say that in this passage Paul speaks only of pederasty, or those who were perverts and not inverts (i.e., they were straight but “departed from natural relations”), hence he was not aware of lifelong homosexual inclinations or a loving relationship among gays. Yet Paul, using a phrase familiar in Hellenistic Judaism to denounce homosexual acts, says they are *para phusin* (“against nature”)—a disruption of the created order. There is no hint of the exploitation of pederasty or of the condition of the actors. Paul focuses instead on the acts and declares them to be unnatural in themselves. Besides, Paul also discusses lesbians (1:26), who were well known in the ancient world for their extended relationships.

But Paul also says that homosexual acts are one of many consequences of God’s wrath, not provocations of divine anger. Therefore, they are not “specially reprehensible sins, no worse in principle than covetousness or gossip” or rebellion toward parents. They will not incur punishment but are their own punishment. Hays suggests Paul reflects what he found in the Wisdom of Solomon: “Therefore those who lived unrighteously, in a life of folly, God tormented through their own abominations.”¹⁴

In Romans 2, Paul goes on to say that all people stand equally condemned under the just judgment of a righteous God. Hence self-righteous judgment of gays is just as sinful as the gay behavior itself.

These biblical passages show that the biblical witness on homosexuality is different from that on women and slavery. While in the latter two, Scripture witnesses against itself (women are treated as property in some OT narratives, but are regarded as equal in Christ in parts of the NT [John 4; Galatians 3:28]; the same can be said for slaves—see Galatians 3:28 and Philemon), the biblical texts on homosexuality are

absolutely univocal. Never is homosexuality treated as anything but a disorder.

PASTORS AND CHURCHES

How should the clergy deal with this issue pastorally?

1. We must confess that the church has often failed to show homosexuals love. If we call on gays to renounce their active lifestyle, we must also repent of our failure to renounce our harsh and unloving treatment of our homosexual brothers and sisters.

2. We should welcome gays into the church, just as we welcome the envious, the gossips, the lustful, and the angry—in other words, ourselves. But we must teach clearly about heterosexual chastity outside marriage, or we will seem to be obsessed with only one kind of sexual sin. We need celibate homosexuals with all their gifts, including pastoring, just as we need the gifts of all repentant heterosexuals.

3. We must remind ourselves of our own sins. Jesus said, “Go and sin no more,” but then sent away the woman’s accusers by suggesting that they too had serious sins. Rather than saying we hate the sin but love the sinner, we should say that we should look in the mirror before we look out the window.

4. Pastors need to speak from the pulpit about the love of Jesus for homosexuals, and also about the power of Jesus to forgive and change. Because homosexual activity is dangerous, pastors have a moral obligation to let this be known. If they treat homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle without particular danger, they participate in the destruction of bodies and souls.

We are rightly judged to be selective in our focus on homosexuality if we in the church do not also teach and preach against abortion, divorce, and the abuse of children, which in numerical terms are more significant problems to the body of Christ.

AUTHOR

Gerald R. McDermott, Professor of Religion at Roanoke College, is the co-author of *Cancer: A Medical and Spiritual Guide for Patients and their Families* (Baker Books), author of three books on Jonathan Edwards, and several other books including: *God's Rivals: Why God Allows Different Religions—Insights from the Bible and the Early Church* (forthcoming from InterVarsity Press).

NOTES

1. Stanton L. Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 13n.
2. Jones and Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 155.
3. John Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships? A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revell, 1998), 53–54.
4. Stott, *Same-Sex Partnerships*, 59.
5. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 392.
6. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 35.
7. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 36.
8. Jones and Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 171–72.
9. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 68.
10. Jones and Yarhouse, *Homosexuality*, 88.
11. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 393.
12. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 403.
13. Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight & Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 112–30.
14. Wisdom of Solomon 12:23; cited in Hays, *Moral Vision*, 388.