

Homosexuality: Speaking the Truth in Love

by Margi Haack

There are few issues that have generated more political heat and extreme rhetoric; more anger and hatred; confusion and pain, than the issue of homosexuality. Christianity has come under fire for its traditional teaching that homosexual behavior is intrinsically immoral. For those who believe that a person's homosexual orientation is biologically determined, as much as race and sex are, the traditional Christian teaching seems cruel and intolerant—akin to racism or sexism. It appears to many that the God of the Bible condemns people for expressing the innate identity He gave them.

There are many—Christians and non-Christians—who feel alienated from all camps. They cannot celebrate their homosexual feelings and wholeheartedly embrace a homosexual lifestyle because they are convinced (for any number of reasons) that their homoerotic feelings are the result of something having gone wrong. I have friends in this situation, and my heart goes out to them.

Those who identify with the gay rights movement talk a lot about respecting diversity, but they do not always respect the diversity among those with homosexual feelings. They need to allow space for those who interpret those feelings as the result of something having gone wrong...including those who seek help to change.

Richard Hays, a New Testament scholar, wrote about his best friend from college, who spent a week with his family shortly before dying of AIDS. Hays writes: "(Gary) was angry at the self-affirming gay Christian groups, because he regarded his own situation as more complex and tragic than their stance could acknowledge. He also worried that the gay subculture encouraged homosexual believers to 'draw their identity from their sexuality' and thus to shift the ground of their identity subtly and idolatrously away from God.

"For more than 20 years, Gary had grappled with his homosexuality, experiencing it as a compulsion and an affliction. Now, as he faced death, he wanted to talk it all through again from the beginning, because he knew my love for him and trusted me to speak without dissembling...In particular, Gary wanted to discuss the biblical passages that deal with homosexual acts...

“He had read hopefully through the standard bibliography of the burgeoning movement advocating the acceptance of homosexuality in the church...In the end, he came away disappointed, believing that these authors, despite their good intentions, had imposed a wishful interpretation on the biblical passages... Gary, as a homosexual Christian, believed that their writings did justice neither to the biblical texts nor to the depressing reality of the gay subculture that he had moved in and out of for 20 years.” [1]

Hays writes that both he and Gary were frustrated that “the public discussion of this matter has been dominated by insistently ideological voices: on one side, gay rights activists demanding the church’s unqualified acceptance of homosexuality; on the other, unqualified homophobic condemnation of homosexual Christians.” Hays wrote this article, after Gary’s death, in the hope that it would “foster compassionate and carefully reasoned theological reflection within the community of faith.” I have quoted Hays because both here and in his studies on the Bible’s teaching about homosexuality, he expresses so well the spirit with which I have attempted to reflect on this terribly sensitive issue.

Let me start by pointing out that there are enough differences between male homosexuals (gay men) and lesbians that they should not automatically be lumped together, even though the two groups are often political allies. For example: few men are aware of choosing to be gay. Many women are not either, but a significant number of women “convert” to lesbianism, sometimes after years of marriage and raising children. For radical feminists, lesbianism can be a political choice, motivated more by feminist ideology than by an exclusive sexual attraction to women. For them, lesbianism is the strongest possible statement of contempt for men (or of their irrelevance). While many women become lesbians after experiencing abuse by men, there are also compelling ideas that draw feminists to embrace lesbianism. Obviously, to communicate with these women, we need to understand their thinking. We must also be prepared to face the uncomfortable fact that many of them grew up in families and churches where they experienced Christianity as bad news for women.

The Debate Among Christians

A growing number of scholars now claim that the Bible passages traditionally used to censure all homosexual behavior have been misunderstood and cannot legitimately be applied to the contemporary moral debate about homosexuality. These revisionist scholars include Catholics and Protestants, including some from an Evangelical background, like Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott who together wrote *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*

What unites these people is the conviction that Scripture nowhere teaches that homosexual behavior is intrinsically, and therefore always, wrong. They admit that the few biblical texts referring to homosexual acts all express disapproval, but it is argued that in each case there is something in the context that makes that particular expression of homosexuality immoral. For example: attempted gang rape or inhospitality in Sodom (Genesis 19), idolatry and ritual defilement in the Old Testament Holiness Code (Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13), lustful promiscuity in Romans (1:24-27), and pederasty (the sexual relationship of adult men with boys) in Corinth (1 Cor 6:9-11) and Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:9-10). They argue that what is censored in the Bible is not homosexuality itself, but only abusive, exploitive, uncommitted, or in other ways destructive expressions of it.

The question under debate is: Does the Bible teach that homosexual behavior is intrinsically wrong no matter what the context and personal motivation? Or, as with heterosexuality, does its rightness or wrongness depend on the specific context and motivation of the people involved? I don't have the space to analyze each of the Biblical references to homosexuality, so I will focus on Romans 1 because this passage clearly addresses the intrinsic moral status of homosexuality.

Romans 1:24-27: "Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

"Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion."

Paul's reference to homosexual behavior in Romans 1 appears in the context of his sweeping theological analysis of the fallen condition of humanity. The widespread practice of homosexuality in the pagan world is cited as evidence that human beings are in rebellion against the Creator. [2] Their exchange of natural sexual relations for unnatural reflects their exchange of the true God for idols. Paul is not arguing in a case-by-case way that every individual homosexual has consciously and willfully rejected God, rather he is making a sweeping diagnosis of the fallen human condition, and some of its tragic consequences.

The most influential revisionist scholar is the late Catholic Yale historian, John Boswell, author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality and Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*. According to Boswell, Romans 1 isn't talking about homosexuals at all. He writes "there is no clear condemnation of homosexual acts in the verses in question." Instead, Paul is condemning individual heterosexuals who go against ("exchange") their own "natural" heterosexual inclinations to engage in homoerotic behavior. [3] Boswell contends that to Paul, "nature" did not mean a universal moral order, but "the personal nature of the (individual) pagans in question."

There are two problems with this view. First of all, men who commit homosexual acts because they are "consumed with passion" or "inflamed with lust" for other men, are by any normal definition homosexual, not heterosexual. Paul is condemning homosexual acts committed by men with an erotic attraction to other men. He is describing men who are homosexual—psychologically and behaviorally. Secondly, Boswell's argument depends on ignoring or rejecting the most likely meaning of the Greek phrase *para physin* (unnatural) in favor of his own idiosyncratic meaning. *Para physin* was a common "stock phrase" or literary convention used by Graeco-Roman (Stoic) Moralists and Hellenistic Jews [4] and had the accepted meaning of against or contrary to nature, frequently used to designate homosexual acts as immoral, in contrast to heterosexual acts, which were natural or according to nature. To Paul and his audience, nature did refer to a "universal moral order." Furthermore, Jewish writers, like Paul's contemporary, Josephus, specifically associated the natural with God's Creation and Law.

Robin Scroggs, in *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, argues that Paul's clear denunciation of homosexual acts in Romans 1 refers only to pederasty, the predominant model of homosexuality in Paul's culture. Pederasty was an intrinsically exploitive, temporary, and unequal relationship between an adult male and a pre-adolescent boy (often a slave). [5] Scroggs argues that the contemporary gay Christian model of mutual, consenting, monogamous adult homosexual partnerships is so different that the N.T. teaching simply cannot be applied to it.

It is probably true that pederasty was in the forefront of Paul's mind, but he explicitly condemns the homoerotic element (male with male) not the pederastic element (man with boy) of the sexual practice. And the fact that Paul explicitly included female same-sex behavior in his condemnation, indicates that he had more in mind than pederasty. This is the only biblical reference to lesbianism, and the Graeco-Roman texts rarely refer to it. The fact that Paul

departed so dramatically from the literary conventions by including lesbianism baffles Scroggs because of his insistence that Paul “could only have had pederasty (an exclusively male phenomenon) in mind.” [6] But if Paul is condemning all homosexuality as contrary to the universal created nature of things, then the inclusion of lesbianism is not at all surprising. It is perfectly fitting.

I believe Scroggs, Boswell, and others miss the obvious in this passage: Paul uses homosexuality, in and of itself, as an illustration of the moral confusion and unrighteousness that comes from refusing to acknowledge the Creator who, as Jesus said, “made them male and female at the beginning, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall...be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’”(Mt. 19.4-5). Marriage between a man and a woman, two complementary equals, was established at creation as the only legitimate context for sexual intimacy.

In Romans I, Paul establishes the intrinsic immorality of homosexual behavior, irrespective of social context, personal motivation or anything else. This means that when Paul condemns pederasty (in 1 Cor 6:9-11) he not only condemns the exploitation involved in that practice, (which he surely hated),but also the homoeroticism itself. Paul’s teachings must therefore be taken seriously by Christians and applied (with love, care and sensitivity) in every culture to whatever model of homosexuality emerges.

Implications of the Bible’s Teaching

Homosexual behavior is wrong. But it is not the worst sin. It is not even singled out as the worst sexual sin. And it does not set people apart as sub-human or some kind of moral freaks. In dealing with this issue, two mandatory Christian attitudes are essential: humility and love.

First humility. It is scandalous when heterosexual Christians rant and rave about homosexual sin as a detestable abomination to God, while excusing themselves of other sins the Bible calls abominations—like lying, pride, stirring up dissension (or gossip), dishonest business practices and injustice in the law courts. [7] These things are also detestable to God. Furthermore, human nature is such that, given the circumstances, any of us could be tempted to commit sins, sexual or otherwise, that we now consider ourselves incapable of.

In Romans 1, Paul sets up what Richard Hays calls a “homiletical sting operation. The passage builds to a crescendo of condemnation ‘against those wicked pagans...’ But then, in Romans 2:1, the sting strikes: ‘Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others;

for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself....' All people—Jews and Greeks, Christians and non-Christians, heterosexuals and homosexuals stand in radical need of God's mercy." [8]

The second mandatory Christian attitude is love: Jesus says we must love our neighbor as ourselves, including our homosexual neighbor. James wrote that we cannot praise God and with the same tongue curse men and women who are made in God's likeness. Gay bashing and jokes are sinful and reveal unreality and hypocrisy in our praise of God.

We're commanded to show hospitality, literally to "love the stranger." God's word does not say: welcome people into your homes, lives and churches, except of course homosexuals. Paul even rebuked the Corinthian Christians for refusing to associate with sexually immoral non-Christians (1 Cor. 5:9). He said we would have to leave the world to avoid them, and that is not an option for Christians! We must be salt and light in the world, with non-Christian friends. If we try to walk the delicate line of loving practicing homosexuals without condoning their sexual practice, we will be accused of homophobia by those who demand acceptance and even celebration of homosexuality. Listen to the words of Black feminist bell hooks: "In the past year, I talked with a black woman Baptist minister, who though concerned about feminist issues, expressed very negative attitudes about homosexuality, because, she explained, the Bible teaches that it is wrong. Yet in her daily life she is tremendously supportive and caring of gay friends. When I asked her to explain this contradiction, she argued that it was not a contradiction, that the Bible also teaches her to identify with those who are exploited or oppressed." [9] This woman is a good example to us, yet bell hooks goes on to accuse her of "homophobic attitudes" that "encourage persecution of gay people" in the black churches.

Homosexual Orientation in a Biblical Perspective

We must understand homosexuality in light of the brokenness and abnormality of living in a fallen world. All of the Bible's references to homosexuality specify homosexual behavior or acts; there is no Hebrew or Greek word for a "homosexual person" as such. It cannot be denied that some people can only remember, as far back as they can recall, being attracted to the same sex. They are not aware of ever having had a choice in the matter. This raises a terribly troubling question. Isn't God cruel and unfair to prohibit homosexual behavior for those with a homosexual orientation they did not choose?

We must never minimize the suffering experienced by those with persistent homosexual desires, who struggle to be celibate. At the same time, ever since the fall, every one of us has

been born with an orientation, or predisposition, to sin which we have not consciously or freely chosen. Yet God holds us morally accountable for our acts. Paul puts it very strongly. “We are slaves of sin” (Romans 6:17)—so much so that we need redemption, a word that means emancipation from slavery. We have the “first fruits” of redemption, but our struggle against sin will not be over until the final redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23). Even if some people are biologically predisposed to homosexuality—that is not the same thing as causation—it does not determine behavior.

We are, in fact, in deep trouble if we believe that a biological predisposition for certain behavior (aggression for example) frees us from moral responsibility for our actions. Pre-Menstrual Syndrome affects some women dramatically. That does not excuse them morally if they abuse their children when suffering from PMS. The fact that the Bible speaks of homosexual behavior but not homosexual persons, should encourage us all. God does not define us by, or stigmatize us for our particular temptations (sinful dispositions or orientations), whatever they are! To define any person by their sexual orientation is to radically reduce a splendid Image bearer of God.

Thankfully, God sees everything, and understands the combination of factors—biology, environment, and choice—that influence our behavior. And He offers forgiveness and help to anyone who genuinely asks Him. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul says that some of the Christians in Corinth had been practicing homosexuals, but, by God’s grace, were no longer. The same is true for many today. There are no “quick fixes,” and Christians must beware of promising total healing for any problem in this still fallen world. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a great variety of therapeutic approaches have helped many homosexuals change both in orientation and practice.

Many find help in one of the ex-gay ministries, but it is also crucial for Christians struggling against homosexual temptation to have the love and support of a local church or Christian community, and particularly, close, affectionate, non-erotic friendships with heterosexual people of the same sex (healthy opposite sex friendships are also important).

Homosexuality, an Urgent Apologetics Issue

My husband and I speak on secular college campuses quite frequently, and our three sons have attended secular liberal arts colleges in New England. There is no question that in the non-Christian academic and media world today, homosexuality is the single issue that Christians feel most intimidated by, and are most scorned for. Where tolerance is believed to

be the highest virtue, Christians who believe homosexual practice is wrong are perceived to be on the lowest moral ground.

In terms of public opinion, the higher the prevalence of homosexuality, the more it appears to be just one among other sexual lifestyles—as morally neutral as being left-handed. The media, which tends to be strongly committed to “normalizing” homosexuality, makes the most of this, which is probably why we still hear the claim that 1 out of 10 people are homosexuals, even though that figure has been completely discredited. The figures for exclusive homosexuality are more like 1 to 3% for white males and half of that for females. But in fact, the prevalence of homosexuality has no logical bearing on the question of its morality. One can never argue from an “is” to an “ought.” For example, pride, greed and lust are extremely common in our culture, but that does not make them morally neutral or morally right. According to Genesis 19:4-5, the percentage of homosexual men in Sodom was far higher than in America today: “all the men, from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old” demanded to have sex with Lot’s guests. If we allow the Apostle Paul’s argument in Romans 1 to interpret the story of Sodom, then a high incidence of homosexual behavior does the opposite of normalizing it. It is evidence that a culture is in a state of significant confusion, distortion, and rebellion against God’s created order.

The Christian faith is unthinkable for many people today because of its teaching that for homosexuals, there is no morally legitimate way to express their sexuality, whereas for heterosexuals, there is at least the possibility of enjoying sex within marriage. This is true, but Francis Schaeffer wrote in 1968: “If a person who has homophile tendencies, or even has practiced homosexuality, is helped in a deep way, then they may marry. On the other hand, there are a certain number of cases who are real homophiles. In this case they must face the dilemma of a life without sexual fulfillment. We may cry with them concerning this, but we must not let the self-pity get too deep, because the unmarried girl who has strong sexual desires, and no one asks her to marry has the same problem. In both cases this is surely a part of the abnormality of the fallen world. And in both cases what is needed is people’s understanding while the church, in compassion and understanding, helps the individual in every way possible.” [10]

The same can be said of single men, widows and widowers, divorced and those who are sexually incapable. Teaching that distorts the Bible by making an idol of marriage (including sexual fulfillment within marriage) is not only false teaching, but is extremely unhelpful to all single people—some of whom may never marry. There is no denying that some Christians are

“homophobic,” in the way that term is defined by the gay movement. But the Bible’s prohibition against homosexual practice is not “homophobic.” It does not single out homosexual behavior for censure, nor does it condone hatred toward any person. In fact, the moral line the Bible draws is not between heterosexual behavior (good) and homosexual behavior (bad). All sexual activity that is not consensual, and in the context of heterosexual, monogamous marriage is immoral, and falls short of God’s norms.

This teaching is particularly difficult to swallow in an individualistic culture like ours, which has made sexual freedom into an idol. Our whole culture screams at us that to be human, to avoid neurosis, etc., everybody must be sexually active. Too many Christians have their own version of that lie by treating sex within marriage in an idolatrous way. At the same time, ironically, we are increasingly seeing the tragic and destructive fall-out of the idolatry of sex: a soaring divorce rate, unwanted pregnancies; abortions; single mothers and fatherless children; a whole array of STD’s (at epidemic levels on many college campuses today), sexual addictions; and of course, AIDS—which due to such high levels of promiscuity among gay men, has taken a particular toll in that population. All this is what comes from so-called “freedom!”

Christians need to challenge our culture’s idolatry of sexual freedom. In the first century, when pagans were converted to Christ, it was in the area of sexual morality that their lives tended to change most quickly and dramatically. And the pagans marveled at the Christians’ sexual freedom, defined as freedom from being driven by their passions, heterosexual and homosexual. It was a freedom that empowered them to live as chaste when single, and monogamously when married. This kind of freedom benefits the whole community—men, women and children—and protects the vulnerable, those who are hurt the most by individual sexual freedom run wild.

Commending the Bible’s Sex Ethic

One of the reasons a strong gay rights movement has emerged is that over the last decades, heterosexual marriage has lost its attractiveness and moral authority—both of which are needed to make the normativity of marriage persuasive and plausible. Many homosexual men and lesbian women quite reasonably point their fingers at the breakdown and ugliness of so many marriages today, and the abuse of women and children, which many of them have experienced first hand, in the so-called traditional family. It is not surprising that many are commending alternative “family forms.”

Bill Bennett has astutely pointed out that conservatives are in a panic about the issue of homosexual marriage while virtually ignoring the issue of divorce, which has been far more widespread and devastating to our culture. The breakdown of heterosexual marriage has come in large part from the idolatry of individual freedom and unwillingness to live within God's marriage norms. Homosexual marriage is just another step further down that same road.

This poses a huge challenge to us who believe that faithful, monogamous, heterosexual marriage is the Creator's norm, and is good for us. We, of all people, must be demonstrating that. This must mean much more than living with prohibitions. Our marriages and family lives must positively demonstrate the goodness of God's sexual and family norms; they must be beautiful, attractive and life-affirming for men, women and children. They must also be welcoming to others—including homosexuals—and a source of rich blessing in society. Celibate singleness must also be seen as a good, positive and productive call, as it was in the lives of Jesus, Paul, and other disciples, both men and women (Mt 19:12, 1 Cor 7, Mary, Martha and Lazarus, etc.). If these things are not living realities, we cannot expect our verbal apologetics for Biblical faith and sexual morality to be persuasive.

These are sensitive and complicated issues. Christians need to think them through in a sane and careful way and provide an alternative to the polarized rhetoric from extremists on all sides. This is one of the most important apologetics issues the Christian Church is facing today, and it is not likely to go away soon.

I have only touched on a few of the challenges surrounding this terribly difficult issue. We need God's grace to walk the tightrope, following His word with humility in all that it teaches, loving those who disagree with us, and reaching out in compassion to those men and women who are suffering the sad and tragic consequences of living outside the created sexual boundaries that God gave us for our good.

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