Welcoming But Not Affirming

Session Four

A Study of an Evangelical Response to Homosexuality

Homosexuality and Biblical Authority

In our second session we looked at the major passages from the Bible that purportedly condemn same-sex intercourse. The goal of that session was to see if recent biblical studies provide a sufficient foundation to revise the traditional understanding of these passages. We concluded that they do not and saw how the Bible has a consistent message that condemns same-sex intercourse.

This session deals with the manner that these texts ought to function in the construction of a contemporary Christian outlook toward homosexuality. So we now raise the sometimes controversial matter of the authority of the Bible in Christian sexual ethics.

How Does the Bible Speak to Homosexuality Today?

In what sense and to what extent does the Bible speak to this issue? Here are four basic options.

Total Biblical Silence

Some say that the Bible is actually silent on this issue. They say that the scriptures nowhere speak about homosexual behavior of any type. These persons would go on to say that Christians who condemn same-sex intercourse are simply misreading the texts. They would agree that some homosexual practices are unethical, but one ought not to attempt to build a case against homosexuality in general by appealing to verses in the Bible that are purportedly speaking about different issues.

This position requires only a brief response. Almost no contemporary biblical scholar asserts that none of these texts touches on homosexual practices of any type. Consequently, we may quickly dismiss this proposal.

Partial Biblical Silence

A view that is more widely held, and thus far more important, is the view that the Bible condemns certain same-sex practices, but that the target of these injunctions is a set of specific abuses found in biblical times. One biblical scholar who holds this view writes,

*Every text dealing with homosexual activity also refers to aggravating circumstances such as idolatry, sacred prostitution, promiscuity, violent rape, seduction of children, and violation of guests’ rights. As a result one can never be sure to what extent the condemnation was of homosexual activities as such or only the homosexual activities under these circumstances* (John McNeill, *Church and the Homosexual*).
Proponents of this view take an additional step. They say the biblical texts are not relevant to the issue that’s at the heart of today’s debate. They say these passages cannot be applied to the loving, committed, stable homosexual relationships today’s gays and lesbians are interested in maintaining.

Why not? The standard answer is simple: These relationships are expressions of a reality that the biblical writers knew nothing about, namely homosexuality as a fixed “sexual orientation,” a lifelong pattern of sexual preference. The implication of this belief is far-reaching:

If the biblical writers knew nothing of homosexuality as a congenital reality, (they would say) we are wrong in reading the biblical texts as condemning the loving expression exhibited between two persons who sexual preference is toward persons of the same sex. In fact, (they would say) for the one for whom homosexuality is a natural condition – to engage in homosexual acts is morally and ethically right, so long as such acts occur within a loving and responsible relationship.

This position builds from certain assumptions that require further scrutiny. For example, those that hold to this position say that the homosexual acts that are condemned in these verses are incidental to what was actually being condemned. However, the Old Testament writers do not generally condemn these acts solely because they were associated with the worship of pagan gods or some other violation. This position is based on another presupposition as well. It assumes that the biblical writers were ignorant of homosexuality as a stable sexual preference. This assumption is not valid. Certain thinkers in the Greco-Roman world (such as Ptolemy, Phaedrus and Aristotle) were aware of a type of constitutional homosexuality, even though they didn’t understand it the psychosexual categories in vogue today.

**Biblical Incorrectness**

This option is more radical than, yet closely connected to, the previous proposal. Many gay/lesbian activists readily acknowledge that the biblical writers condemn homosexuality. But, they quickly add, no one needs to take their condemnation seriously.

Why not? Some say that because homosexuality was of such minimal concern to these writers the scriptural condemnations they wrote shouldn’t occupy us today. Canadian scholar Christopher Levan writes:

*The Bible cannot act as a solid basis upon which to make ethical judgments about homosexual practice when, on the whole, the biblical record treats same-sexual intimacy as a peripheral concern. How can Christian theology declare a law to be significant when the biblical record treats the issue against which the law is written as an inconsequential problem?*

Of course the question must be raised as to how much attention biblical writers must give to any issue before we take it seriously. The Bible is just as reserved in speaking about other matters such as incest and child abuse. Yet this relative silence does not dissuade us from rightly seeing such practices as requiring our attention.

More significant is the claim that in condemning same-sex intercourse the biblical writers were simply wrong. Some contemporary scholars openly declare their view that the teaching of the Bible on these topics are not binding on Christians today.
Gay theologian Gary Comstock writes,

*Those passages will be brought up and used against us again and again and again until Christians demand their removal from the Bible or, at the very least, formally discredit their authority to prescribe behavior.*

On what basis do they judge these texts so harshly? They simply say the Bible can’t stand as the foundational source for Christian sexual ethics. They look to some other norm that they would place on par with biblical teaching. For their overarching authority, gay and lesbian activists typically appeal to their own personal experience. Foundational to them is their quest for acceptance and a sense of personal well-being about gay or lesbian persons.

This thinking sits in judgment over the biblical texts and the teaching of the church. Indeed, with this criterion in place, lesbian and gay critics can pick and choose what in the Christian tradition they find affirming, while rejecting whatever is critical or demands behavioral change. John McNeill writes:

*We must ask ourselves which of the church’s values we continue to want, respect, and love; in other words, which values are compatible with who we are and are not destructive of our dignity as persons.*

This type of mindset leads many activists to place a high value on personal autonomy. Gary Comstock writes:

*Salvation is “to choose your self,” not to “be afraid of yourself,” to live your individuality to the full – but for the good of others.*

This allows him to look within himself, and not to external norms of scripture and tradition, in his quest for acceptance. He views this not as an act of rebellion, but a bold step of independence.

Some gays and lesbians offer a second basis for rejecting the teaching of the Bible. They critique these texts as being legalistic reflections of ancient cultural prejudices. More specifically, they argue that the injunctions against same-sex intercourse are the product of a deeply ingrained bias toward heterosexual males that arose out of the patriarchal nature of ancient society.

Obviously, this third approach raises the question: In what sense can the biblical documents be said to be authoritative sources for theology and ethics in any ultimate way?

**Biblical Normativity**

Posing this question leads to yet a fourth option. Perhaps the Bible does speak to homosexuality as we know it today, and what it says is normative for Christians. Viewed from this perspective, the decision one makes about the validity of homosexual behavior for members of the Christian community is effectively a decision about the authority of the Bible in the life of the church.

But exactly how ought the biblical statements to function in a normative manner today? To this central question we now turn.
How Should We Understand the Biblical Statements?

Most of the people involved in the current debate about the proper Christian stance toward same-sex behavior would agree that the Bible ought to function authoritatively in the church. The question that divides the participants’ conversation is: How? What role should the biblical texts play in the construction of a Christian sex ethic? How can the Bible help us respond constructively to the issue of homosexuality? How should we be reading scripture in the midst of this controversy? Is short, what is the key that can bring the Bible into constructive conversation with our contemporary situation?

The Bible verses the Texts

Many who want a more inclusive stance toward homosexuality generally appeal to the Bible as a whole over against the texts that purportedly condemn homosexual behavior. They point to certain themes they believe capture the heart of the biblical witness, and to them the gospel itself when properly understood. Thus they say these themes demand the affirmation of homosexual persons, despite the presence of passages from the Bible that at, in their view, appear to censure same-sex relations.

What are these themes? Opinions vary. However principles to form the scriptural foundations for Christian sexual ethics would include being shaped by love, justice, equality, fidelity, mutual respect, compassion, and grateful joy. Other scholars offer a more theologically focused foundation that would include covenant, love, justice and liberation.

The Bible and the Texts

Again, many who want a more inclusive stance toward homosexuality appeal to this principle: The “part” must be understood in the light of the “whole.” Hence, the individual texts that deal with homosexuality must be placed in the context of the whole of scripture. Further, they would say that the contemporary focus on themes of love and justice as providing the foundation for a Christian sex ethic is surely not misguided.

Viewed in its entirety, the Bible does teach an ethic of love and does issue a call to justice. But those that teach that these themes override biblical teaching that condemns homosexual behavior move beyond sound biblical study.

Homosexuality and the Church

The contemporary discussion of homosexuality leads inevitably to the central practical issue needing resolution today, the place of homosexual persons in the church. Is there a place for homosexual persons in the church? A wide range of views is found among contemporary Christians. Yet the spectrum of opinion coalesces into four basic positions.

1. Unqualified Openness – This position is convinced that the only way forward is to place homosexuality on equal footing with heterosexuality. Thus, they argue that homosexual persons should participate fully in all dimensions of church life. Gays and lesbians should serve in any role – including the ordained office – to which they sense the requisite all and gifting of the Spirit.
2. **Qualified Acceptance** – This view is that the church gladly accept lesbians and gays as members of the church. But they cannot support the ordination of practicing homosexual persons. Nor do they believe the church should sanction same-sex marriages.

3. **Differentiated Acceptance** – Proponents differentiate between homosexual acts, which they deem sinful, and same-sex preference, which they believe is not. On the basis of this distinction, proponents urge the church to focus on behavior and to treat homosexual practices as one type of sin among many. Further, not only ordination but even church membership ought to be limited to those homosexual persons who are sexually abstinent.

4. **Undifferentiated Rejection** – This position finds no warrant for distinguishing between sexual orientation and sexual behavior. As a result, they believe that no admittedly homosexual person can be a member in good standing in the church.

As this delineation suggests, the question “Is there a place for homosexual persons in the church?” encompasses several issues. Our remaining time will focus on what a Christian ethical response towards homosexual persons should be.

**Questions to Consider**

Should the church welcome gay and lesbian believers into membership?

Should the church formally “bless” same-sex relationships in a manner similar to heterosexual marriages?

Should persons in committed same-sex relationships be barred from ordination?

**The Church’s Public Stance**

Let’s look at what ought to be at the heart of the church’s stance on the central dimensions of the current public debate.

**The Treatment of Homosexual Persons**

Throughout the Bible, a crucial test for the genuineness of a person’s faith is his or her treatment of the needy, as well as the social outcasts of the day (e.g. Ex. 22:21-27; Matt. 25:31-46; James 1:27). One important aspect of this “test” is one’s attitude toward persons whose conduct does not square with Christian moral convictions. Taking this seriously means that we never allow the conclusion that homosexual behavior is immoral to provide fodder for physical or psychological attacks on persons who engage in such conduct. Nor can we condone the practice painting homosexual persons in the worst possible light as a means to raise funds for Christian organizations.

Yet simply avoiding such abuses is not sufficient. The New Testament writers instruct Jesus’ disciples to pattern themselves after his own example. Our Lord was able to extend nonjudgmental, compassionate grace without moral compromise to all persons (e.g. John 8:1-11; Luke 7:36-50). Consequently, Christians ought to be known as a people who come alongside, and minister to, those with whom they disagree.
This includes ministering as persons to persons, of course. Christians ought to help homosexual persons and their families cope with their situation in constructive, God-honoring ways. However, it is often true that well-meaning Christians may protest and out-legislate pro-gay bills in their state senate but may never cultivate a friendship that will help change the heart of a person struggling with homosexuality.

Another significant way of coming alongside gays and lesbians is promoting wholesome attempts to combat homophobia in the church and in society. A first step toward this goal involves gaining a clear understanding as to what homophobia actually is. In contrast to what the term itself suggests, homophobia is in fact not a phobia as all. It is not an irrational fear, similar to claustrophobia or agoraphobia. The current widespread use of the word as a pejorative designation for anyone who questions the morality of homosexual relationships and same-sex intercourse is nonproductive.

Rightly understood, homophobia is a prejudice. In certain respects it is somewhat akin to racism and anti-Semitism. Hence, the homophobia Christians ought to combat is hatred or devaluing of persons for no other reason than because they are sexually aroused by persons of the same sex. Patterning our lives after Jesus leads us to love and value all persons— including gays and lesbians— as persons whom God loves and values. Unfortunately, an improper prejudice against homosexual persons is prevalent in the church.

**Welcoming But Not Affirming**

Like the earliest Christians, we must struggle with the questions: What kind of sexual behavior befits persons within the believing community? What constitutes holiness in life and relationships? Yet the issue at stake here is larger than merely the morality of same-sex relationships. All who would become the Lord’s disciples and hence join the discipleship community must do so on God’s terms, not their own. This entails being willing to leave behind old sinful practices— including unchaste sexual behaviors— so that together we might become a holy people.

For this reason, the welcoming community cannot always be an affirming one. Christ’s community welcomes all sinners, affirming them as persons of value in God’s sight. But like the Master who boldly commanded the adulterous woman the Jewish leaders brought to him, “from now on do not sin again: (John 8:11), the welcoming community of Christ’s disciples steadfastly refuses to affirm any type of sinful behavior.

The current discussion about homosexuality poses a grave challenge to the church. At the same time, it is a moment of great opportunity. The current debate offers us an opportunity to think through the Christian sexual ethic clearly and carefully. More importantly, it calls us back once again to God’s bountiful grace. The divine call to live out our sexuality in ways that bring honor to God is a difficult challenge, especially in our permissive society. Yet the resources of the Holy Spirit are greater than the obstacles that would thwart us. And because the challenge is one we all face, whether straight or gay, we face it best together. For the sake of the gospel in the world, therefore, we need to assist each other and rely on each other, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit working through us, we might live in true biblical chastity to the glory of God. In the end, this is what it means to be a welcoming, yet not always affirming, community.