

Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality

by Walter Wink

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No more divisive issue faces the churches of this country today than the question of ordaining homosexuals. Like the issue of slavery a century ago, it has the potential for splitting entire denominations. And like the issue of slavery, the argument revolves around the interpretation of Scripture. What does the Bible say about homosexuality, and how are we to apply it to this tormented question?

We may begin by excluding all references to Sodom in the Old and New Testaments, since the sin of the Sodomites was homosexual *rape*, carried out by heterosexuals intent on humiliating strangers by treating them “like women,” thus demasculinizing them. (This is also the case in a similar account in Judges 19-21.) Their brutal gang-rape has nothing to do with the problem of whether genuine love expressed between consenting persons of the same sex is legitimate or not. Likewise Deuteronomy 23:17-18 must be pruned from the list, since it most likely refers to a heterosexual “stud” involved in Canaanite fertility rites that have infiltrated Jewish worship; the King James Version inaccurately labeled him a “sodomite.”

Several other texts are ambiguous. It is not clear whether I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:10 refer to the “passive” and “active” partners in homosexual relationships, or to homosexual and heterosexual male prostitutes. In short, it is unclear whether the issue is homosexuality alone, or promiscuity and “sex-for-hire.”

Unequivocal Condemnations

With these texts eliminated, we are left with three references, all of which unequivocally condemn homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 states the principle:

“You [masculine] shall not lie-with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” The second (Lev. 20:13) adds the penalty: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.”

Such an act was regarded as an “abomination” for several reasons. The Hebrew prescientific understanding was that male semen contained the whole of nascent life. With no knowledge of eggs and ovulation, it was assumed that the woman provided only the incubating space. Hence the spilling of semen for *any* nonprocreative purpose -- in coitus interruptus (Gen. 38:1-11), male homosexual acts or male masturbation -- was considered tantamount to abortion or murder. (Female homosexual acts and masturbation were consequently not so seriously regarded.) One can appreciate how a tribe struggling to populate a country in which its people were outnumbered would value procreation highly, but such values are rendered questionable in a world facing total annihilation through overpopulation.

In addition, when a man acted like a woman sexually, male dignity was compromised. It was a *degradation*, not only in regard to himself, but for every other male. The patriarchalism of Hebrew culture shows its hand in the very formulation of the commandment, since no similar stricture was formulated to forbid homosexual acts between females. On top of that is the more universal repugnance heterosexuals tend to feel for acts and orientations foreign to them. (Left-handedness has evoked something of the same response in many cultures.)

Whatever the rationale for their formulation, however, the texts leave no room for maneuvering. Persons committing homosexual acts are to be executed. The meaning is clear: anyone who wishes to base his or her beliefs on the witness of the Old Testament must be completely consistent and demand the death penalty for everyone who performs homosexual acts. This was in fact the case until fairly recent times -- hence the name “faggots,” which homosexuals earned while burning at the stake. Even though no tribunal is likely to execute homosexuals ever again, a shocking number of gays are murdered by “straights” every year in this country.

The third text is Romans 1:26-27, which, like Leviticus 18 and 20, unequivocally denounces homosexual behavior:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

No doubt Paul was unaware of the distinction between sexual orientation, over which one has apparently very little choice, and sexual behavior. He apparently assumes that those whom he condemns are heterosexual, and are acting contrary to nature, “leaving,” “giving up,” or “exchanging” their regular sexual orientation for that which is foreign to them. Paul knew nothing of the modern psychosexual understanding of homosexuals as persons whose orientation is fixed early in life, persons for whom having heterosexual relations would be acting contrary to nature, “leaving,” “giving up” or “exchanging” their usual sexual orientation.

Likewise the relationships Paul describes are heavy with *lust*; they are not relationships of genuine same-sex love. Paul assumes that venereal disease is the divine punishment for homosexual behavior; we know it as a risk involved in promiscuity of every stripe, but would hesitate to label it a divine punishment, since not everyone who is promiscuous contracts it. And Paul believes that homosexuality is contrary to nature, whereas we have learned that it is manifested by a wide variety of species, especially (but not solely) under the pressure of overpopulation. It would appear then to be a quite natural mechanism for preserving species.

Other Practices

Nevertheless, the Bible quite clearly takes a negative view of homosexuality, in those few instances where it is mentioned at all. And the repugnance felt toward homosexuality was not just that it was deemed unnatural but also that it was considered unJewish, representing yet one more incursion of pagan civilization into Jewish life. But this conclusion does not solve the hermeneutical problem of our attitude toward homosexuality today. For there are other sexual attitudes, practices and restrictions which are normative in Scripture but which we no longer accept as normative:

1. Nudity, the characteristic of paradise, was regarded in Judaism as reprehensible, even within the family (Lev. 18:6-19; Ezek. 22:10; II Sam. 6:20; 10:4; Isa. 20:2-4; - 47:3). For a son to look upon his father's nudity was equivalent to a crime (Gen. 9:20-27). To a great extent this taboo probably even inhibited the practice of husbands and wives (this is still true of a surprising number of people reared in the Judeo-Christian taboo system). We may not be prepared for nude beaches, but are we prepared to regard nudity in the locker room or at the old swimming hole or in the home as an accursed *sin*?

2. Old Testament law strictly forbids sexual intercourse during the seven days of the menstrual period (Lev. 18: 19; 15:18-24), and anyone who engaged in it was to be summarily executed (Lev. 18:29, though 15:24 contradicts this). Today many people on occasion have intercourse

during menstruation and think nothing of it. Are they sinners?

3. The Bible nowhere explicitly prohibits sexual relations between unmarried consenting adults -- a discovery that caused John Calvin no little astonishment. The Song of Songs eulogizes a love affair between two unmarried persons, though even some scholars have conspired to cover up the fact with heavy layers of allegorical interpretation. For millennia the church has forbidden sex outside of marriage. Today many teen-agers, single adults, the widowed and the divorced are reverting to "biblical" practice, while others continue to believe that sexual intercourse belongs only within marriage. Which view is right?

4. The Bible virtually lacks terms for the sexual organs, being content with such euphemisms as "foot" or "thigh" for the genitals, and using other euphemisms to describe coitus, such as "he knew her." Today we regard such language as "puritanical" and contrary to a proper regard for the goodness of creation.

5. Semen and menstrual blood rendered all who touched them unclean (Lev. 15:16-24). Intercourse rendered one unclean until sundown; menstruation rendered the woman unclean for seven days. Some people may still feel that uncleanness attaches to semen and menstrual blood, but most people who consider themselves "enlightened" regard these fluids as completely natural and only at times "messy, not "unclean."

Adultery, Prostitution and Polygamy

6. Social regulations regarding adultery, incest, rape and prostitution are, in the Old Testament, determined largely by considerations of the males' property rights over women. Prostitution was considered quite natural and necessary as a safeguard of the virginity of the unmarried and the property rights of husbands (Gen. 38:12-19; Josh. 2:1-7). A man was not guilty of sin for visiting a prostitute, though the prostitute herself was regarded as a sinner. Even Paul must appeal to reason in attacking prostitution (I Cor. 6:12-20); he cannot lump it in the category of adultery (vs. 9). Today we are moving, with great social turbulence and at a high but necessary cost, toward a more equitable set of social arrangements in which women are no longer regarded as the chattel of men; love, fidelity and mutual respect replace property rights and concern to reduce competition between related males for the same woman. We have, as yet, made very little progress in changing the double standard in regard to prostitution. As the moral ground shifts, will moral positions remain the same?

7. The punishment for adultery was death by stoning for both the man and the woman (Deut. 22:22), but here adultery is defined by the marital status of the *woman*. A married man who has intercourse with an

unmarried woman is not an adulterer -- again, the double standard. And a bride who is found not to be a virgin is to be stoned to death (Deut. 22:13-21), but male virginity at marriage is never even mentioned. Today some Christians argue that the development of contraceptives makes even the social prohibition against extramarital intercourse passé - - which is to say, they are prepared to extend to women the privileges which the Old Testament freely accords to men. Others, who believe that sexual intercourse requires a monogamous context for true love to flourish, would nonetheless be aghast at the idea of stoning those who disagree.

8. Polygamy was regularly practiced in the Old Testament. It goes unmentioned in the New -- unless, as many scholars now believe, I Timothy 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6 mean, as the Greek plainly reads, that bishops and deacons should have only one wife, referring not to divorce and remarriage (surely a widowed and remarried bishop was not disallowed) but to polygamy. If so, polygamy was still being practiced in the early church but was beginning to be discouraged. We know from the Mishnah and the Talmud that polygamy continued to be practiced sporadically within Judaism for centuries following the New Testament period. Christian missionaries to Africa in past centuries were ruthless in demanding that tribal chieftains divorce all but one wife, with tragic consequences for the ones rejected. Now many wonder whether some other arrangement might have been more humane, even if it included tolerance of polygamy in at least the first generation of believers.

No Longer Binding

9. A form of polygamy was the levirate marriage. When a married man in Israel died childless, his brother was supposed to marry the widow and sire children for his deceased brother. Jesus mentions this custom without criticism (Matt. 22:23-33). Today not even devout Jews observe this unambiguous commandment (Deut. 25:5-10).

10. In the New Testament, Paul taught that it was best not to marry (I Cor. 7). While he qualifies this as his own advice and not a commandment of the Lord, it is clearly advice that most Christians choose to ignore. And here and elsewhere, in explicitly authoritative teaching, Scripture teaches patriarchal, male-dominant marital relationships as the norm. Do we wish to perpetuate that teaching?

11. Jews were supposed to practice endogamy -- that is, marriage within the 12 tribes of Israel. Until recently a similar rule prevailed in the American south, in laws against interracial marriage (miscegenation). We have witnessed, within our own lifetimes, the legal battle to nullify state laws against miscegenation and the gradual change in social attitudes toward toleration and even acceptance of interracial couples in

public. Sexual mores can alter quite radically even in a single lifetime.

12. The Old Testament regarded celibacy as abnormal (Jeremiah's divinely commanded celibacy is a sign of doom for the families of Israel [Jer. 16: 1-4]), and I Timothy 4:1-3 calls compulsory celibacy a heresy. Yet the Catholic Church has made it normative for priests and nuns.

13. In many other ways we have developed different norms from those explicitly laid down by the Bible: "When men fight with one another and the wife of the one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of him who is beating him, and puts out her hand and seizes him by the private parts [i.e., testicles], then you shall cut off her hand" (Deut. 25:11 f.). We, on the contrary, might very, well applaud her. And just as we no longer countenance slavery, which both Old and New Testaments regarded as normal, so we also no longer countenance the use of female slaves, concubines and captives as sexual toys or breeding machines by their male owners, which Leviticus 19:20 f., II Samuel 5:13 and Numbers 31:17-20 permitted -- and as many American slave owners did slightly over 100 years ago.

The Problem of Authority

These cases are relevant to our attitude toward the authority of Scripture. Clearly we regard certain things, especially in the Old Testament, as no longer binding. Other things we regard as binding, including legislation in the Old Testament that is not mentioned at all in the New. What is the principle of selection here? Most of us would regard as taboo intercourse with animals, incest, rape, adultery, prostitution, polygamy, levirate marriage and concubinage -- even though the Old Testament permits the last four and the New Testament is silent regarding most of them.

How do we make judgments that these should be taboo, however? There exist no simply biblical grounds, for as I have tried to show, in other respects many of us would clearly *reject* biblical attitudes and practices regarding nudity, intercourse during menstruation, prudery about speaking of the sexual organs and act, the "uncleanness" of semen and menstrual blood, endogamy, levirate marriage, and social regulations based on the assumption that women are sexual properties subject to men. Obviously many of our choices in these matters are arbitrary. Mormon polygamy was outlawed in this country, despite the constitutional protection of freedom of religion, because it violated the sensibilities of the dominant Christian culture, even though no explicit biblical prohibition against polygamy exists. (Jesus' teaching about divorce is no exception, since he quotes Genesis 2:24 as his authority, and this text was never understood in Israel as excluding polygamy. A man could become "one flesh" with more than one woman, through the

act of intercourse.)

The problem of authority is not mitigated by the doctrine that the *cultic* requirements of the Old Testament were abrogated by the New, and that only the *moral* commandments of the Old Testament remain in force. For most of these sexual mores fall among the *moral* commandments. If Christ is the end of the law (Rom.10:4), if we have been discharged from the law to serve, not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit (Rom.7:6), then all of these Old Testament sexual mores come under the authority of the Spirit. We cannot then take even what Paul says as a new law. Even fundamentalists reserve the right to pick and choose which laws they will observe, though they seldom admit to doing just that. For the same Paul who condemns homosexual acts as sinful is the Paul who tells women like Anita Bryant to remain silent in the church (I Cor. 14:34). If Anita Bryant were consistently biblical, she would demand that gays be stoned to death -- though she would never be able to say so in church!

‘Judge for Yourselves’

The crux of the matter, it seems to me, is simply that the Bible has no sexual ethic. *There is no biblical sex ethic.* The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period.

Approached from the point of view of love, rather than that of law, the issue is at once transformed. Now the question is not “What is permitted?” but rather “What does it mean to love my homosexual neighbor?” Approached from the point of view of faith rather than of works, the question ceases to be “What constitutes a breach of divine law in the sexual realm?” and becomes instead “What constitutes obedience to the God revealed in the cosmic lover, Jesus Christ?” Approached from the point of view of the Spirit rather than of the letter, the question ceases to be “What does Scripture command?” and becomes “What is the Word that the Spirit speaks to the churches now, in the light of Scripture, tradition, theology, psychology, genetics, anthropology and biology?”

In a little-remembered statement, Jesus said, “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” (Luke 12:57). Such sovereign freedom strikes terror in the hearts of many Christians; they would rather be under law and be *told* what is right. Yet Paul himself echoes Jesus’ sentiment immediately preceding one of his possible references to homosexuality: “Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!” (I Cor. 6:3). The last thing Paul would want is for people to respond to his ethical advice as a new law engraved on tablets of stone. He is himself trying to “judge for himself what is right.” If now

new evidence is in on the phenomenon of homosexuality, are we not obligated -- no, *free* -- to re-evaluate the whole issue in the light of all available data and decide, under God, for ourselves? Is this not the radical freedom for obedience which the gospel establishes?

It may, of course, be objected that this analysis has drawn our noses so close to texts that the general tenor of the whole is lost. The Bible clearly considers homosexuality a sin, and whether it is stated three times or 3,000 is beside the point. Just as some of us grew up "knowing" that homosexuality was the unutterable sin, though no one ever spoke of it, so the whole Bible "knows" it to be wrong.

I freely grant all that. The issue is precisely whether that biblical judgment is correct. The whole tenor of the Bible sanctions slavery as well, and nowhere attacks it as unjust. Are we prepared to argue that slavery today is biblically justified? The overwhelming burden of the biblical message is that women are inferior to men. Are we willing to perpetuate that status? Jesus himself explicitly forbids divorce for any case (Matthew has added "except adultery" to an unqualified statement). Are we willing to forbid divorce, and certainly remarriage, for everyone whose marriage has become intolerable?

A Profound Prejudice

The fact is that there is, behind the legal tenor of Scripture, an even deeper tenor, articulated by Israel out of the experience of the Exodus and brought to sublime embodiment in Jesus' identification with harlots, tax collectors, the diseased and maimed and outcast and poor. It is that God sides with the powerless, God liberates the oppressed, God suffers with the suffering and groans toward the reconciliation of all things. In the light of that supernal compassion, whatever our position on gays, the gospel's imperative to love, care for, and be identified with their sufferings is unmistakably clear.

Many of us have a powerful personal revulsion against homosexuality -- a revulsion that goes far beyond reason to what almost seems to us an instinctual level. Homosexuality seems "unnatural" -- and it would be for most of us. I myself have had to struggle against feelings of superiority and prejudice in regard to gays. Yet for some persons it appears to be the only natural form their sexuality takes. This feeling of revulsion or alienness, or simply of indifference, is no basis, however, for ethical decisions regarding our attitudes toward homosexuality. It seems to me that we simply need to acknowledge that for the majority of us who are heterosexual by nature this deep feeling amounts to nothing more than prejudice when applied to others. It has no sure biblical warrant, no ethical justification. It is just the way we feel about those who are different. And if we can acknowledge that profound prejudice, perhaps

we can begin to allow others their preferences as well.

I want to close by quoting a paragraph from a 1977 address by C. Kilmer Myers, bishop of California, before the Episcopal House of Bishops:

The model for humanness is Jesus. I know many homosexuals who are radi would be a desertion, I believe, of our Master, Jesus Christ. And that I will : cost. I could not possibly return to my diocese and face them, these homose look upon me as their father in God, their brother in Christ, their friend, we stand outside the hedge of the New Israel, you are rejected by God. Your lo yes, your faltering, your reaching out, your tears, your search for love, your nothing! You are damned! You have no place in the household of God. You is no room for you in the priesthood or anywhere else.” There are voices in proclaiming this total ostracism in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. What wil response to this in the House of Bishops?

Now that this issue has become one that none of us can dodge, what will be the nature of our response?