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## Homosexuality and the Body of Christ: An Opportunity for Reflection

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# Homosexuality and the Body of Christ: An Opportunity for Reflection

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by Michael Williams

## **T**he Homosexual Insurgency

Mass communications and the information revolution have radically reconfigured the cultural landscape. Future shock has created present anxiety as we become increasingly aware that our social reality is not a monoculture, but actually a vast array of cultures. Popular culture reads the sociological fact of life-style, political, and confessional diversity as an evidence that such differences are inconsequential, that all religions, ide-

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ologies, and mores stand upon equal footing. The very nature of reality—at least our cultural reality—is relative, particular to a given place, a given time, a given community. On the basis of experienced diversity and relativity, tolerance and courteous sociability are elevated to cultural virtues, and thus the fact of pluralism is transformed into a norm, the only norm, for all else is flux.

Sociological pluralism becomes ideological pluralism. The fact that many diverse worldviews, cultures, and religions exist is taken as evidence that this is the way things ought to be. Popular culture challenges all claims of an absolute truth, not by assessing those claims but by preemptively dismissing truth as a relevant category.<sup>1</sup>

In the past two decades, a socially and politically belligerent gay and lesbian movement has capitalized upon the growing acknowledgement of cultural pluralism in postmodern culture. As never before, we are witnessing a gay and lesbian movement that seeks to advance its agenda as the natural extension of civil rights for minorities and oppressed people.

While many, perhaps the great majority of North Americans have been suprised, shocked, and sometimes outraged by this movement for radical cultural and political change, the gay and lesbian movement has been successful in attracting considerable support from heterosexuals who accept the claim that homosexual acceptance is the natural course of social justice and cultural tolerance.

According to the gay and lesbian agenda, human sexual habits are purely a matter of taste. The only difference between the homosexual and straight

community is a choice of lifestyle. Those who moralistically call down the wrath of God upon the homosexual do so out of homophobia and sexual imperialism.

As it pertains to the body of Christ, what we are starting to see is a flip-flop of moral value between the church and the homosexual movement. Dan Spencer, a gay ethicist, writing in *Sojourners* magazine in 1991, claimed that the gay experience has discovered that homosexuality is a gift from God. Hence Spencer's sexual orientation is an obedient response to divine initiative. Thus, based upon his gay experience, Spencer calls upon the church to redefine its priorities. "The focus must shift from debating the naturalness and acceptability of gay and lesbian people, to confronting and combating homophobia and heterosexualism." If there is a sexual sin in our culture, it is the homophobic rejection of the full personhood of the homosexual by heterosexuals within the traditional church. What we see here is the homosexual movement claiming the moral high ground. In a recent interview in *The Door*, Michael Piazza, a gay pastor, claimed that it is the gay and lesbian community that has really experienced the depths of God's reconciliation. It is they who really know what it is to follow the narrow road of hard discipleship. Where homosexuality was once a sin, the message from the popular media is that heterosexualism is the true sexual sin of modernity, perhaps the only sexual sin.

This conversion of the culturally marginalized and victimized into the truly virtuous has, of course, been aided by the AIDS epidemic. Upon accepting his academy award for best actor as a gay man dying of AIDS in the movie "Philadelphia," Tom Hanks depicted the gay community as the angelic hosts of God come to judge America for its sexual fascism. His acceptance speech was applauded as a prophetic oracle by his audience. The AIDS epidemic of the last decade has produced a sequence of social change regarding homosexuality in Western culture which moves from tolerance of alternative lifestyles and sexual mores, to compassion or pity for the victimized, and finally to full affirmation.

While wishing to be as tolerant of cultural diversity as possible, while seeing compassion for the hurting and marginalized as a fundamental call of

the kingdom of God, while wanting desperately to affirm the full humanity of every human being, I share the discomfort of most Americans with the moral proposals advanced by the homosexual movement. I believe that we must not make peace with the rampant dysfunctionality of our culture. I believe that there are good reasons for the intuitive and pre-articulate anxiety that most people feel toward homosexuality.

The charge of homophobia is finally unpersuasive, and it fails to intimidate. As Richard Mouw rightly points out, disagreement with the normalcy or moral acceptability of homosexual behavior does not mean that one is gripped by a "phobia."<sup>2</sup>

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But I will go further. I do not think it a bad thing or a phobia that people should experience a reflexive recoil from moral error. I take it as an illustration that God maintains his creation and his moral word for it. I take it as a good sign that even in our fallenness, we as a species retain some sense of the right and true over against the false and damaging. Such revulsion is not phobic. It is the result of God's own faithfulness to his work. God still maintains and preserves something of the moral conscience in fallen humanity.

### **The Biblical Witness**

The natural and normal revulsion that most people experience when confronted with homosexuality is affirmed by the biblical witness concerning homosexuality. The number of texts is quite small;<sup>3</sup> seven explicit references. And all the texts are quite straightforward in their meaning. Genesis 19, the story of Lot and the angelic visitors, may be the most difficult, being narrative rather than prescriptive in genre. Hays believes the text to be of negligible weight due to the possibility that hospitality may be the primary *sin* of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. For my part, I see no good reason to doubt that homosexual behavior is the great and grievous sin referred to in 18:20. The context and tone of the story lead me to

believe that there is an implicit—but rather strong—moral condemnation of homogenital activity in Genesis 19.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 both declare homosexual acts as detestable to God. The latter text identifies homosexual activity as a capital offense under the Old Testament Holiness Code. Attempts to dismiss the Leviticus texts as cultic law without abiding moral relevance appear artificial and convenient. Leviticus 20:13 appears within a list of thirteen injunctions regarding sexual behavior, a list which shows no evidence of being cultic in character. Leviticus 18:22 is bracketed on the one side by injunctions against adultery and child sacrifice (vv20-21) and bestiality on the other (v23). Rejecting the Holiness Code injunctions on the grounds of redemptive-historical obsolescence, as some homosexual Christians would like to do, seems to me to open the door to far more problems than even the homosexual Christian community would be willing to consider.

As to the New Testament church, it consistently adopted the Old Testament's teaching on matters of sexual morality, and on homosexual acts in particular. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:26-27, we find homosexuality included in lists of behaviors and dispositions that are unacceptable to God. In fact, 1 Corinthians 6:9 provides us with an important bridge between the testaments regarding the continuity of the biblical attitude on homosexuality. Paul refers to the homosexual offenders or sodomites as *arsenokoitai*. This word is not found in any extant secular Greek text earlier than 1 Corinthians. But it does appear in the LXX of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. I think it appropriate to conclude that Paul is presupposing and affirming the Holiness Code's condemnation of homosexual acts.

While only a few biblical texts address homosexual activity, all of them express unqualified disapproval, a disapproval that carries the weight of a condemnation. In this respect, the issue of homosexuality differs significantly from that of the subordination of women. Attempts by homosexual exegesis to ride the coat tails of expanding roles for women within the institutional church appear self-seeking and intentionally confusing. Biblically, it is not an apples and apples equation, or even apples and oranges, but rather apples and rabbit's feet.

## **The Complexity of the Issue**

What I want to do is recognize that while Scripture is authoritative for the people of God, it is not enough merely to cite the text. We cannot simply review the biblical "data," congratulate ourselves for agreeing with the Word of God, and call the problem solved. We start with the text; it is not an end-point. Homosexuality and the way it is argued within the body of Christ raises the question of truth, in terms of both creational norms and the call of redemption and sanctification. It also raises the question of justice, seeking and doing that which is appropriate, imaging God and following Christ in the midst of a fractured and often ambiguous world. Homosexuality is a theological issue, but that may be the easiest aspect of it. It is also an urgent pastoral issue for the body of Christ, and a policy issue for Christian institutions (we might add that it is also a psychological, sociological, and political issue). As to the pastoral and policy aspects, it is anything but neat and easy, and no stance that informed and committed Christians take will constitute a painless resolution or be met with unanimous approval.

The issue of homosexuality challenges the body of Christ to do some serious self-analysis. It urges us to rethink, to become consciously reflective upon our sexual norms and standards, *and* to ask how faithfully we call ourselves and others to live out those norms. And homosexuality challenges us to rethink the very nature of the body of Christ and the church's responsibility toward the homosexual believer.

## **THESES**

I cannot do justice to all these issues and concerns in one essay. What I propose to do is offer a series of theses, theses that are more suggestive than exhaustive, but theses that I hope will frame the discussion of homosexuality and urge us to seek the Spirit of God, to speak the truth in love, and to pursue justice as the people of God in our dealings with our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

### **1. God's creational intent for human sexuality is heterosexual monogamous marriage.**

This is the norm for human sexuality. The proclamation of the biblical account of sexual dif-

ferentiation in Genesis 2 is that God has made man and woman for one another. Our sexual desires rightly and only find fulfillment in the bonding of man and woman into what Genesis 2:24 calls "one flesh." This bonding is fundamental to human life, for quite simply, without it there is no life. In other words, the sexual union of man and woman in the bearing of children is paradigmatic of their spiritual union as family. And the two (male and female sexual union, and the bearing of children) stand together as the foundation of the human community. Human community has a history; it extends over time. As The Ramsey Colloquium on homosexuality observed in the March 1994 issue of *First Things*, the historical extension of human being is possible only because

through the mysterious participation of our procreative powers in God's own creative work, we transmit life to those who will succeed us. We become a people with a shared history over time and with a common stake in that history. Only the heterosexual norm gives full expression to the commitment to time and history evident in having and caring for children.

Further, as *The Ramsey Colloquium* also pointed out, human society requires that we learn to value difference within community. That difference is paradigmatically established in the creationally given fit and fittedness of male and female sexual organs. Of course people complement one another in many ways besides the sexual,

but the complementarity of male and female is grounded in, and fully embraces our bodies and their structures. It does not sever the meaning of the person from bodily life, as if human beings were simply desire, reason, or will. The complementarity of male and female invites us to learn to accept and affirm the natural world from which we are too often alienated.

Nothing affirms our historicity and temporality, our biology and physicality, as does our sexual differentiation as male and female and our bonding as family. This strategy, creationally given by God, and bounded by our very biology, is the only strategy that continues results the human race. At the risk of sounding unduly sarcastic, even if one were to imagine that homosexuality were normative, all would have to agree that it is a fundamentally flawed strategy for perpetuating the human race.

On both creational and biblical grounds, we should be wary of the homosexual dualism between the body and the self. It is a presupposition of the homosexual movement that the human body is no more than an instrument for the fulfillment of desire, and that that fulfillment is the essence of the person. This gnostic devaluation of the normativity of the biological aspects of human personhood comes out quite clearly in Pim Pronk's *Against Nature*?<sup>4</sup> Pronk argues that the only test of morality is experience. Human moral decision-making is not informed or qualified by biological factors. In the non-differentiated sexual relationship of the homosexual act, personal being and

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sexual fulfillment is detached from physical sexuality, which is biologically differentiated. I get the impression that Pronk sees moral decision-making as freeing the autonomous moral agent from the determinism of the strictly biotic. Thus any talk of creational norm, of biological determination, is authoritarian and dehumanizing. What Pronk and the homosexual movement misses here, what they willingly choose to miss, is that our bodies have their own dignity, bear their own truths, and contribute to personhood in a fundamental way.

The revolution in sexual mores, of which the homosexual movement is a part, is undergirded and enabled by a cult of the autonomous self in modern popular culture.<sup>5</sup> Peter Berger argues that the modern consciousness has moved from fate to choice. The possibilities of modern technological culture suggest that the individual can do almost anything, that the individual becomes whatever he or she chooses. The person is no longer bound to history or heritage. The story one lives out is not the story of his heritage or community but the story he writes for himself. Berger illustrates the extent to which technology frees the individual from the fates of history, the community, and even biological reality, by noting the increase of options in sexual lifestyles. Recent discoveries in birth control technology and sexual alteration surgeries have helped to make pluralism of sexual orienta-

tion and mores acceptable. In the search for maximized personal happiness, the person is able to control her own identity and destiny, free from unwanted pregnancy and the biological constraints of sexual identity.<sup>6</sup>

To an amazing degree, the homosexual agenda rests upon an anthropological doctrine of the autonomous self, or what I have called the cult of the self. The popular homosexual argument rejects creational normativity. And it affirms that all sexual mores are no more than human constructs that are open to alteration without incurring harm to ourselves. I find this argument to be morally irresponsible and intellectually shallow. It is time for the environmentalist movement to sit down with the gay and lesbian movement and give them a good talking to about the dangers of human beings thinking themselves free from their biotic environment. Which is a polite way of saying: there is a price to be paid, there is hell to pay, when you play around with God's creational givens.

## **2. Experience is not self-authenticating in a fallen world.**

It is common today, not only in the homosexual community, but in our culture at large, to think that one's primary duty is to him or herself. The utilitarian individualism of modern society dictates that the only norm for moral decision-making is, as Tom Sine puts it: "What is best for me in my life now." That which is good conforms to individual experience. This is exactly the tactic taken by Pim Pronk (*Against Nature?*). Since his experience tells him that homosexuality is good, and is therefore God's will for him and others similarly situated, he concludes that the church has no right to pass moral judgment upon the issue. The only test of morality is experience. All Scripture can do is reinforce the position that one finds experientially convincing. Experience is a first order concern regarding moral issues. The confessional and the biological are second order concerns. And thus Pronk handily dismisses both the idea of a creation norm and a biblical norm. The only source of normativity left? Autonomous, individual experience.

The relationship between experience, revelation, and normativity is a difficult one; but at face value it seems necessary to me that any confessional commitment that affirms that God speaks

through the words of Scripture will inexorably move toward a biblical priority in addressing questions concerning the relationship between revelation and experience.

The biblical analysis of the human predicament offers an account of human bondage to sin. We are "slaves to sin" according to Romans 6:17. In Romans 7 Paul goes to say that sin distorts our perceptions, overpowers our will, and renders us incapable of obedience. While the believer in principle may be liberated from the blinding power of sin, if we are honest with ourselves we will acknowledge that the pull of sin, the pull of a self-centered, selfish idolatry of individual experience, is always a threat to obedient covenantal response to God.

While the biblical norm does not run roughshod over human experience of the creation, Scripture maintains that human experience does not lay beyond the critical and moral judgment of God. Covenant curse always stands over every presumably self-authenticating human self-evaluation. Again, the witness of Scripture is that we are sinners, sinners at our deepest core, and sinners in such a way that the one thing that we have the least clarity on is the rightness and virtue of our own moral expectations and judgments.

Thus the Reformed tradition, quite rightly I believe, begins with the principle of *sola scriptura*. While the Christian Scriptures are not the sole truth regarding human morality and sexuality, they remain the necessary starting point for all reflection upon that which is human, for it is only by the testimony of Scripture that Jesus Christ—who is the source of all truth about ourselves—is revealed to us. We must affirm that Scripture tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures. The Word of God does not deceive us. In fact, it un-deceives us by holding the world of our experience, our self-centered constructions of the world, up to the restated intentions of the Creator God in the light of the Redeemer Christ.

No utilitarian notion of personal relevance, openness to the world about us, or depth or sincerity of belief can be of greater weight than the light of Scripture. For, all too often in a fallen world, the apparent usefulness or attractiveness of a belief proves to be inversely proportional to its truth.

Alister McGrath cites the example of the sixteenth-century radical writer and preacher Thomas Muntzer. Muntzer led a peasant revolt against the German princes. He assured his followers that they were the army of the Holy Spirit, the advance troops of the coming Age of the Spirit. Their job was to break the back of the kingdom of Satan represented by the political power of the princes. Muntzer promised the peasants that all who followed him would be unscathed by the weapons of their enemies. Encouraged by this attractive, relevant, sincere, and meaningful belief, the peasants went into battle.

The outcome was a catastrophe. Six thousand of their number were slaughtered in the ensuing battle, and six hundred were captured. Barely a handful escaped. Their belief in invulnerability was relevant. It was attractive. It was meaningful. It was also a crude and cruel lie, without any foundation in truth. The last hours of that pathetic group of trusting men rested on an utter illusion. It was only when the first salvos cut some of their number to ribbons that they realized that they had been deceived.<sup>8</sup>

Can our sexuality deceive us regarding the truth? It is not uncommon for pastoral counsellors to hear words such as these: "Yes, I left my wife for her. But we love each other. It feels so right. It must be good."

Changing the argument from the gnostic transcendence of the self from the biotic and historical, the homosexual complains, "I was made this way. I had no say in the matter."<sup>9</sup> He may be half right. He may have been born with a predisposition for same sex erotic attraction. Yet he cannot argue that homosexuality is morally right because he did not choose it. Hays is correct when he claims that

we must reject the apparently common sense assumption that only freely chosen acts are morally culpable. Quite the reverse: the very nature of sin is that it is not freely chosen. We are in bondage to sin but still accountable to God's righteous judgment of our actions.<sup>10</sup>

The homosexual falls back upon a fundamentally Pelagian doctrine of sin: one is culpable only for freely chosen, rational moral actions. The irony here of course, is that the homosexual would not also affirm the strict moralism of the Pelagian doctrine.

Holding that his sexual orientation is a biologically determined trait, and homosexual often adds that any and all disapproval of homosexuality a form of discrimination analogous to racism. This argument simply will not wash. Even if it could be shown that same-sex preference is somehow biologically-based, it would not necessarily make homosexual behavior morally appropriate. We must resist the commonly held assumption that the discovery of biological causation or tendency brings the discussion of moral responsibility to an end. The notion that biology is destiny, that the biotic is immutable, permanent, inevitable, and unaffected by environment is open to question.

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*"Filthy sinners!  
Dig a big hole  
and throw them all into it."*

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The relationship between biotic and environmental causation is far too complex for easy reductionisms.<sup>11</sup>

Surely Christian ethics does not want to hold that all inborn traits are good and desirable. There is mounting evidence that alcoholism and violence may be related to genetic or biologically-based factors. Yet whenever a person picks up a midnight special and in anger blows away his neighbor, the perpetrator is culpable. He has committed murder. He cannot claim that his genetic or biological inheritance made it a *natural* act, and therefore good.

But the homosexual movement may also cite its numbers. The incidence of homoerotic orientation is still hotly argued. The homosexual movement has cited numbers as high as 25 to 30 percent of males, slightly lower among the female population. The Kinsey report claimed that 10 percent of the population is inclined toward homosexual behaviors. Others argue that the Kinsey data has long since been debunked and that the percentage of homosexuals within the American population is no higher than 2 percent. It really does not matter. Statistical incidence is not useful in ethical deliberation. A million Frenchmen may be wrong. Even if 10 percent of the people in the U.S. should declare themselves to be of homosexual orientation, that would not settle the normative issue; it is not possible to argue simply from an *is* to an

*ought*. Racial discrimination and child abuse occur far too frequently in our society, I suspect far more frequently than homosexual orientation, but that does not make them *natural* in any moral sense.

### **3. We live in a sex-saturated culture in which sex is idolized.**

It is simply a myth that personal completeness is a function of being genitally active. Scripture undercuts our cultural obsession with sexual fulfillment. Despite the smooth illusions perpetrated by American mass culture, sexual gratification is not a sacred right. Part of the homosexual agenda is the presupposition that human health and flourishing require that sexual desire be acted upon and satisfied. Being genitally active is thus seen as a *need*, a requirement of full human existence, like food and shelter. Non-satisfaction of sexual “needs” is widely viewed as a form of deviance.

Any discipline or denial or restraint upon sexual activity is popularly depicted as unhealthy and dehumanizing. However, we must insist that it is dehumanizing to define ourselves, or our personhood, primarily by way of our sexual functions. The place of sex has been both exaggerated and trivialized in our culture. Sex has been exaggerated in that sexual activity is seen as a requirement for human fullness and intimacy. Sexual activity is not the foundation for human intimacy, but ought to be a result of that intimacy. Sex has been trivialized in that our culture has reduced the mysteries of human sexuality to little more than the satisfaction of personal desire. Have sex whenever and with whomever you want, but of course, wear a condom, says our culture.

Believe it or not, celibacy is not a fate worse than death. Lives of joy and service are possible without sexual relations. Again, sexual intimacy is not a prerequisite for human fulfillment or personal intimacy. However odd it may seem to contemporary sensibilities, Scripture commends the celibate life as a way of faithfulness (1 Corinthians 7). Some people are called to such lives for the sake of the kingdom.

“Ah,” the homosexual responds, “you direct me toward a life of abstinence, but what of yourself?” I do not pretend that a life of sexual abstinence is easy. The sexual impulse is grounded in creation, in our very bodies. Its pull is always with us. And

the sexual obsession of our culture ever tempts us with its distorted and exaggerated interpretations of God’s gift of sexuality. And God’s gifts are always given on his terms, within the vassalage of his sovereignty.

But I have skirted the question. What of the heterosexual? It is true that the heterosexual is free to be a sexual being. He or she has God’s blessing, even God’s instruction, to exercise the gift of sexuality—but only, *only* within the bounds of the monogamous, heterosexual norm of God’s law and only for the purpose of the deepening of the love relationship between husband and wife. Contrary to how college students have sometimes wanted to argue, the seventh commandment does not presuppose a marital relationship. A biblical sexual morality expects a celibate lifestyle from the unmarried. Extending that ethic, I believe it would also be appropriate to say that married persons are also called to abstain from expressing their sexuality should their spouse become disabled such that he or she is unable to engage in consenting sexual activity. It is not a matter of affirming *any* heterosexual relationship as normative over against homosexual distortion. As Ray Anderson puts the matter:

Homosexual relations are not a disorder of human sexuality merely because they are not heterosexual. There is no intrinsic moral good which occurs merely through heterosexual relationships at the physical level. Such relationships must be accountable to the true order of human personhood and find their dignity and validity in this accountability.<sup>12</sup>

### **4. We need to become more sexually honest with ourselves.**

The homosexual movement has raised a stinging moral challenge to the hypocrisy and decadence of our culture. “Why is it,” they ask, “that the heterosexual community, and you Christians in particular, are so hung up on the sexuality of other people? You never examine your own sexual sins.” The homosexual is right here. In teaching a course on Christianity and modern society, I notice that my students typically are very eager to discuss issues pertaining to homosexuality—especially why it’s wrong—and sexual sins such as pornography and the easy sexuality of our culture, but



when I ask them about their own sexuality, issues like pre-marital sexual contact, date-rape, and the like, normally active and participatory young people suddenly became very quiet.

My question is simply this: can we with any integrity condemn homosexual behaviors if we wink at heterosexual promiscuity? Can we believably and effectively assert the biblical norms for sexuality to the homosexual when permissive abortion policies, widespread adultery, easy divorce, misogyny, and radical feminism are accepted within our society?

“Oh, but that’s the larger American culture, not the community of faith.” Relaxed views of divorce, adultery, child sexual abuse, and unmarried parentage are realities in every church community. *Don’t ask; Don’t tell* could just as easily be the church’s slogan for its own sexual ills as it is President Clinton’s policy for gays in the military. Simply, those who are determined to uphold the biblical norms for human sexuality cannot choose when and with whom they choose to uphold them. As concerned as we might be with the homosexual insurgency in our culture, we need to be equally concerned for the renewal of integrity, in teaching and in practice, regarding sexual ethics within the body of Christ.

To the extent that none of us is complete and whole as sexual creatures, we need to continually hear the biblical norms for human sexuality—including the biblical celebration of human sexuality. None of us is normal. In fact, in a fallen world, there is no such thing as sexual normalcy. I have never seen the point made as well as Richard Mouw does with this bit of narrative:

Several years ago I sat through a debate about homosexuality at a denominational assembly. One minister stood up to tell everyone how strongly opposed he was to homosexual practice. Here is how he put his case: “We normal people should tell these homosexuals that what they are doing is simply an abomination in the eyes of God.”

Even though I basically agreed with this pastor’s interpretation of biblical teaching, I was very distressed by his speech. I felt like standing up and asking him how “normal” he really was as a sexual being. I thought of another minister, a godly man who was nearing retirement, with whom I had talked recently. Commenting on a younger colleague who had been caught in an adulterous relationship, he had said, “I have no business feeling self-righteous. If my own sexual history were

made public, there would be no major scandals. Nothing to get me defrocked. But I would still be ashamed—so ashamed!”

I suspect that many of us can identify with that self-assessment. We don’t feel very “normal” in our sexuality. The Bible tells us why this is so: we are living in a time of fallenness, of human abnormality. And since sex is central to our nature, our sexuality shows this abnormality in a special way.<sup>13</sup>

### **5. The eschatological nature of the body of Christ.**

The Christian community lives in a time of tension between the *already* and the *not yet*. We live

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*This issue challenges the body of Christ to do some serious self-analysis.*

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between the already accomplished beginning of the kingdom in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, and the not yet of the consummation of the kingdom in the return of the LORD. Already we have the joy of the Holy Spirit; already we experience the transforming grace of God, but at the same time, we do not experience the fullness of redemption. This means, among other things, that Christians must continue to struggle to live faithfully in the present time. Wholeness remains a hope rather than an attainment in this life. We live between the cross and the resurrection, the final redemption of our bodies. We cannot confuse our present striving with the fullness of the kingdom. Full sanctification is out in front of us. I am always amazed that Paul could address the church at Corinth the way that he did. This was a most difficult lot. The Corinthian Christians were contentious and divisive, full of class struggles, sexual problems, drunkenness, marital disputes—a real first century soap opera. Yet Paul calls them *saints*, people who are sanctified by the Spirit of God and called to be his peculiar people in the world.

There is no safe moralistic ledge from which we can wag our finger at the homosexual and say, “the kingdom of God is not made up of such as you.” Truth is, the kingdom of God is not made up of such as us. Election into the people of God is *never* an exclusionary principle. Quite the opposite. It is inclusionary both by nature and purpose. That is

Paul's point in Romans 1 and 2.<sup>14</sup> Paul mentions homosexual behavior, along with greed, pride, murder, slander, and the rest in 1:29-31 to catch his audience in a moral sting operation. Just as his hearers are ready to join in the frenzy of condemnation against all sinners and evil doers, the sting strikes in 2:1:

You, therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

Teaching catechism last year, I asked a group of high school seniors about homosexuality. More than one responded with something like: "Filthy sinners. Dig a big hole and throw them all into it." It is just this sort of self-righteous judgment—"I'm the heterosexual, the clean one; those homosexuals are dirty, evil"—that Paul is condemning in Romans 1 and 2. Self-righteous condemnation of the homosexual is just as sinful as the homosexual behavior itself. Paul is preaching the gospel in Romans, not singling the homosexual out for hell-fire. His point is that we all need the grace of God, the blood of Jesus, for we are all dirty in his sight.

Richard Hays takes the issue of the eschatological nature of the body of Christ in a slightly different direction than I have, and it is a legitimate one. Citing Romans 8:23 and its statement that the full "redemption of our bodies" remains a future hope by the power of God's Spirit, Hays proclaims that the transforming power of the Spirit is present in our midst right now. Thus the testimonies of those who claim to have been healed, to have been delivered from the sexual distortion of homosexuality should be taken seriously. "If we do not continue to live with that hope, we may be hoping for too little from God."<sup>15</sup>

#### **6. The body of Christ may not abandon the homosexual believer.**

Yes, there are homosexual Christians. And there are many homosexual Christians whose lives show signs of the presence and grace of God, whose works in ministry are genuine and effective. They are evidence that God gives his Spirit to broken people and ministers his grace even to sinners, without endorsing our sin. While the body of Christ cannot condone homosexual behavior, we

still find ourselves confronted by complex problems that demand rigorous and compassionate solutions. Insofar as Christians have singled out homosexuals for malicious discriminatory treatment we must repent and seek instead to live out the gospel of reconciliation. As we work out and uphold the biblical norms for human sexuality, we must continually remember Paul's warning in Romans 2:1-3 that we are all "without excuse"; we all either stand or fall under God's mercy and judgment.

The ethic that is called for is a tough one. It is a hard one to live. But it is the only ethic the Lord has given to his people: *Hate the sin, Love the sinner*. We live in a community that is called to embrace sinners as Jesus did, without waiving God's righteousness. Should the homosexual believer be included in the body of Christ? Absolutely, but with the full recognition that the church is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning, and not a place to be indulged or merely comforted.

God creates space and time for faith and repentance. As the eschatology sign of the kingdom of God, the church is that space and time in which sinful disorder can learn of the wisdom of God's Word. But that space and time is effectively embodied only when God's grace is proclaimed and practiced. "This," says Ray Anderson, "is the business of the church. It really has no other business. [The church] is responsible to know the difference between order and disorder, but wise enough to contextualize disorder with grace and truth."<sup>16</sup>

The proclamation of grace toward the homosexual means more than refusing to cast the first stone of condemnation, and it means more than simple inclusion. It means supportive and knowledgeable pastoral care for persons seeking to cope with the problems of homosexuality. We need to acknowledge that many people within the community of faith are, with fear and trembling, seeking as well as they can to live lives pleasing to God and in service to others. Confronted by the vexing ambiguities of eros in human life, particularly in a culture that demonically idolizes sex (and increasingly perverse articulations of sexuality at that), the body of Christ needs to be better equipped to support people in their struggle.

What does it mean to support the homosexual believer? This is the issue that urgently requires our attention and commitment. The position I've developed here is consistent with Report 42 of the Christian Reformed Church, published in the *Acts of Synod 1973*. Report 42 called for the church to lovingly and redemptively embrace our homosexual brothers and sisters. But what have we done? Have we created environments in which Christians who struggle with their sexuality can be confident that they can be honest and open about their struggles? Can the homosexual believer safely know that he or she will be accepted in love and pastoral concern rather than censured and condemned? It is time, and this is the space, to make our deeds match our words. It is time and this is the space, to let them know who we are—and who they are in Christ—by our love.

#### NOTES

- 1 For a good treatment of postmodernist commitments to cultural pluralism see Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 191-255.
- 2 Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992) 81-83.
- 3 For a discussion of the biblical materials relevant to homosexuality, see my "Homosexuality, Scripture, and the Body of Christ," *Pro Rege*, XXII.1 (September 1993): 14-23. See also the writings of Richard B. Hays, a New Testament scholar who has written extensively on Scripture and sexuality. A good summary article by Hays can be found in the July 1991 issue of *Sojourners*.
- 4 Pim Pronk, *Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).
- 5 On the cult of the self, see Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). Evangelicals have not gone unaffected by Western narcissism. See David Wells, *No Place for Truth: or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), and David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).
- 6 See Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday-Anchor, 1979).
- 7 Tom Sine, *Wild Hope: Crises Facing the Human Community on the Threshold of the 21st Century* (Dallas: Word, 1991) 244.
- 8 Alister E. McGrath, "The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 35.3 (September 1992) 361-374.
- 9 This change in argumentation from the essential transcendence of the self above history and the creational to the creational determinism of the self might give the impression that I have created a straw man. Not so. This appears to be the way that many homosexuals in fact argue. For them, consistency of argument is not nearly as important as the affirmation of homosexuality. Whatever argument or combination of arguments lends support to homosexual orientation and practice they consider legitimate.
- 10 Richard B. Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," in *Sojourners* (July 1991) 17-21.
- 11 Environment always forms a context in which biological traits are expressed. Different environments might mold or direct biologically-based traits in different ways. Children born with PKU lack the enzyme which converts phenylalanine into tyrosine. The accumulation of unconverted phenylalanine produces physical and mental abnormalities. Yet if a PKU child is reared on a phenylalanine-free diet during early childhood, the disorders associated with PKU will not develop. At least in this case, environment transforms the biotic from destiny to tendency.
- 12 Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 127.
- 13 Mouw, 83-84.
- 14 Again, see my "Homosexuality, Scripture, and the Body of Christ." See also, James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988).
- 15 Hays, 20.
- 16 Anderson, 203.