

## HOMOSEXUAL MARRIAGE

by John R. W. Stott

*Christianity Today Nov 22, 1985*

An increasingly more vocal Christian gay community (characterized by such groups as Evangelicals Concerned and the Metropolitan Community Churches) is actively challenging the church's traditional understanding of homosexual behavior and its sinfulness. More specifically, the contention that both homosexuality and heterosexuality are equally from God and are, therefore, to be celebrated, calls upon individual believers to search the Scriptures again for what they have to say about the purpose and nature of human sexuality.

With this in mind, theologian John R. W. Stott addresses the critical arguments set forth by the Christian gay community in the second volume of his book, *Involvement: Social and Sexual Relationships in the modern world* (Revell, 1985). With his assistance, Christianity Today presents the following adaptation.

---

Because of the explosive nature of this topic, let me begin by setting the proper context for our discussion.

**First**, we are all human beings. That is to say, there is no such phenomenon as a "homosexual." There are only people - human persons - made in the image and likeness of God, yet fallen. However strongly we may disapprove of homosexual practices, we have no liberty to dehumanize those who engage in them.

**Second**, we are all sexual beings. Our sexuality, according to both Scripture and experience, is basic to our humanness. God made us male and female.

Moreover, not only are we sexual beings, but we have a particular sexual orientation. Alfred C. Kinsey's famous investigation into human sexuality led him to conclude that 4 percent of white American males are exclusively homosexual throughout their lives, 10 percent are homosexual for up to 3 years, and as many as 37 percent have had some kind of homosexual experience between adolescence and old age. Kinsey found the percentage of homosexual women to be lower.

**Third**, we are all sinners. The doctrine of total depravity asserts that every part of our human being has been twisted by sin, and this includes our sexuality. Dr. Merville Vincent, of the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, was correct when he wrote: "In God's view I suspect we are all sexual deviants. I doubt if there is anyone who has not had a lustful thought that deviated from God's perfect ideal of sexuality."

**Fourth**, in addition to being human, sexual, and sinful creatures, I take it my readers are all Christians - not people who reject the lordship of Jesus Christ, but rather those who earnestly desire to submit to it and who believe that he exercises it through Scripture; who want to understand what light Scripture throws on this topic, and have a predisposition to seek God's grace and follow his will when it is known.

## NECESSARY DISTINCTIONS

Our context set, are homosexual partnerships then a Christian option? I phrase my question advisedly. It introduces us to three necessary distinctions.

**First**, we have learned to distinguish between sins and crimes. Adultery has always (according to God's law) been a sin, but in most countries it is not an offence punishable by the state. Rape, by contrast, is both a sin and a crime. In 1967, England established the Sexual Offenses Act, which declared that a homosexual act performed between consenting adults over 21 in private should no longer be a criminal offense. "The Act did not in fact 'legalize' such behavior," wrote Prof. Sir Norman Anderson, "for it is still regarded by the law as immoral, and is devoid of any legal recognition; all the Act did was to remove the criminal sanction from such acts when performed in private between two consenting adults."

**Second**, we distinguish between homosexual orientation or "inversion" (for which people are not responsible) and homosexual practices (for which they are). The importance of this distinction goes beyond the attribution of responsibility to the attribution of guilt. We may not blame people for what they are, though we may for what they do. In every discussion of homosexuality we must be rigorous in differentiating between "being" and "doing" - that is, between a person's identity and activity, sexual preference and sexual practice, constitution and conduct.

But we now have to come to terms with a **third** distinction, namely between homosexual practices that are casual (and probably anonymous) acts of self-gratification and those that (it is claimed) are just as expressive of authentic human love as is heterosexual intercourse in marriage. No responsible homosexual person (Christian or not) is advocating promiscuous "one night stands," let alone violence or the corruption of the young. What some are arguing, however, especially in the so-called gay Christian movement, is that a heterosexual marriage and a homosexual partnership are "two equally valid alternatives," being equally tender, mature and faithful.

The question before us, then, does not relate to casual homosexual practices, but it asks whether homosexual partnerships - lifelong and loving - are a Christian option. Our concern is to subject prevailing attitudes (whether total revulsion or equally uncritical endorsement) to biblical scrutiny. Is our sexual "preference" purely a matter of personal "taste"? Or has God revealed his will regarding a norm? In particular, can the Bible be shown to sanction homosexual partnerships, or at least not to condemn them?

What, in fact, does the Bible condemn?

## THE BIBLICAL PROHIBITIONS

The late Derrick Sherwin Bailey was the first Christian theologian to re-evaluate the traditional understanding of the Biblical prohibitions regarding homosexuality. His famous book - of which all subsequent writers on this topic have had to take careful account - 'Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition', was published in 1955. Although many have not been able to accept his attempted reconstruction (in particular his reinterpretation of the sin of Sodom), other writers, less

cautious in scholarly standards, regard Bailey's argument as merely a stepping stone to a much more permissive position.

There are four main biblical passages that refer (or appear to refer) to the homosexual question negatively: (1) the story of Sodom (Gen. 19:1-13), with which it is natural to associate the very similar story of Gibeah (Judges 19); (2) the Levitical texts (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), which explicitly prohibit "lying with a man as one lies with a woman"; (3) the apostle Paul's portrayal of decadent pagan society in his day (Rom. 1:18-32); and (4) two Pauline lists of sinners, each of which includes a reference to homosexual practices of some kind (1 Cor. 6:9-10 and 1 Tim. 1:8-11).

## **1. The stories of Sodom and Gibeah.**

The Genesis narrative makes it clear that "the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord" (13:13), and that "the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah" was "so great and their sin so grievous" that God determined to investigate it (18:20, 21). In the end, God "overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities" (19:25). There is no controversy about this background to the biblical story. The question is: What was the sin of the people of Sodom that merited their obliteration?

The traditional view has been that they were guilty of homosexual practices, which they attempted (unsuccessfully) to inflict on the two angels Lot was entertaining. But Sherwin Bailey challenged this interpretation on two main grounds. First, it is a gratuitous assumption (he argued) that the demand of the men of Sodom, "Bring them out to us, so that we may *know* them," meant "so that we can have sex with them" (NIV).

The Hebrew word for "know" (*yadha*) occurs 943 times in the Old Testament, of which only 10 occurrences refer to physical intercourse, and even then only to heterosexual intercourse. It would therefore be better, Bailey maintained, to translate the phrase "so that we may get acquainted with them." We can then understand the men's violence as based on their feelings that Lot had exceeded his rights as a resident alien, for he had welcomed two strangers into his home "whose intentions might be hostile and whose credentials ... had not been examined." In this case, the sin of Sodom was to invade the privacy of Lot's home and flout the ancient rules of hospitality. Lot begged them to desist because, he said, the two men "have come under the protection of my roof" (v. 8).

Bailey's second argument was that the rest of the Old Testament nowhere suggests that the nature of Sodom's offence was homosexual. Instead, Isaiah implies that it was hypocrisy and social injustice; Jeremiah - adultery, deceit, and general wickedness; and Ezekiel - arrogance, greed, and indifference to the poor. Then Jesus himself (though Bailey does not mention this) on three separate occasions alluded to the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, declaring that it would be "more bearable" for them on the day of judgment than for those who reject his gospel. In all these references there is not even a rumor of homosexual malpractice!

It is only when we reach the Palestinian pseudepigraphical writings of the second century B.C. that Sodom's sin is identified as unnatural sexual behavior. And this finds a clear echo in the letter of Jude, in which it is said that "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up

to sexual immorality and perversion" (v. 7), and it similarly appears in the works of Philo and Josephus, Jewish writers who were shocked by the homosexual practices of Greek society.

Bailey handled the Gibeah story the same way. Another resident alien (this time an anonymous "old man") invites two strangers (not angels, but a Levite and his concubine) into his home. Evil men surround the house and make the same demand as the Sodomites: that the visitor be brought out "so that we may know him." The owner of the house first begs them not to be so "vile" to his "guest," and then offers his daughter and the concubine to them instead. The sin of the men of Gibeah, it is again suggested, was not their proposal of homosexual intercourse, but their violation of the laws of hospitality.

But Bailey's case is not convincing for a number of reasons: (1) the adjectives "wicked," "vile," and "disgraceful" (Gen. 18:7; Judges 19:23) do not seem appropriate to describe a breach of hospitality; (2) the offer of women instead does look as if there is some sexual connotation to the episode; (3) although the verb yadha is used only ten times of sexual intercourse, Bailey omits to mention that six of these occurrences are in Genesis and one in the Sodom story itself (about Lot's daughters, who had not "known" a man, verse 8); and (4) for those of us who take the New Testament documents seriously, Jude's unequivocal statement cannot be dismissed as merely an error copied from Jewish pseudepigrapha. To be sure, homosexual behavior was not Sodom's only sin; but according to Scripture, it was certainly one of them.

## **2. The Levitical texts:**

"Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" (18:22).

"If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads" (20:13)

Both these texts belong to the "Holiness Code," which challenges the people of God to follow his laws and not copy the practices of Egypt (where they used to live) or Canaan (where they were going). These practices included sexual relations within the prohibited degrees, a variety of sexual deviations, child sacrifice, idolatry, and social injustice of different kinds.

"It is hardly open to doubt," wrote Bailey, "that both the laws in Leviticus relate to ordinary homosexual acts between men, and not to ritual or other acts performed in the name of religion." Others, however, affirm the very point that Bailey denies. They rightly point out that the two texts are embedded in a context preoccupied largely with ritual cleanliness, and Peter Coleman adds that the word translated "detestable" or "abomination" in both verses is associated with idolatry. "In English the word expresses disgust or disapproval, but in the Bible its predominant meaning is concerned with religious truth rather than morality or aesthetics."

Are these prohibitions merely religious taboos, then? Are they connected with that other prohibition, "No Israelite man or woman is to become a temple prostitute" (Deut. 23:17)? Certainly the Canaanite fertility cult did include ritual prostitution, and therefore provided both male and female "sacred prostitutes" (even if there is no clear evidence that either engaged in homosexual intercourse). The evil kings of Israel and Judah were constantly introducing them into the religion

of Yahweh, and the righteous kings were constantly expelling them. The homosexual lobby argues, therefore, that the Levitical texts prohibit religious practices that have long since ceased, and have no relevance to homosexual partnerships today.

### **3. Paul's statements in Romans 1:**

“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” (vv. 26-27).

All are agreed that the apostle is describing idolatrous pagans in the Greco- Roman world of his day. They had a certain knowledge of God through the created universe (vv. 19-20) and their own moral sense (v.32), yet they suppressed the truth in order to practice wickedness. Instead of giving to God the honor due to him, they turned to idols, confusing the Creator with his creatures. In judgement, “God gave them over” to their depraved mind and their decadent practices (vv. 24, 26, 28), including “unnatural” sex.

It seems at first sight to be a definite condemnation of homosexual behavior. But two arguments are advanced to the contrary. They emphasize that although Paul knew nothing of the modern distinction between “inverts” (those who have a homosexual disposition) and “perverts” (who, though heterosexually inclined, indulge in homosexual practices), nevertheless it is the latter he is condemning, not the former. This must be so, because they are described as having “abandoned” natural relations with women, whereas no exclusively homosexual male would ever have had them. Second, Paul is evidently portraying the reckless, shameless, profligate, promiscuous behavior of people whom God has judicially “given up.” What relevance has this to committed, loving homosexual partnerships?

### **4. The other Pauline texts:**

“Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes [*malakoi*] nor homosexual offenders [*arsenokoitai*] nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

“We also know that law is made not for good men but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts [*arsekokoitais*], for slave traders and liars and perjurers - and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God ...” (1 Tim 1:9-10).

Here are two ugly lists of sins that Paul affirms to be incompatible with the kingdom of God and with either the law or the gospel. It will be observed that one group of offenders is called *malakoi* and the other (in both lists) *arsenokoitai*. What do these words mean?

To begin with, it is extremely unfortunate that in the original Revised Standard Version translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9, both words were combined and translated “homosexuals.” Bailey was right to protest, since the use of the word “inevitably suggests that the genuine invert, even though he is a man of irreproachable morals, is automatically branded as unrighteous and excluded from the kingdom of God.”

Fortunately, the revisers heeded the protest, and the second edition (1973), though still combining the words, rendered them “sexual perverts.” The point is that all ten categories listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (with the possible exception of “the greedy”) denote people who have offended by their *actions* - idolaters, adulterers, and thieves, for example.

The two Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* should not be combined, however, since they have precise meanings. The first is literally ‘soft to the touch,’ and metaphorically, among the Greeks, it meant males (not necessarily boys) who played the passive role in homosexual intercourse. The second means literally ‘male in a bed,’ and the Greeks used this expression to describe the one who took the active role. The Jerusalem Bible follows James Moffatt in using the ugly words “catamites and sodomites,” while among his conclusions Peter Coleman suggests that “probably Paul had commercial pederasty in mind between older men and post-pubertal boys, the most common patterns of homosexual behavior in the classical world.”

If this is so, then once again it can be (and has been) argued that the Pauline condemnations are not relevant to homosexual adults who are both consenting and committed to one another. Not that this is the conclusion that Peter Coleman himself draws. His summary: “Taken together, St. Paul’s writings repudiate homosexual behavior as a vice of the Gentiles in Romans, as a bar to the Kingdom in Corinthians, and as an offense to be repudiated by the moral law in 1 Timothy.”

Because there are only these four biblical references to homosexual behavior, must we then conclude that the topic is marginal to the main thrust of the Bible? Must we further concede that they constitute a rather flimsy basis to take a firm stand a homosexual lifestyle? Are those protagonists right who claim that the biblical prohibitions are “highly specific” - against violations of hospitality (Sodom and Gibeah), against cultic taboos (Leviticus), against shameless orgies (Romans), and against male prostitution or the corruption of the young (1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy); and that none of these passages alludes to, let alone condemns, a loving partnership between genuine homosexual inverters? Indeed, such is the conclusion reached by Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mallenkott in their book, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* They write:

“The Bible clearly condemns certain kinds of homosexual practice (... gang rape, idolatry and lustful promiscuity). However it appears to be silent in certain other aspects of homosexuality - both the ‘homosexual orientation’ and ‘a committed love-relationship analogous to heterosexual monogamy.’”

But we cannot handle the biblical material in this way. The Christian rejection of homosexual practices does not rest on “a few isolated and obscure proof texts” (as is sometimes said), whose traditional explanation can (perhaps) be overthrown. For the *negative* prohibitions of homosexual practices in Scripture make sense only in the light of its *positive* teaching in Genesis 1 and 2 about

human sexuality and heterosexual marriage. Without the wholesome positive teaching of the Bible on sex and marriage, our perspective on the homosexual question is bound to be skewed.

## SEX AND MARRIAGE IN THE BIBLE

Since gay Christian activists deliberately draw a parallel between heterosexual marriages and homosexual partnerships, it is necessary to ask whether this parallel can be justified.

God has given us two distinct accounts of Creation. The first (Genesis 1) is general, and affirms the *equality* of the sexes, since both share in the image of God and the stewardship of the earth. The second (Genesis 2) is particular, and affirms the *complementarity* of the sexes, which constitutes the basis for heterosexual marriage. In this second account of Creation, three fundamental truths emerge.

**First**, the human need for companionship. “It is not good for the man to be alone” (v. 18). True, this assertion was later qualified when the apostle Paul (surely echoing Genesis) wrote: “It is good for a man not to marry” (1 Cor. 7:1). That is to say, although marriage is the good institution of God, the call to singleness is also the good vocation of some. Nevertheless, as a general rule, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”

God has created us social beings. Since he is love, and has made us in his own likeness, he has given us a capacity to love and be loved. He intends us to live in community, not in solitude. In particular, God continued, “I will make a helper suitable for him.” Moreover, this “helper” or companion, whom God pronounced “suitable for him,” was also to be man’s sexual partner, with whom he was to become “one flesh,” so that they might consummate their love and procreate their children.

**Second**, Genesis 2 reveals the divine provision to meet this human need. Having affirmed Adam’s need for a partner, the search for a suitable one began. God first paraded the birds and beasts before him, and Adam proceeded to “name” them, to symbolize his taking them into his service. But (v. 20) “for Adam no suitable helper was found,” who could live “alongside” or “opposite” him, who could be his complement, his counterpart, his companion - let alone his mate. So a special creation was necessary.

Thus, a special work of divine creation took place. The sexes became differentiated. Out of the undifferentiated humanity of Adam, male and female emerged. And Adam awoke from his deep sleep to behold a reflection of himself, a complement to himself, indeed a very part of himself. Next, having created the woman out of the man, God himself brought her to him, much as a bride’s father today gives her away. And Adam broke spontaneously into history’s first love poem:

At last (in contrast to the birds and beasts),

*“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;  
She shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.”*

There can be no doubting the emphasis of this story. According to Genesis 1, Eve, like Adam, was created in the image of God. But as to the manner of her creation, according Genesis 2, she was made neither out of nothing (like the universe), nor out of “the dust of the ground” (like Adam v. 7), but out of Adam.

The third great truth of Genesis 2 concerns the resulting institution of marriage. Adam’s love poem is recorded in verse 23. The “therefore” or “for this reason” of verse 24 is the narrator’s deduction: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

Even the inattentive reader will be struck by the three references to “flesh”: “this is ... flesh of my flesh ... they will become one flesh.”

We may be certain that this is deliberate, not accidental. It teaches that heterosexual intercourse in marriage is more than a union; it is a kind of reunion. It is not a union of alien persons who do not belong to one another and cannot appropriately become one flesh. On the contrary, it is the union of two persons who originally were one, were then separated from each other, and now in the sexual encounter of marriage come together again.

It is surely this that explains the profound mystery of heterosexual intimacy, which poets and philosophers have celebrated in every culture. Heterosexual intercourse is much more than a union of bodies; it is a blending of complementary personalities through which, in the midst of prevailing alienation, the rich, created oneness of human being is experienced again. And the complementarity of male and female sexual organs is only a physical symbol of a much deeper spiritual complementarity.

In order to become one flesh, however, and experience this sacred mystery, certain preliminaries are necessary, which are constituent parts of marriage.

“Therefore”: “a man” (the singular indicates that marriage is an exclusive union between two individuals) “shall leave his father and mother” (a public social occasion is in view) “and cleave to his wife” (marriage is a loving, cleaving commitment or covenant, which is heterosexual and permanent), “and they will become one flesh” (for marriage must be consummated in sexual intercourse, which is a sign and seal of the marriage covenant, and over which no shadow of shame or embarrassment had yet been cast).

Jesus himself later endorsed this teaching. He quoted Genesis 2:24, declaring that such a lifelong union between a man and his wife was God’s intention from the beginning, and added, “what God has joined together, let man not separate” (Mark 10:4-9).

Thus Scripture defines the marriage God instituted in terms of heterosexual monogamy. It is the union of one man with one woman, which must be publicly acknowledged (the leaving of parents), permanently sealed (he will “cleave to his wife”), and physically consummated (“one flesh”). Scripture envisages no other kind of marriage or sexual intercourse, for God provided no alternative.

Christians should not therefore single out homosexual intercourse for special condemnation. Every sexual relationship or act that deviates from God's revealed intention is *ipso facto* displeasing to him and under his judgment. This includes polygamy and polyandry (which infringes the "one man-one woman" principle), clandestine unions (since these have involved no decisive public leaving of parents); casual encounters and temporary liaisons, adultery and many divorces (which are incompatible with "cleaving" and with Jesus' prohibition "let man not separate"), and homosexual partnerships (which violate the statement that "a man" shall be joined to "his wife").

In sum, the only "one flesh" experience that God intends and Scripture contemplates is the sexual union of a man with his wife, whom he recognizes as "flesh of his flesh."

## CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS CONSIDERED

Homosexual Christians are not, however, satisfied with this biblical teaching about human sexuality and the institution of heterosexual marriage. They bring forward a number of objections in order to defend the legitimacy of homosexual partnerships.

### 1. The argument about Scripture and culture.

Traditionally, it has been assumed that the bible condemns all homosexual acts. But are the biblical writers reliable guides in this matter? Were their horizons not bounded by their own experience and culture? The cultural argument, therefore, usually takes one of two forms.

**First**, the biblical authors were addressing themselves to questions relevant to their own circumstances, and, these were very different from ours. In the Sodom and Gibeah stories, they were preoccupied either with conventions of hospitality in the ancient Near East that are now obsolete or (if the sin was sexual at all) with the extremely unusual phenomenon of homosexual gang rape. In the Levitical laws the concern was with antiquated fertility rituals, while Paul was addressing himself to the particular sexual preferences of Greek pederasts.

The **second** and complementary culture problem is that the biblical writers were not addressing themselves to *our* questions. Thus the problem of Scripture is not only with its teaching but also with its silence. Paul (let alone the Old Testament authors) knew nothing of post-Freudian psychology. They had never heard of "the homosexual condition"; they knew only about certain practices. The difference between "inversion" and "perversion" would have been incomprehensible to them. The very notion that two men or two women could fall in love with each other and develop a deeply loving, stable relationship comparable to marriage simply never entered their heads. So then, just as slaves, blacks, and women have been liberated, "gay liberation" is long overdue.

If the only biblical teaching on this topic were to be found in the prohibition texts, it might be difficult to answer these objections. But once those texts are seen in relation to the divine institution of marriage, we are in possession of a principle of divine revelation that is universally applicable. It was applicable to the cultural situations of both the ancient Near East and the first-century Greco-Roman world, and it is equally applicable to modern sexual questions of which the ancients were quite ignorant. The reason for the biblical prohibitions is the same reason why modern loving homosexual partnerships must also be condemned - namely that they are incompatible with God's

created order. And since that order (heterosexual monogamy) was established by Creation, not culture, its validity is both permanent and universal. There can be no “liberation” from God’s created norms; true liberation is found only in accepting them.

## **2. The argument about creation and nature.**

I have sometimes read or heard this kind of statement: “I’m gay because God made me that way. So gay must be good. I intend to accept, and indeed celebrate, what I am by creation.” Or again: “You may say that homosexual practice is against nature and normality; but it’s not against *my* nature, nor is it in the slightest degree abnormal for *me*.” Some argue that homosexual behavior is “natural” because: (a) in many primitive societies it is fairly acceptable, (b) in some advanced civilizations (ancient Greece, for example) it was even idealized, and (c) it is quite widespread in animals.

These arguments, however, express an extremely subjective view of what is “natural” and “normal.” We cannot agree, for example, that animal behavior sets standards for human behavior! God has established a norm for sex and marriage by creation. This was recognized in the Old Testament era. Thus, sexual relations with an animal were forbidden, because “that is a perversion” (Lev. 18:23) - in other words, a violation or confusion of nature, which indicates an “embryonic sense of natural law.”

This was also clearly in Paul’s mind in Romans 1. When he wrote of women who had “exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones,” and of men who had “abandoned natural relations,” he meant by “nature” (*phusis*), the natural order of things that God had established (as in 2:14, 27, and 11:24). What Paul was condemning, therefore, was not the perverted behavior of heterosexual people who were acting against *their* nature, but any human behavior that is against “Nature,” God’s created order.

## **3. The argument about quality of relationships.**

Gay Christian activists borrow from Scripture the truth that love is the greatest thing in the world (which it is) and from the “new morality” or “situation ethics of the 1960’s the notion that love is an adequate criterion by which to judge every relationship (which it is not).

In his “Time for Consent,” liberal theologian Norman Pittenger lists six characteristics of a truly loving relationship. They are: (1) commitment (the free self-giving of each to the other); (2) mutuality in giving and receiving (a sharing in which each finds his or her self in the other); (3) tenderness (no coercion or cruelty); (4) faithfulness (the intention of a lifelong relationship); (5) hopefulness (each serving the other’s maturity); and (6) desire for union.

If then a homosexual relationship, whether between two men or two women, is characterized by these qualities of love, surely (the argument goes) it must be affirmed as good and not rejected as evil. It rescues people from loneliness, selfishness, and promiscuity. It can be as rich and responsible, as liberating and fulfilling, as a heterosexual marriage.

But the biblical Christian cannot accept the basic premise on which this case rests, namely that love is the only absolute, that beside it all moral law is abolished, and that whatever seems to be compatible with love is ipso facto good, irrespective of all other considerations. This cannot be so, for love needs law to guide it. In emphasizing love for God and neighbor as the two Great Commandments, Jesus and his apostles did not discard all other commandments. On the contrary, Jesus said, “If you love me you will keep my commandments,” and Paul wrote, “Love is the fulfilling [not the abrogating] of the law.”

On several different occasions a married man has told me that he has fallen in love with another woman. When I have gently remonstrated with him, he has responded in words like these: “Yes, I agree, I already have a wife and family, but this new relationship is the real thing. We were made for each other. Our love for each other has a quality and a depth we have never known before. It *must* be right.” But no, it is not right. No man is justified in breaking his marriage covenant with his wife on the ground of the quality of his love for another woman. Quality of love is not the only yardstick by which to measure what is good or right.

Similarly, I do not deny the claim that homosexual relationships can be loving (although a priori I do not see how they can attain the same richness as the heterosexual mutuality God has ordained). But their love quality is not sufficient to justify them. Indeed, I have to add that they are incompatible with true love because they are incompatible with God’s law. Love is concerned for the highest welfare of the beloved. And our highest human welfare is found in obedience to God’s law and purpose, not in revolt against them.

#### **4. The argument about acceptance and the gospel.**

“Surely,” some people are saying, “it is the duty of heterosexual Christians to accept homosexual Christians. Paul told us to accept - indeed welcome - one another. If God has welcomed somebody, who are we to pass judgement on him (Rom. 14:1ff.)? Norman Pittenger goes further and declares that those who reject homosexual people “have utterly failed to understand the Christian gospel.” We do not receive the grace of God because we are good and confess our sins, he continues; it is the other way round. “It’s always God’s grace which comes *first* ... his forgiveness awakens our repentance.” He even quotes the hymn “Just as I am, without one plea,” and adds: “the whole point of the Christian gospel is that God loves and accepts us just as we are.”

This is a very confused statement of the gospel, however. God does indeed accept us “just as we are,” and we do not have to make ourselves good first - indeed we cannot. But his “acceptance” means that he fully and freely forgives all who repent and believe, not that he condones our continuance in sin. Again, it is true that we must accept one another, but only as fellow penitents and fellow pilgrims, not as fellow sinners who are resolved to persist in our sinning. No acceptance, either by God or by the church, is promised to us if we harden our hearts against God’s word and will. Only judgment.

#### **FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE**

If homosexual practice must be regarded, in the light of the whole biblical revelation, not as a variant within the wide range of accepted normality, but as a deviation from God’s norm; and if we

should therefore call homosexually oriented people to abstain from homosexual practices and partnerships, what advice and help can we give to encourage them to respond to this call? I would like to take Paul's triad of faith, hope, and love, and apply it to homosexually oriented people.

## **The Christian call to faith.**

Faith is the human response to divine revelation. It is believing God's word.

**First**, faith accepts God's standards. The only alternative to heterosexual marriage is sexual abstinence. Nothing has helped me understand the pain of homosexual celibacy more than Alex Davidson's moving book, "The Returns of Love." He writes of "this incessant tension between law and lust," "this monster that lurks in the depths," this "burning torment."

The secular world says: "Sex is essential to human fulfillment. To expect homosexual people to abstain from homosexual practice is to condemn them to frustration and to drive them to neurosis, despair, and even suicide. It's outrageous to ask anybody to deny himself what to him is a normal and natural mode of sexual expression."

But no, the teaching of the Word of God is different. Sexual experience is not essential to human fulfillment. To be sure, it is a good gift of God. But it is not given to all, and it is not indispensable to humanness. Besides, God's commands are good and not grievous. The yoke of Christ brings rest, not turmoil; conflict comes only to those who resist it.

So, ultimately, it is a crisis of faith; whom shall we believe? God or the world? Shall we submit to the lordship of Jesus, or succumb to the pressures of prevailing culture? The true "orientation" of Christians is not what we are by constitution (hormones), but what we are by choice (heart, mind, and will).

**Second**, faith accepts God's grace. If God calls us to celibacy, abstinence is not only good, it is also possible. Many deny it, however. It is "so near to an impossibility," writes Norman Pittenger, "that it's hardly worth talking about."

Really? What then are we to make of Paul's statement following his warning to the Corinthians that male prostitutes and homosexual offenders will not inherit God's kingdom? "And that is what some of you were," he cries. "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). And what shall we say to the millions of heterosexual people who are single? To be sure, all unmarried people experience the pain of struggle and loneliness. But how can we call ourselves Christians and declare that chastity is impossible? Christ comes to us as he came to Paul and says: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). To deny this is to portray Christians as the helpless victims of the world, the flesh and the Devil, and to contradict the gospel of God's grace.

## **The Christian call of hope.**

I have said nothing so far about "healing" for homosexual people, understood not now as self-mastery but as the reversal of their sexual bias. Most agree that, lacking heterosexual outlets, and

under cultural pressures, a large percentage of people would (or at least could) behave homosexually. Indeed, although there may be a genetic factor or component, the condition is more “learned” than “inherited.” Some attribute it to traumatic childhood experiences, such as the withdrawal of the mother’s love, inhibiting sexual growth. So, if it is learned, can it not be unlearned?

The possibility of change by the grace and power of God depends also on the strength of the person’s resolve, which itself depends on other factors. Those whose sexuality is indeterminate may well change under strong influence and with strong motivation. But many researchers conclude that constitutional homosexuality is irreversible. “No known method of treatment or punishment,” writes D. J. West, “offers hope of making any substantial reduction in the vast army of adults practicing homosexuality”; it would be “more realistic to find room for them in society.” He pleads for “tolerance,” though not for “encouragement,” of homosexual behavior. Other psychologists go further and declare that homosexuality is no longer to be regarded as a pathological condition; it is therefore to be accepted, not cured. In 1973 the trustees of the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the category of mental illness.

Are not these views, however, the despairing opinions of the secular mind? Christians know that the homosexual condition, being a deviation from God’s norm, is not a sign of created order but of fallen disorder. How, then, can we acquiesce in it or declare it incurable?

We cannot. The only question is *when* and *how* we are to expect the divine deliverance and restoration to take place. The fact is that, though Christian claims of homosexual “healings” are made, either through regeneration or through a subsequent work of the Holy Spirit, it is not easy to substantiate them.

Martin Hallett, who before his conversion was active in the gay scene, has subsequently founded the “True Freedom Trust,” an interdenominational teaching and counseling ministry on homosexuality and related problems. They have published a pamphlet entitled *Testimonies*. In it homosexual Christian men and women bear witness to what Christ has done for them. They have found a new identity in him, and a new sense of personal fulfillment as children of God. They have been delivered from guilt, shame, and fear by God’s forgiving acceptance. But they have not been delivered from their homosexual orientation, and therefore some inner pain continues alongside their new joy and peace.

Indeed, complete healing of body, mind, and spirit will not take place in this life. Some degree of deficit or disorder remains in each of us. But not for ever! The Christian’s horizons are not bounded by this world. Jesus is coming again; our bodies are going to be redeemed; sin, pain, and death are going to be abolished; and both we and the universe are going to be transformed. Then we shall be finally liberated from everything that defiles or distorts our personality.

Alex Davidson is one who derives comfort in the midst of his homosexuality from his Christian hope. “Isn’t it one of the most wretched things about this condition,” he writes, “that when you look ahead, the same impossible road seems to continue indefinitely? You’re driven to rebellion when you think of there being no point in it and to despair when you think of there being no limit to it.

That's why I find a comfort, when I feel desperate, or rebellious, or both, to remind myself of God's promise that one day it will be finished...."

## **The Christian call to love.**

At present we are living "in between times," between the grace that we grasp by faith and the glory that we anticipate in hope. Between them lies love.

Yet love is just what the church has generally failed to show to homosexual people. Norman Pittenger describes the "vituperative" correspondence he has received, in which homosexuals are dismissed by professing Christians as "filthy creatures," "disgusting perverts," "damnable sinners," and the like. Rictor Norton is yet more shrill: "The church's record regarding homosexuals is an atrocity from beginning to end: it is not for us to seek forgiveness, but for the church to make atonement."

"Homophobia," or the attitude of personal hostility towards homosexuals, is a mixture of irrational fear, hatred, and even revulsion. It overlooks the fact that the great majority of homosexual people are not responsible for their condition (though they are, of course, for their conduct). Since they are not deliberate perverts, they deserve our understanding and compassion (though many find this patronizing), not our rejection. No wonder Richard Lovelace calls for a "double repentance," namely "that gay Christians renounce the active lifestyle" and that "straight Christians renounce homophobia." David Atkinson is right to add: "We are not at liberty to urge the Christian homosexual to celibacy and to a spreading of his relationships, unless support for the former and opportunities for the latter are available in genuine love."

At the heart of the homosexual condition is a deep loneliness, the natural human hunger for mutual love, a search for identity, and a longing for completeness. If homosexual people cannot find these things in the local "church family," we have no business using that expression. The alternative is not between the warm physical relationship of homosexual intercourse and the pain of cold isolation. There is a third alternative - namely, a Christian environment of love, understanding, acceptance, and support. I do not think there is any need to encourage homosexual people to disclose their sexual orientation to everybody; this is neither necessary nor helpful. But they do need at least one confidant to whom they can unburden themselves, who will not despise or reject them but will support them with friendship and prayer. They may also need some professional, private, and confidential pastoral counsel; possibly the support of a professionally supervised therapy group; and many warm and affectionate friendships with people of both sexes.

Same-sex friendships are to be encouraged, like those in the Bible between Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, and Paul and Timothy. There is no hint that any of these was homosexual in the erotic sense, yet they were evidently affectionate and (at least in the case of David and Jonathan) even demonstrative. It is sad that our Western culture inhibits the development of same-sex friendships by engendering the fear of being ridiculed or rejected as a "queer."

These relationships, both same-sex and opposite-sex, need to be developed within the family of God which, though universal, has its local manifestations. He intends each local church to be a warm, accepting, and supportive community. By "accepting" I do not mean "acquiescing," any

more than in rejecting “homophobia” I am rejecting a proper Christian disapproval of homosexual behavior. No, true love is not incompatible with the maintenance of moral standards.

There is, therefore, a place for church discipline in the case of members who refuse to repent and willfully persist in homosexual relationships. But it must be exercised in a spirit of humility and gentleness (Gal 6:1f.). We must be careful not to discriminate between men and women, or between homosexual and heterosexual offenses; and necessary discipline in the case of a public scandal is not to be confused with a witch hunt.

Perplexing and painful as the homosexual Christian’s dilemma is, Jesus Christ offers him or her (indeed, all of us) faith, hope, and love - the faith to accept his standards and his grace to maintain them, the hope to look beyond present suffering to future glory, and the love to care for and support one another. “But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

---

John R. W. Stott, rector emeritus of All Souls Church, London, is now director of the London Institute for contemporary Christianity, which helps clergy and laity interpret the Bible, understand the modern world, and relate the two in terms of discipleship and mission.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Dr. Stott deals more comprehensively with this subject in his book “Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today” - Revel (available in the UK as “Issues Facing Christians Today” - Hodder).*