

The Body's Grace: Love, Marriage, and Sexuality

from: *Above the Fray: Ethical Issues from a Christian Perspective*

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NOTE: This was written in 2006 and reflects a much different climate towards the LGBTQ community both in the culture and in the church.

My Changing Thoughts on Homosexuality—Anonymous

I used to believe that homosexuality was wrong. That's just the way I was raised, and it's what we all assumed, growing up. If we knew anybody who was gay, we didn't know it. Or, at least, we didn't talk about it in public- certainly not in church.

For many years, I assumed the bible said that homosexuality was wrong, sinful. I believed this strongly even though I wasn't sure exactly what the bible said about it, where it said it, or how much it talked about it.

I admit that I was as guilty as the next person of making crude, hateful jokes about gays as well. This is a fact that shames me today.

Since then, I have come to have several friends with gay children. These relationships have forced me to change how I act and they have forced me to reflect on what I believe about my faith and homosexuality. I'm not interested in debating whether or not my friends' children were born gay or not. It doesn't really matter. They are now who they are. What I do believe and what I see is that God is present and at work through their lives.

I've gone back recently to reread the scriptures. I can see how Christians can honestly disagree about God's will on this matter, and I think it's probably a good thing for the church to take its time deciding what it believes. What's clear from scriptures, however, is Christ's commandment that we love one another and treat one another as we would treat God. No one can argue about what scripture says about this. I wish Christians paid more attention to this teaching when talking about homosexuality.

I want these thoughts to stay anonymous because even now in church I'm not sure if my point of view will be received in love.

Vignette

The senior high youth of Wesley United Methodist Church had been meeting for several weeks to discuss “Hot Topics” during their youth fellowship. One Sunday evening they were gathered in the youth room to talk about ‘sex.’ Some parents would not allow their youth to attend that night; meanwhile, the topic had attracted other youth who were intrigued by the hot topic. One of these newcomers was a junior named ‘Tom,’ whose parents were active in the church. Tom himself seldom came to youth group and was seldom invited by others.

Tom sat quietly most of the evening, listening from his seat on a bean-bag chair, as the youth discussed how hard it is to be a Christian teenager in a sex-saturated culture. The girls shared the expectations they felt from boys, and the boys shared the peer pressure they felt from other boys. The group debated the value of abstinence and the prudence of couples living together before marriage.

At one point in the conversation, the youth pastor asked them if they knew what the Christian understanding of intimacy or marriage was, but no one volunteered an answer. The youth group then began to discuss homosexuality and gay friends they knew in school.

They were still discussing homosexuality when ‘Tom’ interrupted and the youth pastor: “But isn’t it wrong? Doesn’t the Bible say its wrong?”

You could tell from the way Tom asked the question that, for him, it was more than an abstract question. It was clear that the question struck at who he thought God had made him to be and who the Bible, the Church and his family expected him to be.

The youth all had something to say in response to Tom’s question, but the youth pastor had no idea what to say.

Torn Asunder: The Challenge of Homosexuality

The above vignette narrates a conversation that could happen in any church. Indeed it's the sort of conversation that does happen in every church. Few congregations are without a parent who has a gay child, and no congregation is without youth who struggle with issues of sexuality. Very few congregations, however, articulate a thoroughly Christian understanding of intimacy, sexuality and marriage beyond the rhetoric of the public square.

The presence of people like 'Tom' in church congregations illustrates that, more important than the right answer or position, it is essential that there be communities where such questions can be asked and received in love and hospitality.

In the 21st century no single issue threatens the unity of the (Protestant) Church as much as homosexuality. It is the most divisive, polarizing issue in the church today. The contemporary church devotes a far larger proportion of time, energy and attention to the issue of homosexuality than scripture itself does. In the Anglican Church, it is framed in terms of the appropriateness of gay Episcopal leadership. In the Lutheran and Presbyterian Church, it is the question of gay ordination. In the United Methodist Church, our own tradition, it has provoked a debate about the meaning of church membership.

For instance, in 2005 a United Methodist pastor in Virginia, Rev. Ed Johnson, refused to admit into congregational membership an individual whom he knew to be homosexual. From the pastor's perspective, the United Methodist Church's ritual for membership entailed the prospective member making a renunciation of sin. Because the polity of the United Methodist Church had defined homosexuality as incompatible with the Christian life, the pastor deemed a condition of this man's membership vow to be the willingness to repent of his homosexuality.

When Rev. Johnson continued to refuse membership to this individual, even under the admonition of his bishop, it became a matter for the denomination's judicial body. Rev. Johnson was eventually judged to be within the bounds his pastoral discretion, thus overriding the bishop's asserted authority in the issue.

As the Ed Johnson incident illustrates, this issue is about far more than homosexuality. The stakes in the Church's debate are so high precisely because homosexuality is an issue that calls up additional, and even more pressing, issues, such as:

Biblical Authority- Do we conform our views to scripture's view on every matter? And, in the case of sexuality, what is scripture's view? Is it clear?

Sin- Are some sins worse than others? If homosexuality is a sin, how severe a sin is it?

Creation- If homosexuality is a result of nature not nurture, then is the creation God deemed "very good" somehow imperfect?

Repentance- If homosexuality is a sin and the Church nevertheless admits homosexuals into membership is the Church in danger of trading Christ's call to repentance for the culture's gospel of inclusiveness?

Redemption- Does the power of the Gospel have the power to set us free from every sin? Even, as some conservative groups maintain, our sexuality?

The Nature of the Church- Is the Church for sinners or for repentant sinners? Is membership a functional designation, like a country club, or is it a Body called to holiness?

Of course, this is to say nothing about how homosexuality has forced the Church to recover, rediscover and rearticulate what is a Christian understanding of marriage, sex, bodies and children. This is a process that, in our judgment, is far from complete.

We began this study fully aware of this issue's potential to rip congregations apart. Because of this, many congregations choose to deal with these matters with silence. However, we believe that silence (simply ignoring the issue) is a step that neither takes the views of conservative Christians seriously nor does it respectfully acknowledge the presence of gay Christians in congregations.

We believe a congregation that cannot, in love and hospitality, dialogue on a divisive issue is an inadequate congregation, for it fails to transcend the polarizations that exist outside the church. Such a failure means the church has failed to be 'holy,' that is, it has failed to be 'different' from the world to which it is meant to witness.

Similarly, we believe it is inadequate discipleship to approach this issue with a "the Bible says it's wrong" attitude. Such a closed attitude treats scripture as a dead letter, and it fails to ask what the Holy Spirit might be speaking through the Word of God to the Church today.

We also believe it is insufficient to respond to this issue with the contrary attitude which says "Well, I know how I feel about this matter." Such an individualistic attitude fails to take seriously the testimony of the larger Christian community, both past and present.

Because homosexuality is such a contentious issue, much of the animosity in current debates is generated by a failure to hear one another. The theologian Eugene Rogers in his, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, offers guiding perspectives to better understand how liberals and conservatives hear one another in this debate¹. Liberals, Rogers says, frequently believe conservatives:

- Misread biblical narratives
- Read scripture texts without any regard for their canonical, historical or cultural context.
- Posit the male-female marital union (for the purposes of procreation) as part of God's 'Natural Law' without acknowledging the legitimate role played by single Christians and Christian couples without children.
- Emphasize the norms of tradition at the expense of justice.

Conservatives, on the other hand, according to Rogers, believe liberals:

¹ Rogers, Eugene, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*; (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999)

- Misread biblical narratives as well.
- Over contextualize difficult scripture texts or dismiss them altogether so that the basis for the authority of the Bible is no longer clear.
- Argue their case from the perspective of science and genetics and cultural norms without submitting their views to the communal text of the Christian tradition.
- Emphasize personal experience at the expense of the historic tradition.

This is how liberals and conservatives hear each other in the debates, according to Rogers' assessment. It's important to point out, too, that both sides have grounds for doing so. Liberal Christians often do speak as if they're ready to jettison biblical authority while conservative Christians frequently misread scripture passages to prove their view.

Homosexuality is an issue that strikes at God's intention for our relationships. Whatever answer one gives to this debate, it is clear that God intends for our conversations and discernment to be marked by mercy, humility and love. We pray this is the spirit in which you will enter this conversation. If not, then the manner of our faith will fail to match the message of our faith.

Rules for the Conversations Ahead

Christian Ethicist Nancy Duff in her essay, *How to Discuss Moral Issues Surrounding Homosexuality When You Know You Are Right*, defers to the philosopher John Stuart Mill to explain why it is important for Christians to dialogue with Christians of differing views.² Firstly, Mill reminds us that because we are fallible, if we ignore an opposing opinion we may in fact be ignoring the truth.

Mill secondly points out that even if another's opinion is in error, it may still contain a portion of the truth. Lastly Mill reminds us even if we are entirely correct in our position that position risks becoming simple prejudice if we cease to be in conversation with those who would disagree with us.

² Duff, Nancy; "How to Discuss Moral Issues Surrounding Homosexuality When You Know You Are Right," in *Homosexuality and the Christian Community*, Seow, Choon-Leong ed.; (Louisville: Westminster, 1996), p.144.

So, as we begin our conversation around marriage, sexuality and homosexuality, remember that you are fallible (sinful) and that to ignore one of your peers may be ignoring truth that the Spirit is trying to speak to you.

Remember that even if you think one of your peers is wrong, it's not likely they're absolutely wrong. Listen for what you think is true about their perspective. And do not forget that even if you have no intention of ever changing your mind on these issues, you owe your peers your conservation.

Homosexuality- What Scripture Says

My experience as a pastor tells me that many Christians, like 'Tom,' believe that homosexuality is wrong, or they believe that the Bible says that it's wrong but they believe so with only a vague awareness of what scripture actually says.

Before examining some of the key and oft-cited texts, it may be helpful to lay out some guiding parameters:

- Homosexuality is given minimal mention in scripture. In the larger biblical narrative, it is an exceedingly minor note when compared to, for example, issues of justice, peace or poverty.
- It is not a matter that receives reflection in Jesus' preaching in the Gospels.
- No where in scripture is homosexuality praised and affirmed.
- No where in scripture is there an awareness of what we today would consider a monogamous, homosexual relationship.

The Old Testament

Genesis 19.1-29

Genesis 19 tells the familiar, yet little understood, story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is a story that many conservatives persist in citing as evidence of God's judgment on homosexual activity. I am frequently surprised when I hear my clergy colleagues defer to this story to make their case in this debate.

In the story, a mob of men from the city bang on Lot's door. Their apparent intention is to gang-rape Lot's visitors, whom the reader already knows are really angels. No reason is given in the

text for why the men of the city should be so moved. Rather their threat stands as a sort of symbol in the story for the city's general wickedness.

The angels rescue Lot's family and later pronounce the city's destruction. Despite the propensity of some to read this narrative as an anti-homosexual text, nowhere in the story itself or in the rest of scripture is Sodom's sin identified as homosexuality. Moreover, reading the text in this fashion forces one to draw an analogy between gang-rape and consensual homosexual relations. This is a textual and a logical stretch at best.

Instead of homosexuality, the prophet Ezekiel identified Sodom's chief sin to be: *"This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy"* (16.49). In discerning scripture's will for homosexuality, it is prudent for the Church to look to other texts.

Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13

These spare mentions in the Book of Leviticus receive frequent citation from many preachers and lay theologians. These passages belong to a portion of Leviticus referred to by scholars as the "Holiness Codes." If you read them, you will see that they clearly prohibit male homosexual behavior. They seem straightforward and clear. Case closed, right?

As clear as these texts are, however, they are not satisfactory texts for many Christians. The holiness codes, after all, contain many moral admonitions that have been ignored by Christians since the days of the early Church. These are matters related to food regulations and the ritual necessity of circumcision. It is inconsistent with the larger Christian tradition to pull these texts out of Leviticus for the purposes of debate when the communal consensus has been that they belong to a code that is no longer normative for followers of Jesus. In fact, even the biblical literalist would have to acknowledge that while Leviticus prohibits male homosexual behavior it makes no mention of female homosexual relationships.

The New Testament

The writings of the New Testament do presume that homosexuality is incompatible with God's creative intent.

At the same time, where you find homosexuality mentioned in the New Testament it is almost always treated as a rhetorical illustration rather than a topic in itself. For example:

1 Corinthians 6.9-11

The Corinthians, as bible readers and church-goers will remember, believed that they were already enjoying the exalted resurrection life. They concluded, therefore, that traditional moral conventions no longer applied to them. An aggravated Paul calls the Corinthians "wrong-doers." To illustrate what he means by wrong-doer, Paul very helpfully provides them with a list of the

sorts of people he is including the Corinthians among: "...fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers."

1 Timothy 1.10

Likewise, Timothy presumes that homosexuality is wrong, but 1 Timothy is not concerned with examining it in its own right. Instead Timothy provides a list of behaviors and vices that are opposed to the Gospel, such as: "fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders, liars, perjurers."

Romans 1.18-32

Romans 1.18-32 is the key scriptural text that Christians on both sides of this debate must wrestle with when it comes to homosexuality. It is the only passage in scripture that treats the subject in more than an illustrative fashion, and it is the only passage in scripture that reflects on it in theological terms.

No matter what you conclude about this passage and its understanding of homosexuality, the theological context is crucial. Here in the first chapter of Romans, Paul is attempting to demonstrate how the Gospel, rather than a set of philosophical precepts or moral teachings, is the power of God active in the world and in fact acting to overturn the world.

Paul believes that the very righteousness of God is present in the Gospel, and for Paul God's righteousness is a verb not a descriptor. The Gospel is God's way of making righteousness happen in the world. For Paul, then, Jesus Christ is the embodiment, the incarnation, of God's righteousness. This is Paul's orienting and overarching perspective in his Letter to the Romans.

In chapter 1 he takes as his task drawing a comparison between the righteousness of God disclosed in Christ and the unrighteousness of fallen humanity (1.18). The word "wicked" in most English translations can be more clearly (but more awkwardly) translated as "unrighteousness."

The following verses (19-32) serve for Paul as his exhibits of the evidence for the unrighteousness of the fallen world. Paul catalogs homosexuality as part of his thesis. Homosexuality's inclusion in this series of illustrations should not obscure Paul's larger rhetorical point. As verse 21 indicates, the cited sins all fall under the more general, and more damning, indictment that these fallen sinners have failed to honor God and render him his due thanksgiving. The sin Paul is zeroing in on, in other words, is idolatry.

In what way does Paul understand homosexuality as idolatry?

A majority of biblical scholars and cultural historians concur that Paul has in mind not monogamous homosexual relationships as we might know today but heterosexuals in the wider Greco-Roman culture who engaged in homosexual acts purely for the sake of sex. This means that Paul is critiquing those who have made sex an end in itself, unattached to any sacred or intimate relationship of trust. In Paul's mind, sex has become (or is one example of) an idol.

It is also necessary that readers not miss Paul's larger argument and the implications it bears for how we think of homosexuality. Paul, in chapter 1 of Romans, is not warning his readers of God's wrath to come *if* they should engage in such sinful, idolatrous acts.

On the contrary, and this is fundamental, Paul begins Romans with the premise that the world is already suffering God's wrath (the Fall). If this is so, then Paul understands homosexuality not as a sin deserving of God's wrath. This is important! He instead sees the presence of homosexual acts as proof of God's wrath.

Paul is diagnosing the human condition as he sees it theologically; he is not prescribing wrath or punishment.

While this may be cold comfort to gay Christians, it should preclude Christians from singling out homosexuals as peculiarly deserving of God's wrath. Indeed if one is faithful and literal to the text of Paul's argument, homosexuality is no more grave a sin than those who are "full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious towards parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless."

Paul, quite intentionally I think, provides an exhaustive and all-inclusive list. After all, his point is that all of creation is groaning in rebellion to God and we are all victims of and participants in unrighteousness.

On the other hand, Paul's theological point in Romans also gives grist to the argument that many Christians make that homosexuality violates God's creative intent for humanity. While gay Christians may feel that they were created so, readers of Paul can make the theological claim that homosexuality is a sign of how Sin in our fallen world has distorted God's aims in creation. Nothing in creation, some might posit, presently resembles what God intended in the beginning.

Paul's writing in Romans is dense and difficult. Readers should not forget that Paul's argument is a theological one not a moral one. To be faithful to the text, the arguments and conclusions one makes about homosexuality, at least in terms of Romans, should be theological ones.

Another word of caution to those who debate these matters, and the word of caution comes from Paul. As Paul's reasoning continues into chapter two of Romans, Paul warns that "you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (2.1).

How are We to Interpret Scripture: Two Rival Conclusions

Using Paul as a Model for Ethical Re-Evaluation:

In his essay, *Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality*, biblical scholar Brian Blount advocates the position that certain biblical ethical prescriptions may be modified by the contemporary church, and, in their modified form, they may more faithfully reflect Paul's own theological perspective.³ Blount cites Paul himself as the precedent for such ethical re-evaluation.

Blount points out that the Gospel writers are all unanimous in their presentation of Jesus' views on divorce. Jesus, according to the Gospels, is unambiguously against divorce. Only in

³ Blount, Brian, "Reading and Understanding the New Testament on Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and the Christian Community*, Seow, Choon-Leong ed.; (Louisville: Westminster, 1996), p.28.

Matthew's Gospel does Jesus allow the stipulation of divorce in cases of sexual infidelity (5.31-32). In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul acknowledges Jesus' teaching on this matter (1 Corinthians 7.10-11). Nonetheless, in that same passage, Paul claims his own apostolic authority and allows for a reevaluation of Jesus' teaching based on the context of the Corinthian congregation.

The church at Corinth was struggling to apply their faith in a thoroughly pagan culture. Aware of the destructive effects pagan culture potentially posed to an individual's and a church's faith, Paul changes Jesus' tradition and allows for divorce in the case of Christians who are married to unsupportive pagan partners.

In light of the Corinthian's cultural context, and even though it stands in contrast to Jesus' own teaching in the Gospels, Paul believes this ethical modification to be consistent with his larger understanding of God's present work in and through Jesus Christ. Such ethical deliberation and re-evaluation is not dissimilar to the process of discernment that the Christian Church later undertook with respect to scripture's understanding of slavery. Just as the Holy Spirit guided Paul to re-evaluate Jesus' tradition in light of a different present-day context, Brian Blount posits that the Holy Spirit can and does lead Christians to such discernment today.

When it comes to the matter of homosexuality, Blount argues that Romans 1 understands homosexuality as one symptom among many of the fallen world's idolatry. Our contemporary situation is different, according to Blount. If it is possible for contemporary Christians to concede that a homosexual person need not be an idolater, then Paul's chief complaint may be removed, opening the way for Christians to re-evaluate Paul's ethical prescriptions in a faithful manner. It becomes possible then, Blount says, for Christians to conclude that faithful, monogamous, homosexual relationships can be consistent with God's present-day redemptive activity.

Experience as a Lens for Scripture Not as a Counter-Balancing Authority:

In his book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays acknowledges that the New Testament provides no definitive, applicable "rule" on homosexuality.⁴ The New Testament, as in the case of Romans 1, offers only theological principles against homosexuality, yet Hays stresses that scripture's negative prohibitions regarding homosexuality be read against the larger backdrop of the male-female union, which scripture presents as the normative location for love and intimacy.

However marginal or unclear are the bible's teachings on homosexuality, the scriptural canon clearly and repeatedly affirms that God made man and woman for one another. Any contemporary discernment over homosexuality must struggle with this positive norm that is the overwhelming witness of the scriptural narrative.

For example, Hays turns to Acts 10 and 11, Luke's story documenting the entrance of Gentiles into the fledgling (Jewish) Christian Church. In the story, God directs the apostle Peter in a dream to understand that God desired the inclusion of the Roman, Cornelius, into the community of Jesus. Cornelius' inclusion represents God's invitation to all Gentiles, an invitation that

⁴ Hays, Richard, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*; (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996).

shatters all of Peter's preconceptions about sin, purity and righteousness. Advocates for the acceptance of homosexuals frequently point to this story from Acts as evidence that God desires the church's fellowship to extend to those previously judged sinful, impure and unrighteous.

Richard Hays, however, argues that such a reading of Acts 10 and 11 misses the mark, for the early church did not conclude from Cornelius' story that the biblical witness had, up until then, been wrong on the issue of the Gentiles. Instead Cornelius' inclusion prompted the church reread their scripture and discover that the welcome to the Gentiles had been consistent throughout scripture. Homosexuality is not an analogous issue, Hays would argue, because nowhere in scripture does the narrative advocate the inclusion or acceptance of homosexuals.

Because scripture consistently adopts a negative view of homosexuality and affirms the heterosexual norm, Hays, unlike Blount, argues that any change to the church's traditional teaching must come only "after sustained and agonizing scrutiny by a consensus of the faithful."

The Catholic biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson echoes Hays' urging of consensus-building caution and discernment, writing that:

"The burden of proof required to overturn scriptural precedents is heavy, but it is a burden that has been born before. The Church cannot, should not, define itself in response to political pressure or popularity polls. But it is called to discern the work of God in human lives and adapt its self-understanding in response to the work of God."⁵

Homosexuality: Where the Arguments Often Go Wrong

Though it may be surprising to Christians and non-Christians alike, the current debate in our culture over marriage and homosexuality frequently relies upon ethical perspectives other than the Christian ethical tradition. In other words, the language with which Christians debate homosexuality is very often not Christian language.

Those who advocate the acceptance of homosexuality often resort to the utilitarian tradition's ethical assumptions, in which one's desired outcome (happiness) trumps any moral consideration of the means (homosexual activity). From this perspective, any binding moral principles related to homosexuality are out of bounds or, at least, must submit to the individual's happiness. While some would understand this perspective as favoring people over legalism and love over the letter of the law, such a perspective also risks framing the debate in individualistic terms in which the community has no moral claim when a person's privacy or happiness are in question.

Meanwhile, those who argue against the acceptance of homosexuality more often employ the language of the deontological and natural law traditions than they do the Christian tradition. Such perspectives tend to define homosexuality as an absolute moral wrong regardless of outcome. In this way, homosexuality is always and inherently wrong and it matters not if the outcome is a loving, monogamous relationship. Casting the debate in this way can risk ignoring the lived realities and testimonies of people, a move that is incongruent with how Jesus conducted his own ministry.

⁵ Quoted in Rogers, Eugene, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, p. 134.

Drawing from the natural law tradition in debating homosexuality, many Christians argue that the heterosexual union is the self-evident norm, necessary for the growth and survival of society. An exclusively natural law perspective, however, fails to provide a positive account of marriage beyond it being a created and universally valid moral norm.

A Christian approach to homosexuality must be shaped by a communal vision. In baptism, Christians are made a part of the one Body of Christ. This means a Christian's ethical discernment cannot be done in isolation. It must be done in concert with the community and, at times, one's ethical views and opinions must submit to the community's view. Our baptism does not allow us the luxury of a private or purely individualistic approach to the moral life.

In addition, a Christian approach to this debate should also insist that, instead of exclusively articulating what the Church opposes (homosexuality), we provide a positive account of what we believe about love, sex and marriage. The Christian understanding of marriage and sexuality is more dynamic than following negative prohibitions and obeying moral norms.

For example, in my own relationship with my wife, I can say that our marriage is about more than simply fulfilling God's intended roles for males and females. By being married to one another, we believe we're doing more than simply obeying our genetic make-up as heterosexuals. We did not get married to provide another building block for the foundation of society, and our intimacy, we believe, is meant for more than procreation or adhering to moral norms.

All this is to say that before Christians can make positive or negative judgments regarding homosexuality, they should be able to provide an account of marriage and sexuality that is more substantive and dynamic than the categories and clichés available in the cultural debate. That is to say, Christians should be able to say how their relationship witnesses to their faith, how their life together makes visible the grace of God.

Love and Marriage in the Christian Tradition

It should not be surprising that just as scripture is consistently negative in its presumptions regarding homosexuality, so too have the judgments of the Christian tradition been largely negative.

In keeping with its Jewish interpretative tradition, the early Christian Church read the Book of Genesis as positing the male-female relationship as God's divine intent. Like Paul in Romans, the early Church did not conceive of a category of people that we would today label 'homosexuals.' To the contrary, the early Church presumed that homosexual acts were committed by heterosexual persons who were interested only in the immediate gratification of the act. This is how Paul and others, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, could claim that homosexual acts were both idolatrous and "against nature." Because homosexual acts violated natural law, the Church has traditionally prescribed chastity for homosexuals.

Knowing what the Christian tradition has said about homosexuality, though, is little help if one knows not the Christian tradition's broader understanding of marriage and sexual intimacy.

As a pastor who has met with many couples preparing to marry, I know that very few couples can offer an understanding of why they should be married or what the purpose might be for their intimacy beyond telling me that they are “in love.”

And in our culture, heterosexual marriage is most frequently articulated as the “foundation of society.” Not only is this an impoverished notion from a romantic standpoint, it seems a dubious argument for Christians to make when our savior was, quite intentionally, an irritant to traditional society.

The Biblical Norm

Genesis 1

The creation story has been understood in the Christian tradition as the foundational text that presents the male-female union as normative. What understandings of marriage and sexuality have been derived from the Genesis text?

As the Genesis passage makes clear, God decided that it was not ideal for Adam to be alone. The Christian tradition has held that relationship is one of the primary reasons that Christians marry. Marriage, in other words, provides the space and time for Christians to grow in trust, faithfulness and intimacy.

The constant refrain in Genesis’ creation account is that what God had made was abundantly and thoroughly “good.” Because no part of God’s creation fails to be good, Christian tradition has held that sexual intimacy is a part of God’s good creation, and that it’s given for the enjoyment of God’s creatures. Contrary to popular misperception, Christians do not believe that sexual intimacy is intended only as the means for procreation. Though an often neglected text, the Old Testament erotic poem Song of Songs makes the goodness of sexual intimacy unambiguous.

Another aspect of Genesis that informs a Christian understanding of marriage and sexuality is God’s invitation for his creation to be fruitful and multiply. Christian tradition has seen the welcoming of children into families as one of the purposes of marriage. Just as the gracious life of God issues forth in new life, creation, so too does Christian marriage welcome new life. God’s gift of relationship, then, is a gift that prompts the giving of new gifts.

Eugene Rogers, in *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, observes that at different times in its history the Christian tradition has focused upon different aspects of its understanding of marriage. That Jesus’ first public miracle in John’s Gospel is to turn water into wine at a Cana wedding clearly shows that, for Jesus, weddings were an occasion of joy and celebration.

Following Easter, as the first generation of Christians anticipated Christ’s imminent return in glory, marriage came to be seen as an unnecessary (earthly) commitment. There was no need to marry if Christ was returning soon to usher in the New Creation. It was in this context that the apostle Paul in his New Testament writings described marriage primarily as a protection against lustful sins. Singleness and celibacy were recommended for the majority of the Christian community; marriage was prescribed only for those whose lack of self-control would otherwise lead them into lust and sin.

During the scholastic period of the middle ages, the Catholic Church tended to overemphasize marriage and sexuality as a means for procreation. Indeed St. Ambrose once claimed that “the child is the only reason for a woman to marry.” The Protestant Church during the Reformation period emphasized the Pauline texts on marriage, seeing it as a remedy against lust. In fact, the Protestant Reformers so emphasized this understanding of marriage that conjugal love that was too passionate could also be construed as adulterous and idolatrous.

Marriage in the Catholic tradition has been codified as one of the Church’s seven sacraments. Once again, a sacrament is a visible sign that communicates or conveys an inward or invisible grace. The tradition has understood the marriage relationship as a sacrament in that the married couple’s love and relationship becomes a visible sign “of things more desirable.” That is, married love conveys and communicates to one another and to others something of the grace of God.

The Orthodox Christian tradition, following St. Gregory of Nyssa’s understanding, has understood marriage and sexual intimacy to be a means of sanctification. Sanctification is a theological term that describes one’s growth in grace; it is the process of growing ever more holy in the love of God. Marriage allows for Christians’ sanctification for it creates the space and time for *eros* (intense but self-centered love) to become *agape* (charitable, other-directed love). In this fashion, married love teaches Christians how to love as God loves.

It is possible, then, for contemporary Christians, who are caught up in navigating through the cultural debate, to gather together these various historic understandings of Christian marriage and summarily conclude that Christian marriage has been intended for offspring, faithful relationship and sanctification.

Reflection

Married Love: Witness and Sacrament

In these ethical reflections, we’ve taken ‘witness’ and ‘sacrament’ as our guiding lenses. When thinking ethically about married love and homosexuality, our task is to ask ourselves: How does my response to these issues give witness to my fundamental convictions as a Christian? And also: How do my own beliefs and actions on this subject make visible what we know of God’s invisible grace and love?

Witness

As we have seen already, homosexuality is a marginal concern in the scriptural canon. Because of its limited treatment in scripture, witness is an important ethical lens as we reflect on homosexuality. In particular, this lens will hopefully prevent us from becoming enmeshed in emotional reactions and it will help us stay mindful of the more critical and imperative convictions that our lives are to be in witness to.

So what are our fundamental Christian convictions as they relate to the issue of homosexuality?

1) Sacred Worth:

Scripture's negative prohibitions regarding homosexuality should not be allowed to calcify into a prejudice that veils the more basic conviction that as creatures of God homosexuals are persons of sacred worth, and as members of the human community they also reflect God's image.

Moreover, Christians believe in Christ God assumed humanity in order to redeem it. Christian belief has traditionally held that for all of humanity to be redeemed, all of humanity must somehow be represented in the human nature of Jesus. Not only do homosexuals have sacred worth as creatures of God, they also have a share in the redemptive work of God.

The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church echo much of this by stating that though the Church believes homosexuality to be incompatible with Christian teaching, "homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth."⁶

Understood in this light, it seems reasonable also that Christians would support civil rights for homosexual persons.

2.) Jesus Christ Died for the Ungodly:

The apostle Paul makes clear that this affirmation of Christian faith includes every one of us. We are all sinners. This basic Christian tenet should commend humility upon people on both sides of the homosexual debate. Those who think that homosexual love is a sin must not mistakenly convey that this sin puts them beyond God's loving mercy or redemptive work.

Those who accept homosexual relationships as morally legitimate must not rest self-righteously in the certainty of their own opinions or personal experience for we are all participants in a fallen world and our judgments are clouded by sin. To know the mind of Christ is no easy thing.

We would argue that the premise that Christ died for the ungodly allows for Christians to welcome gay Christians into congregational membership. To exclude gay Christians from church membership appears to single out or emphasize homosexual sin to an extent that scripture itself does not.

3.) The Hospitality of the People of God:

In Romans 1, St. Paul writes that homosexual acts are "against nature" (*para phusin*). Eugene Rogers points out that in Romans 11 Paul uses this exact same phrase to describe God's act of adopting Gentiles in to the household of Israel. God's inclusion of the Gentiles into the People of God, Paul says, is "against nature." God's grace is such that Christians owe their salvation to God's unnatural—let's say, queer—act.

⁶ *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*; (Nashville, Tenn: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004).

Rogers argues that because Christians have been adopted so unnaturally, they must be a people of hospitality to both Jews and outsiders. He adds that because they are saved by such a strange grace, the adoption of gay Christians in to the People of God must not be a closed question for straight Christians. The salvation of Gentile Christians by the God of Israel proves that no work of inclusion is beyond this God's unnatural grace.

4.) God is Present and at Work in All People:

That gay Christians have been adopted in to the household of Israel should remind Christians today that, no matter how they feel about the issue of homosexuality, God is at work and present in all people. The Acts 10 story of Cornelius reaffirms this point and 1 John 4 goes even further, teaching that those who love, by their loving, implicitly know something about God.

If this is true, then gay Christians can not only experience the presence of God they can teach something about God to straight Christians. Indeed this suggests that straight Christians, regardless of their position on this issue, must take the experience and testimony of gay Christians seriously and not be content to condemn, categorize or caricature.

Sacrament

The cultural debate surrounding homosexuality and marriage should not tempt Christians into mistakenly believing that it's sufficient to be 'for' or 'against' this issue. In fact, it's our judgment that a good deal of the cultural confusion owes to the church's collective amnesia over what marriage and intimacy mean.

Christians should be more cognizant of what their relationships are meant to make visible. Our Protestant tradition, unlike the Catholic tradition, does not define marriage as a sacrament, but it seems to us that the language of sacrament is exactly right. Married love is meant to convey more than the love of two people; it's meant to make visible God's love and grace.

1.) God's Faithfulness

In the wedding ceremony, couples declare and vow before a community to keep faith with one another whether they are rich or poor, ill or well, happy or struggling.

Christian marriage is neither overly romantic nor is it naïve. It anticipates hardship and trial.

By covenanting fidelity in every circumstance, Christian couples become a parable of the love of God. That is, they remind us that God keeps faith with us no matter what- just as God the Father kept faith with Jesus the Son. The faithfulness of married love helps to make visible God's faithfulness.

2.) God's Joy and Delight

More than just faithfulness, married love helps us to remember how God sees us. In Christian marriage, neither spouse remains the same person they were on the day of their wedding. Each spouse, over time, is shaped by the perceptions of the other. Being perceived each day by the other, each spouse comes to see themselves as an occasion of joy and delight for the other. In this way, Christian marriage helps remind all of us that, in God's eyes, we are all occasions of delight.

3.) Christ's Self-Emptying Love

In many ways, it's not enough to say that Christian marriage is meant to make God's love visible. Christian marriage is meant to make visible a very specific sort of love. In the wedding ritual, Christian couples promise to forsake all others (all other people and all other things) and pour their love into the other- for the sake of the other. The love of Christian marriage is a self-giving, self-emptying love. This is how Christian marriage can be modeled after the love of Jesus even though Jesus himself never married.

4.) The Hope of the Resurrection

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, while Jerusalem was being besieged by enemies and God's chosen people were suffering the wrath and judgment of God, symbolically purchased land and field as his way of communicating hopeful confidence that God would redeem his people and restore their fortunes (Jeremiah 32). Christian marriage is a similar hope-filled, symbolic act. By marrying, Christians refuse to be seduced in to despair by the world's fallen-ness. By their love and commitment for one another, by their welcoming children into their lives, Christians make visible their faith and hope that the future belongs to God.

5.) The Sanctifying Work of the Holy Spirit

Married couples do not stay the same people they were on their wedding day. The binding covenant of Christian marriage provides the context-the confines- in which Christians can grow in holiness by growing in the love of someone other than themselves. In this way, Christian marriage makes visible to others the Holy Spirit's active, invisible work in our midst.

Conclusions

As far as the issue of homosexuality is concerned, we believe that the most Christian attitude at present may be a refusal to make any conclusions. Christ's Church will not have been served well if Christians continue to divide themselves and lob recriminating charges at one another.

Instead the most charitable and faithful step may be to continue to wrestle with the scriptural narrative, to struggle with the Holy Spirit's present day witness and to listen gently to the testimonies and experience of gay and straight Christians. The current fractures within many Christian churches points out the desperate need for faithful consensus among the Body of Christ.

In lieu of conclusions, we offer these thoughts and possibilities.

- A Christian conception of marriage cannot be limited to the purposes of having children. Any Christian understanding of marriage must allow, indeed expect, that the married love of childless couples have their own particular and necessary vocation to fulfill.
- Christians cannot overemphasize the male-female relationship of Genesis as the biblical norm, for the Church cannot afford to neglect the important witness of single Christians, whose friendships and relationships can also make the love and faithfulness of God abundantly visible.
- If Christians define the appropriateness of relationships and marriage in terms of the biblical norm and procreation, then it seems that heterosexual marriage is the reasonable norm for the Church to endorse. However, if Christian marriage is also understood as a means of grace and sanctification, then to deny that source of grace to homosexuals might be understood to frustrate the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives— which, according to the Bible, would be a grave sin indeed.
- But isn't it wrong? Rather than allowing this to remain a political or academic debate, we believe that most Christians would be better served by instead asking themselves how their own relationships reflect, make visible, the grace, fidelity and joy of God's own life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Because it is possible for Christians to have the “correct” biblical answer on homosexuality, but still not have a relationship of their own that conveys to others the self-emptying love of Christ.

As it relates to the subject of homosexuality, we do feel confident in urging two conclusions.

- If it's a true biblical ethic that Christians wish to adopt, then that ethic will conform to the primary message of scripture and concern itself with issues of peace and justice, greed and poverty and forgiveness and reconciliation. A true Christian ethic, even if it's conservative, will treat homosexuality as a minor concern for it is an exceedingly minor note in scripture.
- Congregations wrestling with this topic will take Paul's admonitions in 1 Corinthians 13 to heart. This passage is typically read to couples at weddings, but Paul wrote this for a community of people. We think it absolutely necessary, given the cultural climate, that

churches struggling with this issue remember that the love of their community is meant to be patient and kind and never ever boastful, rude or arrogant.