

“Affirming Love?”

Estimates of the modern prevalence of homosexuality vary considerably. They are complicated by differing or even ambiguous definitions of homosexuality, and by fluctuations over time and according to location. A good educated guess puts figures at approximately 3% of the population¹ which would be approximately 9,000,000 in the US, an almost 200,000,000 in the world. It is helpful to consider these numbers as I ask the question, how do I remain true to the biblical revelation concerning homosexuality and at the same time remain faithful to the call to love my neighbor?

It is important in an issue that covers so much ground to briefly state where I stand on several of the components of the matter before getting at the heart of my concern. To that end I provide answers to some of these questions in stating what this is not.

... This is not asking the question, are homosexual acts sinful? The bible is clear that they are.² I stand with and affirm the excellent textual and hermeneutical work of Robert A. J. Gagnon in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. In it, he refutes all attempts to make the scripture pro-homosexual. And if we understand from Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28³ that our thoughts as well as our actions are held accountable, then we know that homosexual temptations acted upon inwardly are sinful as well. Gagnon writes this, “*He (Jesus) regarded all sexual activity (thoughts and deeds) outside of lifelong marriage to one person of the opposite sex as capable of jeopardizing one’s entrance into the kingdom of God.*”⁴ Whether we view this entrance to the kingdom of God as that which comes at consummation or the entrance to the kingdom of God here on earth that comes at salvation, it puts this discussion in its appropriate light. This matter is one of the very souls of those around us whom we are called to love.

... This is not asking how people become homosexual. There are many factors that contribute to someone identifying himself or herself as a homosexual. They include but are not limited to psychobiological (i.e. first sexual experience), psychological (i.e. parental influences / relationships), temperament (i.e. gender non-conformity), sexual abuse, sociological/cultural, and hearts bent by sin.⁵ There is also a less definable spiritual component, particularly for those raised in a non-Christian environment. Here I must also mention the possibility of a physiological component. Current research, although by no means definitive,⁶ hints at this possibility. But this does not undermine my understanding of the biblical text concerning homosexuality. There are many physiological factors that affect the way that we interact with the world and are tempted by sin; the predilection to addiction is a similar corollary. If at some time in the future it were proven that there are indeed physiological factors that contribute to a homosexual orientation, I would then point to a fallen world that affects our bodies, even from conception on, as well as our actions. “*What is does not always tell us what ought to be.*”⁷

¹ Myers and Scanzoni p.55 - Incidence of Homosexuality: Defined in terms of; Self-Identity or exclusive same-sex contact in the past year 3% of males, 2% of females; On-going same-sex attraction 5%; Ever had same sex contact: 9% of males (half before age 18) 4% of females (use. after age 18); Ever had same-sex fantasy 10% - Dr. David Jones, Covenant Seminary, Christian Ethics notes, Homosexual Outline, - Van Leeuwen, 143-58

² Lev. 18:22, 20:13, Rom 1:27, 1Cor 6:9, 1Tim 1:10

³ Matt 5:28 “...everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

⁴ Gagnon, 209

⁵ categories from Dr. Richard Winter’s lecture “The Search for Sexual Sanity in a Confusing Culture: Homosexuality” in Introduction to Counseling class at Covenant Seminary 4/07

⁶ www.narth.com has references and links to many of these studies

⁷ *Faithfulness to God’s Standards*: p32

Therefore ... this is not asking the question of sexual orientation. Is there such a category? Today's popular western, political culture often assumes that there is. We in the orthodox Christian community have to disagree. We believe that homosexuality in practice, behavior, or as an identity is not what God intended for the best part of his creation. We also need to acknowledge that there are many millions of people who believe that their identity is first homosexual. It is an identity that is pushed upon them by the fall, by a fallen creation, and by the sin of fallen people, and at the same time it is an identity that they choose. So if there is both a physiological cause and an environmental cause, and if these two are combined in such a way that the biological predilections towards homosexual behavior are encouraged either by positive reinforcement, (such as in a culture where it is viewed as an acceptable option) or negatively, (through abuse or neglect), then we have those that are clearly oriented towards the same sex. This being true, then we would have to agree that for many it is not *simply* a choice. Homosexuals do then make fallen choices based upon how they have been shaped by the fallen state of this world. The same is true for all people in regards to any other fallen choice. We are all affected by both the fallenness of this world and we all make choices to live in our fallenness.

... This is not asking the question on what our position should be concerning same-sex civil unions or gay marriage. We believe marriage between one man and one woman to be a creational norm that is assumed and explicitly and implicitly defended throughout all of scripture. The result of this fallen world is confusion about these truths. This confusion is not a sufficient reason for us to remain quiet concerning the damaging affects of a culture that permits, allows, or condones, homosexual marriage. Gagnon writes this, "...it is possible for aggressive homophile instruction in the schools to recruit some additional children into a homosexual lifestyle who otherwise would have gone through life as self-identifying heterosexuals."⁸ This is a likely scenario in a society that supports gay marriage and it is only one of the many dangers inherit with this permissive view.

Thus, the church should stand publicly before government and culture for the truth of scripture not simply because it is what we believe but because we believe that these truths concerning how we should live are for the good of all. Contrary to the opinion of those who see gay marriage as a way to strengthen the institution of marriage,⁹ we hold that only heterosexual marriage supports the common good. Standing for this publicly may seem to call into question the idea of the separation between church and state. One voice from the arena of sexual politics suggests, "*that the separation of the two is as much for the possibility of vibrant faith as it is for the possibility of a civil polity.*"¹⁰ What this argument ignores is that there is only so much separation possible between the life of faith and civil polity because all government is subject to the will of God. This is not a sufficient argument for those who disagree, but it points for us the need to speak into culture when the situation warrants. The Westminster Confession of Faith indicates what our role in government is and is not, "*Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience.*"¹¹ The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) Book of Church Order also helps to define our role in the civil government, "*These assemblies are altogether distinct from the civil magistracy, and have no jurisdiction in political or civil affairs. They have no power to inflict temporal pains and penalties, but their authority is in all respects*

⁸ Gagnon, 418

⁹ Myers and Scanzoni p.xii

¹⁰ Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal*, p.24

¹¹ WCoF 31-4

moral or spiritual."¹² The matter of gay marriage and the prevailing attitude of acceptance in our culture of a homosexual lifestyle are deemed here to be an extraordinary case of moral and spiritual concern, of which our conscience demands that we speak into publicly.

Thus the PCA at its 32nd General Assembly (GA), in 2004, concerning this issue of gay marriage, homosexual practice and temptations, and the civic responsibility of the church concerning these issues, adopted an overture that begins thus, "*Therefore be it resolved that the 32nd PCA GA; a) Humbly calls on the civil governments ... all nations of the earth to act ... to ensure that marriage is legally defined ... as existing exclusively between one man and woman.*"¹³ There are then costs for making this stand, which I'll discuss later.

... This is also not asking whether change is possible. In one respect this is not the right question. The hope of someone with homosexual tendencies or who has lived a homosexual lifestyle, and who desires to change, is not that they will one day find that all their homosexual tendencies will disappear and they will live happily ever after in a heterosexual marriage. This can and does happen, but the hope is that through ongoing repentance all of their temptations will come under the lordship of Jesus Christ. It is then that the homosexual can say no when faced with any temptation. The process of healing from any besetting sin requires a commitment to the normal means of grace, as well as individual counseling within the context of a local church. This is the call to any Christian, homosexual or not, who desires change.

... This is also not asking the question should an *unrepentive* homosexual be allowed to join the church or similarly should an unrepentive homosexual who is also already a member of a church come under church discipline. Just as a church should not allow an unrepentive sex addict or someone who is continually engaging in premarital sex without any sign of repentance to join the church, a church should not allow an unrepentive homosexual to join either, no matter how convinced they are that the bible does not condemn homosexuality. In the same fashion a current member who engages in homosexual behavior and exhibits no signs of repentance *should* come under the discipline of the church. However, judging repentance is a difficult process, which is given to the session of a local church and *is* in part what this discussion is about.

A committee formed by the Missouri Presbytery of the PCA to answer the question of ministry to homosexuals posed by one of its congregations stated, "*... we believe that Scripture calls us to the practice of discipline as a means of grace to bring about the growth in obedience to God which is the calling of every Christian.*"¹⁴ This can apply to both those who come under the discipline of the church and those who seek membership. The local church is responsible to all that are a part of its regular ministry, and barring some from membership could fall into this question of discipline. Important to note here is that a complete healing from all homosexual tendencies is not a requirement for admittance to the membership of the church. What is required is the recognition of sin, the need for the saving work of Christ, the promise to rely on the Holy Spirit for the work of sanctification, the promise to support the church, and submission to the government and discipline of the church.¹⁵ It is to be expected that those who come forward to become members of the church are in the process of being sanctified and will at times succumb to the temptations of their old nature. Again, it is a consistent unrepentance that is deserving of formal discipline or prohibition from membership.

¹² PCA BCO 11-1

¹³ Minutes of the 32nd GA of the PCA, 32-52, p. 175

¹⁴ *Faithfulness to God's Standards: The Lord's Calling to Homosexuality-Inclined Christians, Committee of the Missouri Presbytery 1994*, p40

¹⁵ see PCA BCO 57-5

Samantha, (name changed for anonymity sake), was born into a home whose environmental factors lead her siblings to drugs, alcohol, and abusive relationships. She found herself, after several years of struggle, deeply rooted in the lesbian community. Samantha had little contact with any Christians and came to Christ through a book. She then sought a ministry to help her move out of the homosexual lifestyle, and came into contact with a church that has exhibited the ability to love the outcast and the oppressed well. Samantha demonstrated a real commitment to Christ and was seeking to live repentively in light of her new faith. She had stopped pursuing sexual fulfillment with her partner, but was still living with her when she was accepted for membership.

Many evangelical churches will never be an accepting place for those seeking to turn from the homosexual lifestyle, much less a place where a woman like Samantha could become a member. This is a sad fact of the ignorance, bigotry and hatred that has no place in the Christian ethic. Since biblical wisdom is needed to rightly judge repentance, we cannot make a rule based on anecdotal evidence. Thus, those who are charged with protecting the church must, personally examine any person seeking admittance to membership. The hope is that when the session has someone like Samantha before them they recognize the opportunity to live out the calling of the church, which does not require that a person “get cleaned up” before they come to Christ.

...But what about those who do not recognize their need for repentance?

The question then is ... how do we, as those called to shepherd and protect the church, love both the homosexual who is our neighbor and the homosexual community?

Of course we understand that to love someone includes pushing them away from their sin and towards God. We must pray for the conviction of sin. Today’s culture of tolerance has excluded this capacity to love. Leviticus 19 has several insights on how to love our neighbors well, v. 17 reads, “*you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.*” This makes clear our need to love in this way. Unfortunately, this line of thought has been used to attack the homosexual community and alienate them from the church. Though we do not admit the unrepentive homosexual as a member of the church, we do welcome them into the life of our worshiping community.

We must affirm both publicly and privately then what is good and right in the life of those who call themselves homosexual. Pointing to the *imago dei*¹⁶ that is a part of everyone, no matter their sin, is one of today’s best apologetics. There is much that is good, even in a homosexual relationship. It is of course twisted and tainted by sin, but we can still legitimately affirm how homosexuals live out their *imago dei*. As we affirm what is right, we can at the same time love them well by “reasoning frankly” with them concerning their sin. Gagnon writes, “... *positive moral conduct in many areas of one’s life does not establish the legitimacy of all of one’s conduct. Homosexuals do not turn into werewolves simply because they commit same-sex intercourse.*”¹⁷

If we ought to affirm love and at the same time reveal the fallenness of homosexuality, how then do we enter into the homosexual culture in a way that is neither condemning nor approving?

Martinez (name changed for anonymity) is a homosexual transvestite who regularly attended a small group and came several times to the worship service of a church who wanted to live out the ethos discussed in this paper. Unfortunately, even after making a few friends in the church, he drifted away from pursuing faith in that context. His history and story plays the primary role in his decision to no longer participate in the life of the church, but it was aided by the

¹⁶ Latin for image of God, indicates a comprehensive theology of who we are as human beings and how live out our likeness to God as what separates us from the rest of creation

¹⁷ Gagnon 452

congregation's fear and mistrust. Martinez, who did participate in drag shows, would tone down what he wore to church, relatively speaking, but regularly wore lipstick and was noticeably effeminate in his speech and actions. When a mostly conservative, white, middle to upper-middle class congregation came into contact with him, they generally did not know what to do. Even as the leadership of the church desired to minister to all types of people, they did not aid the congregation enough to help many of them move past their own prejudice to see the hurting and broken image of God beneath the confused exterior of people like Martinez.

Anecdotally, this points to the need for a church's leadership to train and encourage the congregation to spend time with people that are different than themselves. This is the call for the church to reach the hurting and oppressed. "*Christians must be exhorted to live not in fear, but with the kind of self-sacrificing love and acceptance that Jesus showed toward those regarded as social inferiors.*"¹⁸ This points to both the corporate (those who exhort) responsibility of the church to the individual homosexual, and to the homosexual community and the personal (those exhorted) responsibility of each church member to them as well.

For those that exhort, one responsibility is to preach and teach in such a way that invites from the word of God all sinners to bring their fears, hopes, and shame to the feet of the cross. This is preaching and teaching that brings the gospel to bear on all aspects of life including homosexuality. This hope of the gospel, from the word, through the power of the Spirit, even speaks into the heart of those who think that their homosexuality is immutable. This is the hope of a fuller life, available even to those that believe that they are given their homosexual orientation at birth and cannot change. Contrary to the view that sees orthodox Christianity as offering "*no morally responsible way for (the homosexual) to realize (their) sexual identity,*"¹⁹ orthodox Christianity offers the only way to know the fullness of what it means to be human. Not simply as a heterosexual, but as a child of God created in his image.

As those that exhort, we are to also provide as a ministry of the church, a way for the homosexual that desires change, to come out of the lifestyle. This would include counseling services, safe same-sex relationships, support groups, and even a place to live if needed. Those who exhort are also called to lead their congregation through the example of developing friendships with homosexual neighbors. This is done not for the purpose of ministry but for the sake of loving those who are in our community.

Love like this is costly. There is a cost in comfort and time; in fact, loving anyone is costly. The potential for heartbreak is also a significant cost to love and loving the homosexual may cost one's reputation. Many who would agree with the biblical views here would never so identify themselves with a homosexual for the fear of being counted like them. There are many individual decisions that must be made as one enters into the gay community. For example, many would not have a problem with having a homosexual couple over for dinner, but would they go to their homosexual friend's house to eat? One may go out to have a drink with their homosexual friends, but would they go out individually with their homosexual friend of the same sex, or would they go with them to a gay bar? Can they attend the civil union ceremony or marriage of a same-sex couple?

These questions cannot be answered easily and they require wisdom and counsel. What is clear though is that if the loss of an idol of reputation or the fear of having our intentions misunderstood is the risk of engaging the homosexual community, then it is a cost that should be

¹⁸ *Faithfulness to God's Standards: The Lord's Calling to Homosexuality-Inclined Christians*, Committee of the Missouri Presbytery 1994, p40

¹⁹ Dan O. Via, *Homosexuality and the Bible Two Views*, p.98

willingly paid. It is likely that as Jesus was counted as a sinner, for associating with sinners, that we will be as well. Some Christians, even those in our own circles, may suspect that we are soft on the sin of homosexuality because we are willing to love them where they are. We may be counted with the unrighteous because we are willing to love homosexuals in such a way that compels them to consider the claims of Jesus and the bible on even their supposedly immutable sexual orientation. This is all done for the sake of love, the love that we, the broken, abused, and outcast, have received freely from Christ. This we now offer freely with the hope that more and more of those created in the image of God will find their fullness and completion in the corporate worship of their creator.

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