

The Bible and Homosexuality

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Ulrich Mauser, educated in Germany and Professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary, has taught at three theological schools during his career, serving as academic dean at one of them. All along he has focused on the meaning of the scriptures for what we actually believe and do as a people of faith. His books and articles focus not on texts by themselves but on their theological meaning, often in relation to real world issues. His most recent book, for instance, is *The Gospel of Peace: A Scriptural Message For Today's World*. During the last two years, Professor Mauser has joined some of his colleagues at Princeton to issue public statements on burning issues in the church: one of these focused on the ordination of homosexuals. He is not

the sort of Bible scholar who hides in the library.

On September 29, 1994, Walter Wink and I made presentations and engaged in dialogue on the issue of the ordination of homosexual persons. The event took place at Central Presbyterian Church in Montclair, New Jersey. My thanks are due to sponsors of this event, and to my colleague Walter Wink for the open and fair way in which he debated the issue. The following pages are based on my presentation in September 1994, but they reflect also some of the points raised in the debate, and they are substantially rewritten as a result of further work which I have done after the meeting in Montclair.

1. Homosexuality in the Church - A New Situation

Israelite-Jewish traditions, together with an almost unanimous Christian voice, have for millennia judged homosexual behaviour to be contrary to the will of God, and destructive to human community. At times they did so against pervasive cultural trends in societies where homosexuality was an accepted practice, at other times they succeeded in moulding public attitudes and social mores and laws. The situation today is radically different. The Gay/Lesbian campaign for public recognition of homosexuality as a morally and legally legitimate lifestyle has not only made deep inroads into the media and into cultural institutions, but it has produced an advocacy in the Church which calls for a new reformation in which homosexuality is affirmed as a Christian form of life, demanded by the Gospel and infused with God's spirit.

Some examples can illustrate the new situation. In a statement of January 22-23, 1993, the Synod of the Northeast expressed the belief that the Presbyterian Church USA "should repent its already

identified sin of homophobia" implying in this statement that the church's opposition to homosexuality, which had informed Christian teaching and practice for centuries, was not only wrong, but sinful. At the same period, in one of our student publications at Princeton Theological Seminary, issue after issue contained letters by students who said they were coming out of the closet, that they had found homosexuality to be a gift of God which they were celebrating with thanksgiving, and that they were charging anybody who would question their sexual orientation with hypocrisy and with disobedience to the spirit of the Gospel, which offers God's all-inclusive grace to everyone without distinction. The debate has reached the point at which the defence of the traditional stance of the church regarding homosexuality is declared morally reprehensible. A group organized in January 1995 which calls itself "Semper Reformanda" identifies advocacy for the Gay/Lesbian movement with the pursuit of justice which is mandated by the Gospel. The group's founder stated in a telephone interview their concern for justice and peace: "whether it be justice on behalf of women or other marginalized people - gay and lesbian people. It's part of our obedience to Jesus Christ to bring justice in the life of the world, and that that's an essential part of the mission of the church" (The Presbyterian Outlook, July 10, 1995, p. 3). With all due respect to fellow Christians who hold different opinions, it has become impossible to avoid the problem whether a self-assertive and open homosexual lifestyle is a form of confessing and living the Gospel, whether it is a denial of the Gospel, or whether it is a neutral question which has

nothing to do with the Gospel one way or another.

2. Unambiguous Biblical Condemnations of Homosexuality

There is virtual agreement among all who participate today in the homosexuality debate that Old and New Testament contain some unequivocal condemnations of homosexual practice. These sentences are:

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman: it is an abomination" (Lev 18:22).

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall be put to death: their blood is upon them" (Lev 20:13).

"God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Rom 1:26-27).

"Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers - none of these will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9-10).

The condemnation of the law applies for those "who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers" (1 Tim 1:9-10).

It is debated which precise social behaviour is meant by "male-prostitutes" and "sodomites" in the last two quotes but it is not controversial that they include homogenital activity.

Other passages in Old and New Testament are often understood to incriminate homosexuality also: the gang-rapes told in Gen 19:1-11 and Judg 19-21 may not see the homosexuality involved in the narratives to be the crime deserving punishment, although Jude 7 is evidence that in New Testament times the story of Sodom and Gomorrah was read as prime illustration of “sexual immorality” and “unnatural lust”. We will omit discussion of any ambiguous passages.

3. The Ethos of Human Sexuality in the Bible

The few unambiguous condemnations of homosexuality in the Bible are surrounded by a fairly broad stream of texts which speak of a very high evaluation of human sexuality. There is an ethos of sexual life in Old and New Testament which must not be left out of consideration when the issue of homosexuality is discussed. The terribly dark shadow cast over homosexual activity in the Bible can only be understood as the contrast of the great light which is shed on the creation of male and female which elicits the judgment “very good” by its Creator (Gen 1:31). It is my contention that a great many discussions of the issue of Gay and Lesbian claims in relation to the Biblical message suffer from the virtual isolation of this problem from the positive sexual ethos in Scripture. We shall, therefore, first sketch this positive ethos which is the necessary backdrop for the Biblical judgments of homosexuality.

There are four passages in the New Testament which deal with important aspects of the relation between men and women by appealing to the creation stories in Gen 1 and 2. The four passages are: Mark 10:2-9 and Matthew 19:3-9; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; Ephesians 5:21-33.

a) Mark 10:2-9 and Matthew 19:3-9: Pharisees challenge Jesus with the question whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus’ answer goes over the head of Mosaic legislation back to the creation stories. He says, “from the beginning of creation ‘God made them male and female’ (Gen 1:27). ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’” (Gen 2:24). Jesus’ answer recalls an order of sexuality older and more pristine than later law. “From the beginning” alludes not only to a distant past but to the bedrock of human sexuality as God’s

creation. The drive which causes a man to leave behind his old family unit to form with his wife a new union of life (Gen 2:24) is grounded in an antecedent act of divine creation, the calling into being of a single human being in the two different forms of male and female (Gen 1:27). As God’s creation there is only one human being who exists in two separate, distinct, and different forms of male and female; and vice versa, they are in their separateness, distinction, and difference one single human being. In this simultaneous oneness and duality, male and female together are the image of God, receive the blessing of God and the unrestricted approval of their Creator to be “very good” (Gen 1:28, 31).

b) In 1 Cor 6:12-20 Paul has to contend with a group in the Christian community that considers it perfectly legitimate for a man to hire the services of a prostitute. Paul’s uncompromising “no” to prostitution is, again, grounded in an appeal to the creation of Adam and Eve: “Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, ‘The two shall be one flesh’ (Gen 2:24). But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (v. 16). In contrast to the Corinthian party which considers genital activity to be a purely biological function, comparable to the digestive process (v. 13), Paul argues with the creation narrative that the physical union of a man and a woman establishes a bond in which their very selves, their personhood are involved, analogous to the bond between a member of Christ and the Lord himself.

c) 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. This section deals with a question of hair-style and head-dress during communal worship. The circumstances addressed in this passage are obscure and all reconstructions are hypothetical. I follow one such hypothesis which sees the issue in an attempt of some Corinthian women to pray and prophecy in public worship (v. 4) in a manner demonstrating that the difference between male and female is done away with if one lives in the Spirit of God. Therefore, they cut their hair in a fashion usual for men and they discard a head-dress identifying them as women. Paul argues for a retention of the custom, not in order to endorse a hair-style and a dress-fashion, but to counter the claim that the difference between male and female is no longer valid in the new creation. To that end he appeals extensively to the creation story: Man brings glory to God, as the female brings glory to the male (v. 7 alluding to Gen

1:27); woman was made from man and in order to complement man who, without woman, would be utterly alone and helpless (vs. 7-8, referring to Gen 2:18-24), but man and woman are co-dependent on each other, woman coming out of man but man also coming out of woman (vs. 11-12). The point of the argument is the insistence that faith in Christ, the new being in God’s spirit, does not eliminate God’s good creation of human life in the essential difference of male and female.

d) Ephesians 5:21-33 goes as far as to say that the love and care which husbands and wives exercise for each other are a mystery which embodies in the form of actual, mundane history the transcendent love and care which unite Christ and his Church. And again this is said to give final validity to God’s creation of male and female as partners because “for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.” (Eph 5:31 citing Gen 2:24).

The mystery of seeing in the union of an earthly marriage, understood as the unity of two who are essentially different, an image of the union of Christ and the Church, picks up on the frequent use of marriage metaphors for the relation which unites God and God’s people both in Old and New Testament. For the prophet Hosea, the infidelity of Israel toward her god is expressed in the image of a divorce: God as husband is divorced from Israel as wife (Hosea 1-3). The very marriage of the prophet is to be an enactment of the loathsome union between a faithful husband and a faithless wife as the palpable earthly reflection of the history through which God suffers with his people, and the restoration of God’s covenant with Israel is presented as a new betrothal (Hosea 2:16-20). Jeremiah compares the positive relation of Yahweh and Israel’s youth in the wilderness to the devotion and love of a bride to her bridegroom (Jer 2:2) and Ezekiel likens God’s totally unmerited mercy toward Israel to the rescue of an abandoned baby girl by a man, and their subsequent marriage (Ezek 16 and in different form and expanded to two women in Ezek 23). The New Testament has inherited, expanded, and enriched this imagery. Paul can say that he has betrothed the Corinthian Christian community to Christ as a chaste virgin to her one husband (2 Cor 11:2). The new heaven and the new earth in Rev 21 are cast into the picture of the coming down from heaven of a new Jerusalem as the bride of Christ. In Jesus’ parables and

sayings, the image of the wedding feast is used to describe the arrival of the kingdom of God in the world. Jesus's coming is the entry of the bridegroom at the wedding feast (Mark 2:19). People invited to enter into the kingdom of God are presented as guests invited to the nuptials of the King's son (Matt 22:1-10), and the story of the virgins, (Matt 25:1-13) uses the same imagery.

Of course, in all these texts, in Old and New Testament alike, the figures of bride and bridegroom, husband and wife, of wedding feast and wedding guests, together with their negatives faithlessness, divorce, and harlotry are images. We are dealing with metaphors, similes, parables which are not directly identified with the reality to which they refer. But this cautionary sentence must, at the same time, be put positively. The sexual images, metaphors, similes, and parables in Old and New Testaments have the power to express in words a truth which without these words would forever remain mute and unknown. The language of God and God's people as bridegroom and bride, as husband and wife, is creative in the extreme. It calls into being a vista in which the existence of a marriage, and in it the confirmation of the prior dignity of human life in the polarity of male and female, is elevated to become a reflection of the wonders of God's relationship with us, of God's fidelity to us, of God's destiny for us. This produces an ethic in which human sexuality is enabled to be an imprint of God's covenant with his people. But this ethic is predicated on the unalterable polarity of male and female. In the covenant God remains forever clearly and unalterably distinct from us as our creator, as our Lord, and as our redeemer. The union between God and humans in the covenant is a bond between two clearly and eternally distinct partners. Exactly for this reason can God's covenant with the world be mirrored and expressed only through a human bond in which the unity of the partners preserves and honours the essential polarity between them.

4. Homosexuality in Rom 1:26-27

Homosexuality is not much of a problem in Old and New Testament. The positive ethos of the divine creation of the human as male and female is so strong that only a few and isolated judgments of homosexual practices are needed. Only at one point has the issue been drawn into a theological argumentation, but at that point homogenital practice becomes no less than the showcase for the ills of a world which has rejected the knowledge

and praise of God the Creator. The passage is Rom 1:26-27 and, here again, the appeal to the creation story in Gen 1 and 2 is crucial.

Rom 1:18-3:20 offers a long indictment of human failing which leads to the conclusion that, in the light of the revelation of God's power of salvation in the Gospel (1:16-17), no human being is justified by their own accomplishments in God's sight (3:20). The opening section, 1:18-32, deals with Gentile religion and morality. Gentile religion is foolishness (1:22) because it imagines God in the likeness of created beings (1:23). The first lie of idolatry is immediately followed by moral degradation. "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves" (1:24). Religion and ethics belong together, but for Paul they are yoked in a way that ethics is outcome and consequence of religion. In the case of Gentile religion the primal error of substituting the honour of the immortal and invisible God with images of creation is followed by its necessary consequence in the degradation of morality. The very showpiece of this moral degradation is homosexual activity (1:26-27).

The indictment of homosexuality in Rom 1:26-27 is linked to the preceding argument against idolatry through the repetition of the word "exchange" which is used three times. Paul states, first of all, as a general principle the Jewish conviction that Gentile religion is corrupt because it substitutes ("exchanges") the glory of God for the veneration of images of mortal beings. Gentile religion "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (1:23). The sequence "human being, birds, four-footed animals and reptiles" echoes Gen 1:26 which says that the human being will have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over the reptiles. The appeal to Gen 1:26 serves Paul to emphasize that in the fatal substitute of the true God for images, the human being idolizes the very animals which in the story of creation were to be subject to human dominion.

The first "exchange" of legitimate for illegitimate worship is followed by a second in which the moral implications are also introduced. Gentiles "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:25) which is the reason that God gives them up to their

own desire leading to the degrading of their bodies (1:24). The phrase "degrading of their bodies" in the second mention of the "exchange" is not specific. In the third step involving the "exchange", however, the specificity is palpable: "Women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another" (1:26-27). Paul uses words for "men" (*arsenes*) and "women" (*thleiai*) in these verses which are otherwise not used in his letters (except in Gal 3:28). The words derive from the vocabulary of the creation story in Gen 1:27 where the one human being (*anthropos*) is said to exist in the form of the union of two, male and female (*arsen kai thly*). The three uses of the phrase "exchange" coordinate idolatrous religion and homosexual activity. Idolatrous religion substitutes the worship of the only true God for objects unworthy of veneration, and homosexuality substitutes the relationship established by the Creator with a relationship that has no foundation in God's creation. There is a precise analogy between the exchange of the Creator for creatures, and the exchange of the Creator's act in ordaining the union of male and female for the union of members of the same sex.

5. The Modern Debate about Bible and Homosexuality

The unambiguous condemnation of homosexual practice in some Biblical passages is not disputed today. But its implications for modern Christian ethics, and for the practice of pastoral care and the ordinances of the churches, is sharply controversial. I conclude by offering some theses about Biblical teaching on homosexuality in the modern context.

a) Homosexuality and the Sexual Ethos of the Bible

It is a fundamental mistake, in my view, to discuss Biblical statements on homosexuality in isolation from the positive ethos of human sexuality in Scripture. As bits and pieces of Old Testament legislation, and of Jewish heritage in the New Testament, the sparse references to homosexuality could well be attributed to the social conditions of a distant past. But seen against the foil of the extremely high valuation given to the counterpoint of maleness and femaleness in God's creation in the Bible, the sole attribution to time-bound modes of social norms cannot be maintained. On the background of the positive ethos of human sexuality in Old

and New Testament, homosexuality becomes inescapably a denial of the goodness of God's creation.

b) Love-Ethic and Sexual Ethos

It is said in the debate today that the New Testament insists on an ethic of love to which everything else is subordinate. Love embodying the Gospel, it is argued, breaks down legalistic barriers and reaches out particularly to the disadvantaged and the oppressed. The validity of this insistence must be recognized without reservation. But it does not at all follow from it that Christian ethical thought, and ethical practice, must be restricted to the bare injunction to love without consideration of the concrete forms of exercising love which correspond to the Gospel. Love is the fulfilment of the law, but this love is not without its embodiment in actual concrete areas of human life. "Love is the fulfilling of the law" ... but this love fans out into the concrete forms of commandments "you shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet" (Rom 13:9-10). Neither Old nor New Testament assume that human common sense, or a natural goodness of moral sensibilities, lead everybody to a universal understanding of what it means to love. Rather, love must be thought through and practiced in accordance with the act and word of God in which love receives its distinctive form. And in this context - it must be stated with unambiguous harshness - sexual relations between male and female are not comparable in kind or in value to relations between same-sex partners. Heterosexual unions are an emanation of God's creation: homosexual unions practice the denial of it.

c) Call for a New Reformation

The modern dispute about homosexuality in the Church has produced the argument that we must be open to changes. The history of the Church demonstrates that it is necessary, from time to time, to re-evaluate time-honoured traditions and to alter accustomed positions. It is often said that the abolition of slavery and the recognition of women as fully equal partners with men are issues in which Bible-supported positions had to be given up. Against this claim it must be kept in mind that, first, nowhere in Old or New Testament is it indicated that being a member of a given race, or being a woman, is in conflict with being a part of God's good creation, but homosexuality is said to be in that conflict. And, second, while both slavery

and a patriarchal society are presuppositions in much Biblical literature, they are counterbalanced by other aspects of Biblical teaching which have been used successfully by advocates of the abolition of slavery and of women's rights; but no such counterbalance exists in the Bible concerning homosexuality. In regard to homosexual activity there is no Biblical evidence which might soften the unambiguous stand adopted in the Bible.

d) Homophobia versus Heterophobia

Defenders of the heterosexual norm today find themselves accused with regularity of homophobia, an attitude that has lately been elevated to the rank of a deadly sin. But the overused word "homophobia" has caused a blindness to a whole set of other factors in our society which could well be characterized as heterophobia. There is among us a spirit, and very much so in the midst of our Christian communities, which makes men and women distrustful and antagonistic toward each other. Males advocate "male bonding" as their recipe for salvation and women seek refuge in the idea of a "women's church" in which a special feminist theology based on genuinely feminine experiences ought to be established. There is, in my assessment, a massive outbreak of heterophobia among us today, and the cry for the recognition of homosexuality in the church is one manifestation of it. One illustration, a quote from a statement by Kate Millett in 1970: "Women's liberation and homosexual liberation are both struggling toward a common goal: a society free from defining and categorizing people by virtue of gender and/or sexual preference. 'Lesbianism' is a label used as a psychic weapon to keep women locked into their male-defined 'feminine role'. The essence of that role is that a woman is defined in terms of her relationship to men. A woman is called lesbian when she functions autonomously. Women's autonomy is what women's liberation is all about." (From Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel*, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992, pp. 84f.)

e) Grace and Forgiveness

It is said very often today that the exclusion of homosexual practices from permissible forms of sexual activity in the church amounts to a contradiction of the free and unmerited grace of God, and constitutes therefore a denial of the all-inclusive claims of the gospel. But the dynamics of New Testament ethics drive

toward the sanctification of human life, not to the indiscriminate approval of any form of conduct. Why have all New Testament authors, who are after all the very origin and source for our knowledge of God's mercy and grace, insisted that there are necessary boundaries to Christian freedom outside of which freedom turns into enslavement? The Jesus who turns to sinful people is also the great healer who restores sick life to health and as the healer he has also instructed his community with a conduct becoming to discipleship. None of us can claim freedom from sin, and none of us has the right to hurl condemnations at sinners as though he or she had any ground for faith but the sheer mercy of God. But the healing community of the great healer would abandon the mission if it did not diagnose sickness for what it is, and call for the rejuvenation, indeed the regeneration, of life in the discipline of faith.

f) Modern Psychosexual Theory and the Bible

A point often made in the modern debate about homosexuality in the Church is the observation that Old and New Testament had no knowledge of the difference between a homosexual orientation and homosexual acts engaged in by heterosexually oriented people. The observation is correct but it misses the point for two reasons. First, Paul in Rom 1:26-27 does not speak of individual Gentile life-stories but of a dominant orientation which establishes a characteristic pattern for a whole community. Comparable would be the dominance of the theory of the superiority of Aryan people over German history between 1933 and 1945. Without the domination of that racial theory German history in that period cannot be understood. But that does not mean that all individual Germans during that period adopted the Aryan theory. Second, the notion of sexual orientation, or sexual preference, is based on the individualistic idea that sexuality is determined by personal inclination or choice: what individual desire dictates is the decisive norm for sexual conduct. Biblical sexual ethos is irreconcilable with this individualistic approach. The Biblical view of human sexuality as the union between male and female posits a relationship with all its consequences as the core of sexual relations. Part of these consequences is the lifelong acceptance of the gift and the challenge of the other, the procreation and rearing of children and the care for the family. All of that involves that human sexuality is, as

God's creation of male and female, bound up with community and, therefore, with unselfish service, with discipline, and with the will to subordinate individual desires, including sexual urges, to the well-being of others.

g) Ordination and Civil Rights

The ordination of a person to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament is not a civil right. Therefore, the question of the ordination of self-affirming and practicing homosexual persons cannot be made a civil rights issue. The Church reserves the right to establish requirements for ordination which have nothing to do with civil rights. One such requirement is the achievement of a theological degree as a prerequisite of ordination. The setting of a boundary which excludes some persons from ordination is, for that reason, no infringement of a civil right.

h) The Grace of God and Homosexuality

The prohibition of the ordination of self-affirming and practicing homosexual persons is not tantamount to their exclusion from the Christian community. Christian congregations are communities in which sinners of all different kinds are invited to receive forgiveness, healing, and purpose. I have myself knowingly and willingly handed out the bread and wine of communion to persons whom I knew to be homosexuals. I have every intention to continue that practice. Ministers of the Church have no right to restrict the grace of God. But that does not mean that the ministry of the Church endorses the attempt of the Gay/Lesbian movement to promote homosexual practices as an alternative life-style. The grace of God is the power which makes creative choices possible which affirm life as God's creation. Far from eliminating human responsibility, it is the free grace of God which alone enables heterosexual and homosexual sinners to make decisions in favour of life. That includes homosexual persons who, by the grace of God, can find new avenues of personal choices through which they can enrich the life of the Christian community in ways possible only for them.