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The Compassion of Truth: Homosexuality in Biblical Perspective

Thursday, July 15, 2004

Homosexuality is perhaps the most controversial issue of debate in American culture. Once described as “the love that dares not speak its name,” homosexuality is now discussed and debated throughout American society.

Behind this discussion is an agenda, pushed and promoted by activists, who seek legitimization and social sanction for homosexual acts, relationships, and lifestyles. The push is on for homosexual “marriage,” the removal of all structures and laws considered oppressive to homosexuals, and the recognition of homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, and others as “erotic minorities,” deserving of special legal protection.

The larger culture is now bombarded with messages and images designed to portray homosexuality as a normal lifestyle. Homoerotic images are so common in the mainstream media that many citizens have virtually lost the capacity to be shocked.

Those who oppose homosexuality are depicted as narrow-minded bigots and described as “homophobic.” Anyone who suggests that heterosexual marriage is the only acceptable and legitimate arena of sexual activity is lambasted as out-dated, oppressive, and outrageously out of step with modern culture.

The church has not been an outsider to these debates. As the issue of homosexual legitimization has gained public prominence and moved forward, some churches and denominations have joined the movement—even becoming advocates of homosexuality—while others stand steadfastly opposed to compromise on the issue. In the middle are churches and denominations unable or unwilling to declare a clear conviction on homosexuality. Issues of homosexual ordination and marriage are regularly discussed in the assemblies of several denominations—and many congregations.

This debate is itself nothing less than a revolutionary development. Any fair-minded observer of American culture and the American churches must note the incredible speed with which this issue has been driven into the cultural mainstream. The challenge for the believing church now comes down to this: Do we have a distinctive message in the midst of this moral confusion?

Our answer must be Yes. The Christian church must have a distinctive message to speak to the issue of homosexuality, because faithfulness to Holy Scripture demands that we do so.

The affirmation of biblical authority is thus central to the church’s consideration of this issue—or any issue. The Bible is the Word of God in written form, inerrant and infallible, inspired by the Holy Spirit and “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” [2 Timothy 3:16]. This is the critical watershed: Those churches which reject the authority of Scripture will eventually succumb to cultural pressure and accommodate their understanding of homosexuality to the spirit of the age. Those churches that affirm, confess, and acknowledge the full authority of the Bible have no choice in this matter—we must speak a word of compassionate truth. And that compassionate truth is this: Homosexual acts are expressly and unconditionally forbidden by God through His Word, and such acts are an abomination to the Lord by His own declaration.

Professor Elizabeth Achtemeier of Richmond’s Union Theological Seminary states the case clearly: “The clearest

teaching of Scripture is that God intended sexual intercourse to be limited to the marriage relationship of one man and one woman.”(1) That this is so should be apparent to all who look to the Bible for guidance on this issue. This assessment of the biblical record would have been completely uncontroversial throughout the last nineteen centuries of the Christian church. Only in recent years have some biblical scholars come forward to claim that the Bible presents a mixed message—or a very different message—on homosexuality.

The homosexual agenda is pushed by activists who are totally committed to the cause of making homosexuality a sanctioned and recognized form of sexual activity—and the basis for legitimate family relationships. Every obstacle which stands in the way of progress toward this agenda must be removed, and Scripture stands as the most formidable obstacle to that agenda.

We should not be surprised therefore that apologists for the homosexual agenda have arisen even within the world of biblical scholarship. Biblical scholars are themselves a very mixed group, with some defending the authority of Scripture and others bent on deconstructing the biblical text. The battle lines on this issue are immediately apparent. Many who deny the truthfulness, inspiration, and authority of the Bible have come to argue that Scripture sanctions homosexuality—or at least to argue that the biblical passages forbidding homosexual acts are confused, misinterpreted, or irrelevant.

To accomplish this requires feats of exotic biblical interpretation worthy of the most agile circus contortionist. Several decades ago, the late J. Gresham Machen remarked that “The Bible, with a complete abandonment of all scientific historical method, and of all common sense, is made to say the exact opposite of what it means; no Gnostic, no medieval monk with his fourfold sense of Scripture, ever produced more absurd Biblical interpretation than can be heard every Sunday in the pulpits of New York.”(2) Dr. Machen was referring to the misuse and misapplication of Scripture which he saw as a mark of the infusion of a pagan spirit within the church. Even greater absurdity than that observed by Machen is now evident among those determined to make the Bible sanction homosexuality.

Different approaches are taken toward this end. For some, an outright rejection of biblical authority is explicit. With astounding candor, William M. Kent, a member of the committee assigned by United Methodists to study homosexuality declared that “the scriptural texts in the Old and New Testaments condemning homosexual practice are neither inspired by God nor otherwise of enduring Christian value. Considered in the light of the best biblical, theological, scientific, and social knowledge, the biblical condemnation of homosexual practice is better understood as representing time and place bound cultural prejudice.”(3) This approach is the most honest taken among the revisionists. These persons do not deny that the Bible expressly forbids homosexual practices—they acknowledge that the Bible does just that. Their answer is straightforward; we must abandon the Bible in light of modern “knowledge.”

The next step taken by those who follow this approach is to suggest that it is not sufficient for the authority of the Bible to be denied—the Bible must be opposed. Gary David Comstock, Protestant chaplain at Wesleyan University charges: “Not to recognize, critique, and condemn Paul’s equation of godlessness with homosexuality is dangerous. To remain within our respective Christian traditions and not challenge those passages that degrade and destroy us is to contribute to our own oppression.”(4) Further, Comstock argues that “These passages will be brought up and used against us again and again until Christians demand their removal from the biblical canon, or, at the very least, formally discredit their authority to prescribe behavior.”(5)

A second approach taken by the revisionists is to suggest that the human authors of Scripture were merely limited by the scientific immaturity of their age. If they knew what we now know, these revisionists claim, the human authors of Scripture would never have been so closed-minded. Victor Paul Furnish argues: “Not only the terms, but the concepts ‘homosexual’ and ‘homosexuality’ were unknown in Paul’s day. These terms like ‘heterosexual,’ ‘heterosexuality,’ ‘bisexual,’ and ‘bisexuality’ presuppose an understanding of human sexuality that was possible only with the advent of modern psychology and sociological analysis. The ancient writers were operating without the vaguest idea of what we have learned to call ‘sexual orientation’.”(6)

Indeed, Paul and the other apostles seem completely ignorant of modern secular understandings of sexual identity and orientation—and this truth is fundamentally irrelevant. Modern notions of sexual orientation must be brought to answer to Scripture. Scripture must not be subjected to defend itself in light of modern notions. Paul will not apologize to Sigmund Freud or the American Psychological Association, and the faithful church must call this approach what it is; a blatant effort to subvert the authority of Scripture and replace biblical authority with the false authority of modern secular ideologies.

A third approach taken by the revisionists is to deny that biblical passages actually refer to homosexuality at all, or to argue that the passages refer to specific and “oppressive” homosexual acts. For instance, some argue that Paul’s references to homosexuality are actually references to pederasty [the sexual abuse of young boys], to homosexual rape, or to “non-committed” homosexual relationships. The same is argued concerning passages such as Genesis 19 and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Yet, in order to make this case, the revisionists must deny the obvious—and argue the ridiculous.

Likewise, some argue that the sin of Sodom was not homosexuality, but inhospitality. John J. McNeill makes this case, arguing that the church oppressively shifted the understanding of the sin of Sodom from inhospitality to homosexuality.(7) The text, however, cannot be made to play this game. The context indicates that the sin of Sodom is clearly homosexuality—and without this meaning, the passage makes no sense. The language and the structure of the text are clear. Beyond this, Jude, verse 7, self-evidently links the sin of Sodom with sexual perversion and immorality, stating that “Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.”

This verse is sufficient to indicate the severity of the Bible’s condemnation of homosexuality. Leviticus 18:22 speaks of male homosexuality as an “abomination”—the strongest word used of God’s judgment against an act.

The most extensive argument against homosexuality is not found in the Old Testament, however, but in Romans 1:22-27, a passage which is found within Paul’s lengthy introduction to his Roman letter.

“Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason, God gave them over to degrading passions; for the women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.”

As Romans 1 makes absolutely clear, homosexuality is fundamentally an act of unbelief. As Paul writes, the wrath of God is revealed against all those “who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”(8) God the Creator has implanted in all humanity a knowledge of Himself, and all are without excuse. This is the context of Paul’s explicit statements on homosexuality.

Homosexual acts and homosexual desire, states Paul, are a rebellion against God’s sovereign intention in creation and a gross perversion of God’s good and perfect plan for His created order. Paul makes clear that homosexuality—among both males and females—is a dramatic sign of rebellion against God and His intention in creation. Those about whom Paul writes have worshipped the creature rather than the Creator. Thus, men and women have forfeited the natural complementarity of God’s intention for heterosexual marriage and have turned to members of their own sex, burning with an illicit desire which is in itself both degrading and dishonorable.

This is a very strong and clear message. The logical progression in Romans 1 is undeniable. Paul shifts immediately from his description of rebellion against God as Creator to an identification of homosexuality—among both men and women—as the first and most evident sign of a society upon which God has turned His judgment. Essential to understanding this reality in theological perspective is a recognition of homosexuality as an assault upon the integrity of creation and God’s intention in creating human beings in two distinct and complementary genders.

Here the confessing and believing Church runs counter to the cultural tidal wave. Even to raise the issue of gender is to offend those who wish to eradicate any gender distinctions, arguing that these are merely “socially constructed realities” and vestiges of an ancient past.

Scripture will not allow this attempt to deny the structures of creation. Romans 1 must be read in light of Genesis 1 and 2. As Genesis 1:27 makes apparent, God intended from the beginning to create human beings in two genders or sexes—“male and female He created them.” Both man and woman were created in the image of God. They were and are distinct, and yet inseparably linked by God’s design. The genders are different, and the distinction goes far beyond mere physical differences, but the man recognized in the woman “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.”(9)

The bond between man and woman is marriage, which is not an historical accident or the result of socialization over time. To the contrary, marriage and the establishment of the heterosexual covenant union is central to God's intention—before and after the Fall. Immediately following the creation of man and woman come the instructive words: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."(10)

Evangelicals have often failed to present this biblical truth straightforwardly, and thus many of our churches and members are unarmed for the ideological, political, and cultural conflicts which mark the modern landscape. The fundamental axiom upon which evangelical Christians must base any response to homosexuality is this: God alone is sovereign, and He has created the universe and all within by His own design and to His own good pleasure. Furthermore, He has revealed to us His creative intention through Holy Scripture—and that intention was clearly to create and establish two distinct but complementary genders or sexes. The Genesis narratives demonstrate that this distinction of genders is neither accidental nor inconsequential to the divine design. "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make for him a helper suitable for him," determined God.(11) And God created woman.

God's creative intention is further revealed in the cleaving of man to the woman ("his wife") and their new identity as "one flesh."(12) This biblical assertion, which no contorted interpretation can escape, clearly places marriage and sexual relations within God's creative act and design.

The sexual union of a man and a woman united in covenant marriage is thus not only allowed, but is commanded as God's intention and decree. Sexual expression is limited to this heterosexual covenant, which in its clearest biblical expression is one man and one woman united for as long as they both shall live.

Therefore, any sexual expression outside of that heterosexual marriage relationship is illicit, immoral, and outlawed by God's command and law. That fundamental truth runs counter, not only to the homosexual agenda, but to the rampant sexual immorality of the age. Indeed, the Bible has much more to say about illicit heterosexual activity than about homosexual acts. Adultery, rape, bestiality, pornography, and fornication are expressly forbidden.

As E. Michael Jones argues, most modern ideologies are, at base, efforts to rationalize sexual behavior. In fact, he identifies modernity itself as "rationalized lust." We should expect the secular world, which is at war with God's truth, to be eager in its efforts to rationalize lust, and to seek legitimacy and social sanction for its sexual sins. We should be shocked, however, that many within the Church now seek to accomplish the same purpose, and to join in common cause with those openly at war with God's truth.

Paul's classic statement in Romans 1 sets the issues squarely before us. Homosexuality is linked directly to idolatry, for it is on the basis of their idolatry that God gave them up to their own lusts [*epithymia*]. Their hearts were committed to impurity [*akatharsia*], and they were degrading [*atimazo*] their own bodies by their illicit lusts.

Their idolatry—exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and worshipping the creature rather than the Creator—led God to give them over to their degrading passions [*pathos atimia*]. From here, those given over to their degraded passions exchanged the natural use of sexual intercourse for that which God declared to be unnatural [*para physin*]. At this point Paul explicitly deals with female homosexuality or lesbianism. This is one of the very few references in all ancient literature to female homosexuality, and Paul's message is clear.

But the women involved in lesbianism were not and are not alone. Men, too, have given up natural intercourse with women and have been consumed with passion [*orexis*] for other men. The acts they commit, they commit without shame [*aschemosyne*]. As a result, they have received within their own bodies the penalty of their error.

Beyond this, God has given them up to their own depraved minds, and they do those things which are not proper [*kathekonta*]. The message could not be more candid and clear, but there are those who seek to deny the obvious. Some have claimed that Paul is here dealing only with those heterosexual persons who commit homosexual acts. The imaginative folly of this approach is undone by Scripture, which allows no understanding that any human beings are born anything other than heterosexual. The modern—and highly political—notion of homosexual "orientation" cannot be squared with the Bible. The only orientation indicated by Scripture is the universal human orientation to sin.(13)

In other letters, Paul indicates that homosexuals—along with those who persist in other sins—will not inherit the

Kingdom of God. The word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10 is *arsenokoites*, a word with a graphic etymology. Some modern revisionists have attempted to suggest that this refers only to homosexual rapists or child abusers. This argument will not stand even the slightest scholarly consideration. The word does not appear in any Greek literature of the period. As New Testament scholar David Wright has demonstrated, the word was taken by Paul directly from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, and its meaning is homosexuality itself.(14)

The biblical witness is clear: Homosexuality is a grievous sin against God and is a direct rejection of God's intention and command in creation. All sin is a matter of eternal consequence, and the only hope for any sinner is the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, who on the cross paid the price for our sin, serving as the substitute for the redeemed.

Our response to persons involved in homosexuality must be marked by genuine compassion. But a central task of genuine compassion is telling the truth, and the Bible reveals a true message we must convey. Those seeking to contort and subvert the Bible's message are not responding to homosexuals with compassion. To lie is never compassionate—and their lie leads unto death.

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