

THE SILENCE OF THE BIBLE REGARDING HOMOSEXUALITY

The message of so many pastors and churches that God hates all homosexuals and will send them to hell is, for millions of gay men and lesbian women, destroying all their sense of self-worth, separating them from their families, forcing them to live in closets in constant fear that their orientation will be discovered, pushing them out of churches they have loved, influencing society to ostracize them, abetting hate crimes against them, and driving them to suicide.

Churches are great losers because of this. Churches that affirm gays and lesbians testify that these people are some of the most spiritual, dedicated, and talented leaders they have.

Why are so many churches content to continue this destruction and this loss? Churches condemn homosexuals because a common interpretation of the Bible is that the Bible condemns them. Many writers have attempted to disprove this through interpretation of scripture.

The truth that the Bible does not condemn homosexuals can be found, I believe, in laying aside all the divisive interpretations and examining facts that must be accepted as truth. Consider the following. reasons why we cannot say the Bible condemns gays or lesbians and why Christian gays and lesbians should be accepted by the church just as others are accepted.

i

The meaning of any scripture is the meaning in the mind of the writer when he wrote it. My esteemed theology professor, W. T. Conner, told us, "The Bible doesn't mean what it says, it means what it means" - something true of everything ever written or spoken. We have to go behind the words to the mind of the writer, to what he was thinking, for if it wasn't in his thinking, it wasn't in his meaning.

All the different denominations and sects testify to the difficulty of this, for each represents a different interpretation of what the Bible writer meant. If, however, there is something the writer could not have known, we can be certain he was not talking about that. Homosexual orientation would not be discovered until just over 100 years ago. Until then, everything ever written or spoken about human beings could refer only to people we would call heterosexual. The writer of scripture could not have said anything about homosexuality or gays or lesbians, for no thought of them could have been in his mind. The writer knew of men practicing sex with other men, and some of these could have been homosexual, but *in the writer's mind* they were heterosexual men who were choosing to practice sex with other men. The writer could not have said anything about a homosexual. There can be nothing in the Bible about homosexuality or homosexual people.

Sex between two heterosexuals undoubtedly would be lust (or in the OT, hate and degradation - see below). We would expect the Bible writer to condemn it.

The above is simple fact. We should stop saying the Bible condemns homosexuals.

ii

The Bible speaks in several places of sex practiced by two people of the same sex. Who were these heterosexual people the writer had in his mind? We know from historians that in Old Testament times and Greco-Roman times such sex was widely practiced by people who unquestionably were heterosexual.

Much of this practice of sex by heterosexuals in Old Testament times had little to do with sex. It originated in the low and often despised place of women in the culture. We see this degradation of women in Lot's offering his two virgin daughters to the men of Sodom for the mob to do with them whatever it wanted to do. We see it in the daily prayer of every male Jew in Bible times: "Blessed be God, for he did not make me a woman." It was common for a man who had a grudge against another man, if he could subdue the begrudged, to rape him, thus reducing him to the place of a woman. When an army conquered another army or besieged a walled town until it capitulated, the conquering army (if present percentages prevailed, 90-96% heterosexual) degraded all their captives or the men of the town by raping them. Heterosexual men were raping other heterosexual men. "Gang rape [was] an extreme means to disgrace one's enemies . . . to disgrace one's manly honor, to reduce one to a woman's role . . . the ultimate means of subjugation and domination." (Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World*, p. 48) .

In the New Testament Greco-Roman world married men with families commonly kept male lovers. "The Greeks regarded it impossible for a man to have a deep, all-encompassing relationship with a woman. This was possible only between two men." (John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, p. 19) There were debates "about which sex was preferable as erotic focus [and] Roman authors published a great deal of homosexual poetry" (Ibid, p. 23). In other words, homosexual sex by heterosexual persons was common.

We should note that in Romans 1:26,27 Paul plainly states he is talking about heterosexuals; he says the women and men involved forsook "natural relations" of men with women, and instead these heterosexual women were having sex with other women and the heterosexual men with other men.

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A common response to the above is: The Bible condemns the homosexual sex act; it doesn't make any difference whether by heterosexuals or homosexuals.

Ethicists, however, remind us that only human beings have morality, only people are moral or immoral, not acts apart from the people performing the act. "The Lord looks on the heart" (I Samuel 16:7) of a person; it is always *the person behind the act* that God judges. Words can be hurtful or helpful, but the words independent of the speaker are without morality; it is the person speaking who is judged to be hurtful or helpful. Likewise with sex acts. The acts apart from the person performing them are simply acts without morality. The same act can be rape or loving sex. I point a gun and pull the trigger. Is that act moral or immoral? Neither. The intention of my heart is judged. Was that intention murder? Putting a suffering animal to sleep? Target practice? Each of these is the same act, an act in itself without morality. Acts are not judged. The judgment is made on the basis of what God finds in the heart of the person who is involved in the act.

So it is not true that it is the homosexual sex act that the Bible condemns. We are back to the people performing the acts. When the Bible talks about "good" or "evil" acts, it is talking about the hearts of people. In the Bible, the people are the heterosexual people discussed in i and ii above.

If the above considerations are simple, indisputable facts, the Bible has no condemnation of gays or lesbians or anything they do. If that condemnation is groundless, the church's response to gay and lesbian Christians should be the same as that to all others: welcoming them to full fellowship and affirmation in the church. The churches would be particularly blessed; for psychologists (e.g., Freud and Jung) tell us and practical evidence shows us that gays and lesbians have gifts and potential often greater than that of heterosexuals.

And the indescribably hurtful and wrongful condemnation by so many churches of so many of these children of God would be no more. Sagacious Will Campbell observed that some denominations have apologized to Blacks for our treatment of them in history. Then he said, "Some day we'll apologize for what we are doing to gay and lesbian Christians and non-Christians. But not yet, for we ride the waves of culture." Lord, hasten the day.

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ADDENDUM

If the Bible has nothing to say specifically about gays or lesbians, we have no Biblical reason for not affirming them in our churches. But many people have other reasons for not accepting them, usually personal revulsion to same gender sex. We recognize that personal feelings are not an adequate reason for judging morality.

If we go now into the field of Bible interpretation, we find some theologians asserting that the principles of the Bible affirm the loving, committed partnerships of homosexuals. Some recognize the complexity of the subject. Professor Kathy Rudy notes, "Christian ethicists, moral theologians, and religious leaders throughout the ages have spent an enormous amount of time and energy thinking about when sex can be considered moral and when it cannot (*Sex and the Church*, p. 108).

Nevertheless, many theologians consider it not necessarily so complex, believing that the Bible criterion for moral sex is love - the kind of love Christ had when he died on the cross for us (Ephesians 5:25). James B. Nelson expresses the thought of other theologians I have read, "I believe that our best biblical scholarship reaches Walter Wink's conclusion: 'There is no biblical sex ethic. The Bible knows only a love ethic'" ("Sources for Body Theology: Homosexuality as a Test Case" in Jeffrey S. Siker, Ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, p 81).

From much evidence there can be no question that gay men and lesbian women cannot have this kind of love for someone of the opposite sex but that they can have such love for their partners of the same sex just as fully in every way as heterosexual partners can. As far back as 1963 a Quaker committee after long study of homosexuality concluded, "Homosexual affection can be as selfless as heterosexual affection, and, therefore, we cannot see that it is in some way morally worse" (Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* p. 130).

In 1975 the Christian Association for Psychological Studies reported that behavioral science research and the realities of their clinical practice had forced them to propose that while promiscuity, fornication, and adultery should be regarded as sinful for both homosexual and heterosexual persons, a loving, committed, permanent relationship between two persons of the same sex was in an entirely different category and was not condemned in Scripture (Nava and Dawidoff, *Created Equal: Why Gay Rights Matter to America* p. 120, 147).

Can we doubt that the same criteria hold for either heterosexual sex or homosexual sex? Then both are judged on the basis of whether God finds love or lust in the hearts of those practicing sex. Lust is always condemned in the Bible; that would be heterosexual or homosexual. But if there is the love of two lives dedicated to each other with a partnership/marriage intended to be permanent, heterosexual or homosexual - well, if God is love, then such love is godlike. Can we fail to affirm it?

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