

FELLOWSHIP: HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE CHURCH

Homosexuality is an issue that challenges all Christian communities. It does so not only as a matter of moral discernment and pastoral care, but also as a matter of fundamental self-understanding of the church as both inclusive (and thus, in some sense of the term "catholic") and separate (and thus, in some sense of the term, "holy"). Homosexuality poses a hermeneutical challenge to contemporary Christians. The question is not only how we feel or think or act concerning homosexuality, but also how those feelings, thoughts, and actions relate to the canonical texts we take as normative for our lives together.

The case of homosexuality presses on the church's self-understanding with particular severity because on the basis of a certain kind of *experience*, it challenges what appears to be the uniform and unequivocal testimony of the canonical *texts*. I have argued vigorously here that the narratives of experience *must* be heard and discerned, and brought into conversation with the symbols of tradition, if the process of the church's reaching decision is to be an articulation of faith.

Before moving to the specific case of homosexuality, however, it is important to clarify slightly two aspects of the argument I have been pursuing. The first concerns the experience of God in human lives. Nothing could be more offensive than to challenge tradition on the basis of casual or unexamined experience, as though God's revelation were obvious or easy, or reducible to popularity polls. The call to the discernment of human experience is a call not to carelessness, but to its opposite; it is a call to the rigorous asceticism of attentiveness. I repeat: An appeal to some populist claim such as "everyone does it" or "surveys indicate" is theologically meaningless. What counts is whether *God* is up to something in human lives. Discernment of experience in this sense is for the detection of Good News in surprising places, not for the disguising of old sins in novel faces.

Yet it is important to assert that God *does*, on the record, act in surprising and unanticipated ways, and upsets human perceptions of God's scriptural precedents. The most fundamental instance for the very existence of Christianity is the unexpected crucified and raised Messiah, Jesus. A considerable amount of what we call the New Testament derives from the attempt to resolve the cognitive dissonance between the experience of Jesus as the source of God's Holy Spirit, and the text of Torah that disqualified him from that role, since, "cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" (Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut. 21:23).

Another example, as we have seen, is the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. Easy for us at this distance, and with little understanding of the importance of the body language of table fellowship, to take for granted such a breaking of precedent that allowed Gentiles to share fully in the life of the Messianic community without being circumcised or practicing observance of Torah. Good for us, also, therefore, to read Acts 10-15 to see just how agonizing and difficult a task it was for that first generation of Christians

to allow their perception of God's activity to change their beliefs, and use that new experience as the basis for reinterpreting Scripture.

The second point I want to qualify slightly is the requirement for responsible hermeneutics to take every voice of Scripture seriously. I spoke of the *auctoritates* of the texts as diverse and sometimes contradictory. But every ecclesial decision to live by one rather than another of these voices, to privilege one over another, to suppress one in order to live by another, must be willing to state the grounds of that decision, and demonstrate how the experience of God and the more fundamental principles of "the mind of Christ" and "freedom of the children of God" (principles also rooted in the authority of the text) legitimate the distance between ecclesial decision and a clear statement of Scripture. Do we allow divorce (even if we don't openly call it that) when Jesus forbade it? We must be willing to support our decision by an appeal, not simply to changing circumstances, but to a deeper wisdom given by the Spirit into the meaning of human covenant, and therefore by a better understanding of the saying of Jesus. This is never easy. It is sometimes—as in the case of taking oaths and vows—not even possible. But it is the task of responsible ecclesial hermeneutics.

How does this approach provide a context for thinking about homosexuality? First, it cautions us against trying to suppress the biblical texts which condemn homosexual behavior (Lev. 18:22; Wis. 14:26; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9) or to make them say something other than what they say. I think it fair to conclude that early Christianity knew about homosexuality as it was practiced in Greco-Roman culture, shared Judaism's association of it with the "abominations" of idolatry, and regarded it as incompatible with life in the kingdom of God. These *auctoritates* emphatically define homosexuality as a vice, and they cannot simply be dismissed.

Second, however, Scripture itself "authorizes" us to exercise the freedom of the children of God in our interpretation of such passages. We are freed, for example, to evaluate the relative paucity of such condemnations. Compared with the extensive and detailed condemnation of economic oppression at virtually every level of tradition, the off-handed rejection of homosexuality appears instinctive and relatively unreflective. We are freed as well to assess the contexts of the condemnations: the rejection of homosexuality, as of other sexual sins, is connected to the incompatibility of *porneia* with life in the Kingdom. We can further observe that the flat rejection of *porneia* (any form of sexual immorality) is more frequent and general than any of its specific manifestations. We are freed, finally, to consider the grounds on which the texts seem to include homosexuality within *porneia*, namely that it is "against nature," an abomination offensive to God's created order.

Such considerations, in turn, provide an opening for a conversation between our human experience (including our religious experience) and the texts of our tradition. Does our experience now support or challenge the assumption that homosexuality is, simply and without exception, an "offense against nature"? Leviticus and Paul considered homosexuality a vice because they assumed it was a deliberate choice that "suppressed the truth about God." Is that a fair assessment of homosexuality as we have come to understand it? It is, of course, grossly distorting even to talk about "homosexuality" as though one clearly definable thing were meant. But many of us who have gay and lesbian friends and relatives have arrived with them at the opposite conclusion: For many persons the acceptance of their homosexuality is an acceptance of creation as it applies to them. It is emphatically *not* a vice that is chosen. If this conclusion is correct, what is the hermeneutical implication?

Another order of question concerns the connection of homosexuality to *porneia*. The church, it is clear, cannot accept *porneia*. But what is the essence of "sexual immorality"? Is the moral quality of sexual behavior defined biologically in terms of the use of certain body parts, or is it defined in terms of personal commitments and attitudes? Is not *porneia* essentially sexual activity that ruptures covenant, just as *castitas* is sexual virtue within or outside marriage because it is sexuality in service to covenant?

If sexual virtue and vice are defined covenantally rather than biologically, then it is possible to place homosexual and heterosexual activity in the same context. Certainly, the church must reject the *porneia* which glorifies sex for its own sake, indulges in promiscuity, destroys the bonds of commitment, and seduces the innocent. Insofar as "gay lifestyle" has these connotations, the church must emphatically and always say no to it. But the church must say no with equal emphasis to the heterosexual, "Playboy-Cosmopolitan" lifestyle. In both cases, also, the church can acknowledge that human sexual activity, while of real and great significance, is not wholly determinative of human existence or worth, and can perhaps begin to ask whether the church's concentration on sexual behavior corresponds proportionally to the emphasis placed on it by Scripture.

The harder question, of course, is whether the church can recognize the possibility of committed and covenantal homosexual love, in the way that it recognizes such sexual or personal love in the sacrament of marriage. This is a harder question because it pertains not simply to moral attitudes or pastoral care, but to the *social* symbolization of the community.

The issue here is analogous to the one facing earliest Christianity after Gentiles started being converted. Granted that they had been given the Holy Spirit, could they be accepted into the people of God just as they were, or must they first "become Jewish" by being circumcised and obeying all the ritual demands of Torah? Remember, please, the stakes: The Gentiles were "by nature" unclean, and were "by practice" polluted by idolatry. We are obsessed by the sexual dimensions of the body. The first-century Mediterranean world was obsessed by the social implications of food and table fellowship. The decision to let the Gentiles in "as is" and to establish a more inclusive form of table fellowship, we should note, came into direct conflict with the accepted interpretation of Torah and what God wanted of humans.

The decision, furthermore, was not easy to reach. Paul's Letter to the Galatians suggests some of the conflict it generated. And as we have seen, Luke devotes five full chapters of Acts (10-15) to the account of how the community caught up with God's intentions, stumbling every step of the way through confusion, doubt, challenge, disagreements, divisions, and debate. Much suffering had to be endured before the implications of Peter's question, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God" (Acts 11:17), could be fully answered: "We believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:11).

The grounds of the church's decision then was the work that God was doing among the Gentiles, bringing them to salvation through faith. On the basis of this experience of God's work, the church made bold to reinterpret Torah, finding there unexpected legitimation for its fidelity to God's surprising ways (Acts 15:15-18). How was that work of God made known to the church? Through the narratives of faith related by Paul and Barnabas and Peter, their personal testimony of how "signs and wonders" had been worked among the Gentiles (Acts 15:4, 6-11, 12-13).

Such witness is what the church now needs from homosexual Christians. Are homosexuality and holiness of life compatible? Is homosexual covenantal love according to "the mind of Christ" an authentic realization of that Christian identity authored by the Holy Spirit, and therefore "authored" as well by the Scripture despite the "authorities" speaking against it? The church can discern this only on the basis of faithful witness. The burden of proof required to overturn scriptural precedents is heavy, but it is a burden that has been borne before. The church should not, cannot, 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 that work of God. Inclusivity must follow from evidence of holiness; are there narratives of homosexual *holiness* to which we must begin to listen?