

“The Difficult Issue of Homosexuality”

Genesis 19:1-11 (and other passages)

11/15/92 – University Presbyterian Church, Dr. Philip Siddons

The topic for today touches on an issue with which we all are somewhat uncomfortable. Each of us brings to the subject unanswered questions regarding the facts; our own inexperience as well as socially induced prejudice. We're often not comfortable with this topic because it has to do with one of the most sensitive aspects of our human nature: our sexual orientation.

My hope, this morning, is not that any of you would gravitate toward the position I might adopt. Nor do I wish to change anyone's mind on the matter. All I hope to do is mention enough issues and research conclusions, in a credible way, that will help you continue your own personal research on the issue so that you can deal with the subject in a credible and fair way. We're dealing with this subject in some depth because all of us have found the shallow discussions around the water cooler at work unsatisfying.

Most important to remember is that this topic represents an area of a lot of suffering. Life is extremely painful for those who are oriented to others of their own sex as well as being difficult for their families. And it is, at a minimum, uncomfortable to deal with for those of us who are heterosexuals and who have done little study on the issue. Few of us have heard a sermon on this issue with any depth and some have read very little on the matter. So it is out of a pastoral concern for those oriented to others of their own sex and for those who must deal with the issue that I am taking the risk and the time to deal with this topic.

It is relatively easy for us to sit back in our arm chairs and casually discuss homosexuals and the easy-to-read magazine

articles of only 2 or 3 pages. It is even easier to turn on the television talk shows and emotionally relate to one side or the other, as Donahue, Oprah or Geraldo parade shocking and extreme factions before us to bolster their audience numbers. You see, ... as long as homosexuality remains an abstract topic about people with whom we are not socially involved, it continues to be a safe issue, far removed from our personal lives.

But sooner or later many of us will be ejected from our comfortable observation point in life when someone we know turns out to be oriented to her or his own sex. We are then sobered by the dilemma of the real people in our lives.

It is then that this abstract concept is seen embodied in the lives of our fellow human beings – those who are forced to endure the hatred and derogatory names. These are real people, our sons and daughters, our friends and companions.

First, I raise for us some questions about our attitude about dealing with change. Peter, in Acts 10, is creatively instructed in a dream that the gospel will be going out to the Gentiles. In the dream, Peter rejects this idea. It went against everything that his religious subculture taught him about Gentiles and the Jewish distinctiveness as God's chosen people.

In fact, the first church in Jerusalem, composed only of Jewish Christians, had to have a big conference and argue long and hard about whether or not to let non-Jews become Christians. So the question is: whether or not we are willing to risk reexamining what we have been taught through the years – even though we may have

been taught, like Peter, to think one certain way.

As a methodology, I will begin to summarize the opinions people usually adopt on the issue. Then I will work through the related Biblical material.

Next will come comments about the current scientific and sociological findings, and finally I will raise some questions about what all this has to do with our lives today. Just from being around on this earth for a number of years we find that we generally hold one of four opinions about homosexuality. (Suggested by James Nelson, quoted by William Sloane Coffin, and quoted below.)

1. Rejecting-Punitive Position.

First, we may hold a rejecting-punitive position. The Jerry Falwells and the Pat Robertsons of the land obviously take this position. To them, homosexuality is perverse, repugnant and sinful.

One of the several difficulties with this position is that a more disciplined look at the Biblical materials reveals not as forthright a statement on homosexuality as was previously thought. But we'll do the Biblical work shortly.

Further, in reference to Scripture, there is the interesting task of differentiating between what the ancient Jews determined as ritually unclean (in their cult practices) from what God's word suggests as morally wanting. We will also discuss that later.

2. Rejecting But Non-Punitive Position

A second position we may discover we have taken is the rejecting but non-punitive stance. This is the thinking that homosexuals are not criminals or sinners so much as victims of a distorted development, having some form of a psychological disorder – a confusion of the mind.

A difficulty with this position is that research has determined that people do not choose their orientation, ... they discover it. There is further evidence that it is not possible to force one to change their orientation from a homosexual to a heterosexual orientation anymore than it is possible to change a heterosexual into one oriented to one's own sex. The fundamentalist TV talk shows, every once in a while, like to parade someone before the viewing audience who claims to have been "cured" or reoriented to heterosexuality. In all the medical, psychological and sociological studies that have been conducted on human sexuality, none report evidence of a change in one's orientation among those sure of their orientation.

There is substantial research showing interesting facts regarding when and how people come to be homosexuals. They no longer believe that all humans possess an inborn tendency toward heterosexuality.

At birth, the infant's physical gender is established, but at that time the brain and the neurological pathways (of all persons) are apparently "wired" for being both masculine and feminine. Apart from the physical structuring, which gender identity (and related behavior) actually develops is believed to be determined by the interplay of two factors.

The first of the determining factors are the pre-birth settings of neural tissues (or other prenatal biological dispositions). We would be negligent to ignore the recent discoveries of the differences in brain structure, at least between straight and gay men. UCLA researchers reported that autopsies showed that the bundle of nerves connecting the left and right hemispheres of the brain (The anterior commissure) appear to be about a third larger in homosexuals than in heterosexuals.

Another study published last year revealed that a segment of the hypothalamus, which influences sexual activity, seems to be half as large in gay men as it is in straight men.

Another survey found that when one twin is gay, their identical sibling is three times as likely to be gay as well. These findings suggest a strong biological influence. (Time, August 17, 1992, p51)

A second determining factor is the post-birth socialization and learning influences. Somewhere in the mysterious combination of biological nature and the sociological nurturing, one's sexual orientation is formed (apart from the person's will). Up to 18 months of age, they claim, an infant's core gender identity is not even beginning to become fixed. A person's orientation toward one sex, or the other, is fixed sometime in the time span of 18 months to 3 years. Unlike most other creatures on our planet, the gender identity and gender role development are not fully completed until sometime after birth. One's gender orientation comes upon a person just as one's left or right handedness. Stop and ask yourself, what is the likelihood that someday you might change your orientation from heterosexual to homosexual? To pose that question to people who are homosexual seems equally absurd.

3. Conditional Acceptance Position

A third position on the issue many have adopted is that of conditional acceptance. This view says that given the fact that people do not choose their orientation in life, one would be hard pressed to fix a moral judgment on their state. But since homosexuality seems to have a disrupting effect on society, those who discover themselves to be homosexual should limit their activity. According to this view, these people should remain celibate and generally

curtail their social behavior. People with this view don't think gay and lesbian people should become teachers, doctors or ministers.

A negative consequence of this view is that homosexuals who are asked to remain celibate have to pay a heavy toll – the toll of loneliness and the absence of affection in a culture which has not only disallowed homosexuality but also frowns on singleness.

Because of the negative view society has for these people, most homosexual persons have felt compelled to pass as heterosexuals. The average American, with about 200 adult acquaintances, knows but does not recognize the 5 to 20 gay and lesbian people in their own circle of acquaintances. Conservative estimates are that 5 to 8% of the people in your life are oriented to others of their own sex but they keep it quiet. There are many gay or lesbian people who marry a person of the opposite sex in order to achieve more social acceptance. Tragically they are often incapable of sharing with their spouse the levels of deepest affection and intimacy, both spiritual and physical, even though they may produce children.

4. Unconditional Acceptance Position

The fourth position one may adopt, in all this, is that of unconditional acceptance of gays, lesbians or bisexuals. This view understands that there are various sexual orientations, and although some orientations represent minority occurrences, they should be celebrated as part of God's diverse creation.

The problem with taking this position is that it runs against the grain of society's traditions and laws. Our culture is basically anti-homosexual. There are several things in our society that show this.

First there are 31 states that outlaw homosexual behavior between consenting adults. You may have followed the news in

how legislators in Oregon unsuccessfully tried to change their state laws to reclassify homosexuality to be in the same categories as the abnormalities of pedophilia, sadism and masochism – even though our nation’s psychiatric community has done the opposite. The majority of the people of Oregon, and even the journalist William Buckley, saw this as injustice. (See his syndicated column of 9/15/92 in The Buffalo News ‘Oregon referendum on gays goes too far’.)

Secondly, in all 50 states homosexuality runs against tradition.

Thirdly, the overwhelming majority of Americans interviewed would not allow (if they could) homosexual men to assume most public service careers or be in careers with a high exposure to the general public. And fourthly, there is a widespread pattern of private discrimination against homosexual persons. There is a profound bias against gay, lesbian and bisexual people in our culture.

Many heterosexual persons irrationally assume that the sexual orientation of a homosexual governs the person’s entire life – as if it is a master trait, dominating the person’s whole personality. We don’t think that heterosexual people have their entire lives dominated by sexual passions, but because of the prejudice, fear and misinformation in our culture, many people think that gay and lesbian people think about nothing else but sex. It is a double standard.

Society generally expects homosexual persons to be maladjusted, incompetent, unreliable, irreligious and promiscuous. And yet, the culture does not attribute this obsession to those who are heterosexuals, because most people, most of the time and in most places are nonsexual. But even though one’s orientation is not central to a person’s minute by minute behavior, it is a basic part of a person’s identity and personality, just as is one’s race.

A homosexual person may, in fact, be well-adjusted, competent, reliable and religious, or they may be the opposite of these positive traits – just as a heterosexual may be a problem or a blessing to society. The percentage of homosexuals who wrongfully seduce or violate others is no higher than the percentage of heterosexuals who commit similar crimes. So to try to pull all this together, like it or not, we have probably come here with one of these four views on the subject:

1. a rejecting-punitive position,
2. a rejecting non-punitive position,
3. a conditional and limited acceptance or
4. an unconditional acceptance.

Now to the Biblical material.

Sodom

The Old Testament passage which historically has been most influential on Christian’s attitudes toward homosexuality is Genesis chapters 18-19. The story of Lot’s family safely getting out of the condemned city of Sodom, at the minimum, is bazaar. The sins of Sodom and Gomorrah were so great that judgment was said to be passed on them.

In the story, the mob wanted Lot to give them the two out-of-town visitors (who happened to be angels) for them to (as they say) “know” or have sexual intercourse.

To understand this scene, we have to grit our teeth and face the fact that the mob wanted to gang rape these two celestial visitors who were, by appearances, males.

Through the centuries, though, translators and commentators have associated this intended action with homosexuality and because of this, the word “sodomy” was derived from this biblical passage.

Technically, sodomy refers to anal intercourse, but for more accuracy in understanding this incident, we have to remember that rape is not a sexual act so much as it is one of violence and abuse of power.

And in those ancient times it was not unusual to flaunt one's victory over a conquered people by treating the captured enemy leaders with the greatest possible contempt – by forcing the defeated royalty down to the lower status that women were assigned – usually with public gang rape. To put it briefly, and I know this is rugged imagery through which to work, the mob didn't want to abuse those two guests because they were homosexually oriented but because they were arrogant and violent and wanted to totally humiliate those strangers to the city.

Rather than the story making a point about homosexuality, the Sodom story is focusing on two specific evils: (1) violent gang rape, and (2) horrible inhospitality to strangers. Violence is the real point of the story.

We should also never mention this passage without remembering that in the story Lot tries to save his two supernatural guests by offering to throw his two teen age daughters out into the mob for them to molest. Why hasn't Lot gone down in history has a heinous example of how depraved humanity can become?

But the Bible is often its own best commentary and interestingly enough, we find the Bible's explanations for Sodom's destruction as having nothing to do with homosexuality.

How then does the Bible (itself) interpret the sin of Sodom?

Well there is a parallel story over in Judges 19-21. A Levite is on a trip with his concubine and while they are in an unfamiliar

city a crowd comes to the house where the couple is staying. This mob demands that the home owner send the male Levite out so that they may "know him" – again the use of that word).

In place of the Levite, the host verbally offers the mob the Levite's woman friend and his own daughter. In the confusion, the woman friend of the Levite is thrown out the door, ... she is gang raped and abused to her death. Again, amazingly, ... the male scriptural writers and editors place no judgment on this behavior. Another gruesome story but parallel and probably dependent on the previously written account of Sodom.

But whatever a person decides about the interpretation of the Genesis Sodom story, one must decide about the Judges narrative. The same violent mob action was intended.

The gender of the offended party is not the point. The subject is the humiliating violence intended and actualized (that was judged as evil). From these two passages alone, one can not say there is a specific teaching on the issue of homosexual relationships between consenting adults. The Sodom story was about a commonly practiced gang rape violence in that culture.

In the first chapter of Isaiah, the nation of Judah is rebuked by comparing it with Sodom and Gomorrah. The specific sins mentioned are: greed, rebellion against God, empty religious ritual (without true devotion to God), failure to properly care for orphans and widows, failure to pursue justice and failure to champion the rights of the oppressed. There is no mention of homosexuality.

In Ezekiel 16:49-50 it says: "This was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride of wealth and food in plenty, comfort and ease and yet she never helped the poor and wretched. They grew

haughty and did deeds abominable in my sight and I made away with them, as you have seen.” Still no specific mention of homosexuality.

In the New Testament Jesus refers to Sodom not in the context of sexual acts but in the context of inhospitality. He says, in Luke 10, “When you enter a town and they do not make you welcome... I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom on the great day than for that town.”

Jude 7 does refer to the sexual sins of Sodom, commenting on their fornication and “unnatural lusts.”

The emphasis, here, is on heterosexual intercourse outside of marriage and going after alien or (literally) ‘strange flesh’ as the original Greek says. In the unusual context of this letter, these “unnatural lusts” might refer to desire for contact between human and heavenly beings but we are uncertain because of the difficulty of the text.

There is a related passage in Deuteronomy 23:17-18 that uses two Hebrew words often translated as “sodomite” and thought to mean homosexual. The words here are used to condemn the men and women who lead in the pagan worship of the gods of the fertility cults. But there is nothing in the text to justify the idea that the male priests were engaged in homosexual activity, even though men and women priests were involved as cultic prostitutes. And one would be hard pressed to figure out how the symbolism about fertility would have any connection with a priest who might be homosexual. To sum it up, then, the Sodom story says nothing at all about the condition of a homosexual orientation. The only real application to homosexuals would have to be a general one: homosexuals, like everyone else, should show hospitality to strangers, dealing justly with the poor and vulnerable, ... and should not force their power or violence (sexually or

otherwise) on others.

Ancient Israel’s Holiness Code Summarized in Leviticus.

The central theme of Leviticus 18-20 is “holiness before the Lord.” In this passage, as well as elsewhere, there is an attempt to define a state of ritual purity and a moral integrity. The priests thought that if these rituals could be followed, they would succeed in being a “pure” nation in the world. They devised an organizational scheme which tried to categorize everything in nature.

Wholeness of body was one class that was considered better than the class of people who were diseased or physically challenged. Priests were not to wear suits made out of more than one kind of material. In some ways, these priests were a little like the Amish cult we see today.

They organized animals into clean and unclean. They decided that because God usually made animals to have cloven hoofs who chewed their cud, God must have intended this to be the norm. So camels, rabbits and pigs were considered out of order or “unclean.”

The priests, in their organizational mania, figured out that water creatures usually have scales and fins for locomotion. They reasoned, then, that God must have been thinking of a category of “clean” water animals – all properly having scales and fins. They legislated that scaled and finned water animals could be eaten. Water animals that did not have that combination, such as frogs and lobsters, were designated as “unclean.”

It was also against the law (and punishable by death) to consult with a medium or wizard, to curse at one’s parents, to commit adultery and to have intercourse with a menstruating woman. And since it was thought that God created the so-called “clean” category of heterosexuality, to engage in

homosexuality was ruled as “unclean” as well – deserving the death penalty. In all the above mentioned examples, it was taught that violation of these priest’s laws was a violation of God’s laws.

And then there were the punishments prescribed for violation of these categories of “cleanliness.” When they said that “they shall be put off from among their people” it meant that they were to be killed.

Facing the modern reader, then, is this basic question: `What does one do about these ancient rules on capital punishment? If some are thought to be valid today, ... which ones, ... and on what basis does one determine the validity of one over the other? Paul mentions some of these ritual purity laws in Romans 1-3. Virtually all scholars agree that Paul is describing the general condemnation of Gentiles and Jews under the law. Paul’s major point here is that everyone is found wanting morally when their actions face the scrutiny of the laws. The problem, Paul says, is that people have rejected God and have made themselves autonomous. Consequently, God has abandoned them, leaving them to their own disgusting lives, which are dominated by sexual immorality and other forms of behavior which violate what Paul calls “natural.”

The New Testament

Quoting Paul: “God gave them up to the defilement of their bodies, ... shameful passions, males abandoning sexual relations with females which accord with nature, were inflamed with their longing for one another, males committing shameless acts with males...” and so on. And Paul calls the behavior “unfit” and “improper.”

Now Paul turns his attention in 2:1 to the person who would self-righteously pass judgment on that behavior. No one, Paul is saying, is innocent of such offenses. But in

saying that, Paul is obviously not claiming that everyone does every particular thing on this list. He is saying that everyone is found guilty of failing to conform to the law, which is perceived to be the intended order of things.

Paul is certainly not advising Christians to return to the Levitical laws of ritual purity. On the contrary, he was trying to pry that kind of legalism out of their minds. He was just mentioning the old Jewish law to remind some (perhaps self-righteous and legalistic Jews) that even they are not pure or good enough (according to their own and ancient system of rituals) to escape guilt. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” he concludes.

Paul’s point is that all people are under the power of sin (3:9). He is not making a point about homosexuality.

Paul knew that homosexuality went against the ancient priestly categories, as well as swearing at one’s parents or having sex during menstruation. But he certainly was not defending those categories of the ancient Jewish cult. He was just using the ancient legal categories as a block of material familiar to his Jewish readers for the purpose of illustration. To be thorough, we should also notice that in 1 Cor. 6, Paul lists some evils, ...again using some hard-to-understand Greek words. The translators differ on their renderings. Various attempts include: “homosexuals, sexual perverts, those guilty of homosexual perversion, sodomites, effeminate and sensual people given over to unnatural vice.”

Which of these many images did Paul originally intend to convey to his readers regarding a lifestyle of wrong doing?

Well, look at the other things in his list. Idolaters, adulterers, thieves, greedy people, drunkards, revilers and robbers. It

would make more sense to understand that he was trying to describe flagrantly immoral behavior ... licentiousness as a lifestyle. It would be impossible to interpret this text as making a comment on one's basic sexual orientation – a distinction only recently understood in our own time.

In other words, and more briefly, when Paul condemned behavior that was thought to be associated with homosexual activity, he was condemning licentious and vulgar behavior that is a product of an overall lifestyle that totally rejects the authority of God. He was in no wise commenting on, nor was Paul even aware of, the distinction between someone who is oriented to those of their own sex, as opposed to someone who is exhibiting an entire lifestyle of total debauchery and hedonistic sexual activity (apart from committed and caring relationships). So the Bible is silent on the matter of a person's acquired sexual orientation. It also appears that New Testament Christianity threw out the archaic ritualistic laws of ancient Israel's cultic classifications. People are just not punished anymore for wearing a mix of polyester and cotton clothing. And given the apparent fact that the Bible seems to only condemn licentious sexual behavior by heterosexuals and homosexuals, we seem to be left with several rather open ended questions.

Questions With Which We're Left Today

1. The ancient Israelites thought that marriage was God's only intention for human beings. Given that some Christians choose to be single today, does that make them less than what God wants? And given that some Christians discover that they are oriented to those of their own sex (through no fault of their own), what is one to do with that ancient perception of Israel?

2. The author of Job tells us that the mysteries of God's activities as the Creator cannot be completely comprehended by the human mind. Job believes that no doctrine of creation can state all the truth about the Creator. So, does the Church's knowledge of God's work as Creator continue to grow?

Does time, science, medicine and experience lead us to new glimpses of the Creator's plan?

3. Homosexual behavior violated ancient Israel's male dominated gender scheme. Treating one's wife as an equal also violated their male-dominated social order. By what criteria should a Christian decide that one part of the Israelite's male-dominated society reflected God's eternal plan – while other ancient Israeli social customs only represented a culturally-conditioned human understanding of God's plan?

4. Homosexual behavior between consenting males and heterosexual intercourse between a husband and a menstruating wife were both punishable by death in ancient Israel. By what criteria does the Christian Church today decide that one law reflected God's plan and the other only a culturally-conditioned human understanding of God's will.

5. While Paul quotes a traditional Jewish list of things that were ritually out of order in Romans 1:18f., does he do it approving the use of the list; ... or is he not, in fact, using it to forcefully remind a self-satisfied judgmental audience not to depend on their law codes to justify themselves, ...but, rather, to set their sights on the new concept of justification by faith in God's unconditional love?

6. When Paul talks about those in Romans 1 who have consciously chosen to replace truth with untruth, ... suppose we assume that he was thinking that

heterosexuals can consciously choose to become homosexual. Today we understand that homosexual persons have not made such a conscious choice. Would not we, again, assume that Paul is not talking about one's orientation, but rather elicit, licentious and deliberate acts of vulgarity and pleasure seeking? Wasn't he really talking about people who were so perverse and warped that they would engage in an overall lifestyle which even tries experiences (to which they aren't basically oriented) – something like a drug user trying any new drug just for the fun of it?

7. In First Timothy 2:9-15 it clearly states the author's opinion that women are not to braid their hair, wear gold or pearls or costly clothing. They are to learn in silence and never teach or have authority over men and they are to keep silent. It goes on to suggest that Adam was not deceived but Eve.

This is stated in 1st Timothy, even though Adam, according to the Hebrew text, was right next to Eve and had obviously taken a bite himself.

Now it is clear that those of us in the Presbyterian Church believe that new understandings about the equality of women and men have been shown to us through God's Spirit. We seem to believe that the Church has been led by the dynamic of the Spirit to new and different understandings of what it means to be a woman or a man living today with Christian values. We've seen new light on the issue of slavery and have made appropriate changes in our society. Is it possible that in the dynamic of the Spirit, the Church is seeing new light in this matter of those who are oriented to others of their own sex?

The Church Today

The Christian Church is rethinking these concerns, and we can see this in the

current discussions about the Presbyterian church in Rochester which tried to hire an ordained woman who happens to be a lesbian, ... but as in anything, we must first deal with our fears. Perhaps some of us are afraid of being thought of as a homosexual by others. "Say, ... what's that you're reading? . . . Oh, . . . it's nothing, just a book on homosexuality."

Perhaps we need to rid ourselves of the myth of catching homosexuality, ... as if we, through contact with gay or lesbian folks, may suddenly wake up with a fever and discover that we are oriented to others of our own sex. Perhaps the best way to rid ourselves of the fear of homosexuals and of the topic is to remember the fears we once had from our lack of experience with other difficult issues. Maybe you used to be afraid to talk with a foreigner who did not speak your language. Through experience and learning you overcame some of these fears.

Perhaps you used to be afraid to be near people who were mentally or emotionally disturbed. Maybe you used to be afraid to be with and talk to someone who had a terminal illness. Perhaps, in the same ways, we can free ourselves from the fear of homosexuality.

I think Christians should make an attempt to understand how our society has made life tremendously difficult for our gay, lesbian and bisexual brothers and sisters. I feel that I have little understanding of the psychological and sociological pressures that our gay, lesbian and bisexual people experience but I want to do my part to eliminate the injustice and affirm their equality and dignity. From talking with several gay and lesbian friends and their parents I have gained some understanding into the depression and the feelings of oppression they feel.

I raise all these questions only to

stimulate our thinking, and as I suggested earlier, ... to try to encourage us all to read and think more about this, because I believe this issue matters. It matters to the individual person who is gay, lesbian or bisexual. It matters to that person's loved ones, and it ultimately matters to all those who do not love and fully accept that person.

My personal studies and personal experience has lead me to adopt the 4th position on the issue – that of unconditional acceptance. I fully accept gay, lesbian and bisexual people as individuals with worth (equal to that of my own). I do not consider one's orientation an issue in terms of the Christian faith, personal friendship, church involvement or leadership or any other area of life. I consider their quotient of sin to be no greater than my own, as I do with all people.

Holding this position is at variance with the previously expressed majority opinion of the Presbyterian denomination, but my convictions lead me to work and change that injustice. I firmly believe that there is more light yet to dawn upon Christianity on this issue, ... and as it shines, I want to see it.

Bibliography

Much of the material from this presentation was abstracted from, or quoted from the following sources, which are highly recommended for your further reading:

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