

Same Sex Love: Interpretive Survey of the Moral Landscape and a Way Forward

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This is an overview in support of an open and affirming stance with and on behalf of the LGBTQ+ community for faithful followers of Jesus. This analysis includes: addressing primary classic scriptures used by the Church's traditional view; testimonies from persons who identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community; a sampling of the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana voice for an open and affirming stance; a brief review of the social sciences and psychological sciences commentary; and an invitation to full inclusion. This research focuses primarily on one aspect of the subject of same-sex love and same-sex relations in the biblical context. A loving and holistic affirmation of the full expression of our sexual and gender identity in the human family is partially informed by addressing this foundational material.

This brief survey is far from exhaustive but is a step toward the discovery of the generous and increasingly inclusive biblical arc of God's relationship with the people of God through the Holy Spirit. To those who would like to take a deeper dive into a biblical case for affirmation James V. Brownson's, "Bible, Gender and Sexuality," is an excellent resource.

Offered in the spirit of a disciple being daily formed into the image of Christ on the journey with my neighbor.

Introduction

“take note
all we who draw circles
of in and out

geometry's compass
earth and heaven's
circumference
the soul's measure

are not in our hands”¹

“I came out of the closet and ironically, the robes and stoles I had worn for decades as a minister in the United Methodist Church took my place.”² Rob Hill, currently Mississippi State Director of the Human Rights Campaign, tells of the day in June of 2014 when he voluntarily surrendered his credentials after twelve years of effective ministry to a rural congregation in Jackson.³ “The church was never just my business – it was my home.”⁴ Rob confesses his cynicism toward the Church but insists on a faith aspect for the HRC saying, “the laws can change but real change has to be in the heart.”⁵ Rob’s story is one among thousands of gay persons’ stories who have been ostracized by the Church. Through the shared experiences of Christian gay men and women, and the substantial voice of the psychological and social sciences, the Church is compelled to reexamine its centuries-held view of same-sex relations.

As I explore the moral terrain of same-sex relations and same-sex love in the postmodern church, the communities and experiences by which I have been formed will

¹ Christie Smith Stephens, Poem, July 8, 2015, Christie Smith Stephens source.

² Rob Hill, “Hill: Methodist church law ends ministry,” *The Clarion – Ledger*, May 30, 2015, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://www.clarionledger.com/story/opinion/columnists/2015/05/30/hill-methodist-church-law-ends-ministry/28227759/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rob Hill, phone interview by author, August 5, 2015.

inevitably inform me. I have been born into and have committed my life ministry to the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, a Wesleyan holiness movement. I have been engaged in developing a hermeneutic by which to frame an ethical image from the biblical texts through the writing of Richard B. Hays. His design for discernment of an ethical conclusion through the relevant biblical texts is fourfold: 1) *The descriptive task: reading the text carefully*, 2) *The synthetic task: placing the text in canonical context*, 3) *The hermeneutical task: relating the text to our situation*, and 4) *The pragmatic task: living the text*.⁶

The Biblical Texts

Old Testament

The biblical texts most often used in support of the church's long term stance on same-sex relations as sin include three Old Testament texts: Genesis 19:1-29, and Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.⁷

The Genesis account depicting a “gang-rape scenario” in Sodom is seen by many scholars from both sides of the issue as irrelevant to the subject.⁸ As traditional theologian Richard B. Hays states: “there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse.”⁹ The primary offenses against Sodom and Gomorrah are recorded in Isaiah 1:10-17—lack of doing justice for the orphan and the widow, Jeremiah 23:14—adultery and lying, and Ezekiel 16:49—failure to provide aid for the poor and needy.

⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1996), 1-10.

⁷ Hays, 381-382; Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 2003), 4-9, 56-63; David P. Gushee, “Tackling the Hard Questions,” *Sojourners* vol. 44, no. 1 (January 2015): 19.

⁸ Hays, 381; Gushee, 19.

⁹ Hays, 381.

The Leviticus Holiness Code, Leviticus 17 – 26, are cited as two more viable possibilities for a mandated condemnation of same-sex relations in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Hays claims these verses as the basis for “the subsequent universal rejection of male same-sex intercourse within Judaism.”¹⁰ Traditionalist exegete Robert A. J. Gagnon develops further a “web of interconnected homosexual texts” exploring Old Testament narratives that have possible references to “homosexual” behavior or other unacceptable sexual behavior (Gen. 9:20-27, Lev. 20:17, Eze. 16:49-50).¹¹

Gagnon makes an additional argument taken from Old Testament texts using the creation story as expressed in Genesis 2:24. Through this verse Gagnon sees the male/female pairing as “a prescriptive norm.”¹² I will return to the creation story as it interplays with New Testament texts later in this discussion.

Gagnon opines an unwavering negative stance on same-sex behavior as accepted Israelite moral code. The scholar’s discussion opens, by implication, the blatant disregard for the valuing of women as an undergirding factor in the Old Testament’s assessment of same sex relations.¹³ The texts’ strong aversions to same-sex behavior reveal the underlying presumption of male superiority and the second-class status of women. If a man took on what was perceived as the role of a woman sexually, it was considered to be a shame to “male honor.”¹⁴ Thus, the revulsion to same-sex behavior follows the cultural norm to keep the patriarchal hierarchy in place. Without thoughtful consideration of the embedded patriarchal context by which writers of biblical texts were largely informed, the contemporary church is in danger of basing its teaching against same-sex relations

¹⁰ Hays, 381.

¹¹ Via, Gagnon, 56-60.

¹² Ibid., 61.

¹³ Ibid., 60.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

upon the practice of the oppression of one gender by another.¹⁵

New Testament scholar Dan O. Via also notes the strong cultural patriarchal bias including land ownership issues, priority of separation from pagan nations and male honor.¹⁶ He stresses the patriarchal society would have had no tolerance for any sexual act that would put a male in the more passive position as the female role would have been perceived.¹⁷ He reminds us of the willingness of Lot to even offer his virgin daughters to avoid contributing to an act of same-sex relations (Gen. 19:1-29), disturbingly underscoring the patriarchal context.¹⁸ Lot's offering would be considered reprehensible by any ethical modern day standard.

James V. Brownson's work proposes, "To the extent that [patriarchal] concerns shape biblical discussions of homosexual activity, they must be subjected to a wider critique, based on the larger biblical movement...away from patriarchy toward a more egalitarian vision."¹⁹ Brownson robustly points out significant streams of egalitarian contrast seen throughout the canon. Concerning texts that are steeped in the priority of the protection of male honor he stresses, "these texts may be limited in their ability to speak to same-sex relationships today – in a [modern day] context where such hierarchical assumptions no longer apply."²⁰

Returning to Gagnon, he completes his argument by stating: "[W]hen [male-male validation] becomes sexualized, such that one perceives union with a sexual same as self-completion, then something distorted has happened: a denial of the integrity of the

¹⁵ Via, Gagnon, 9, 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁹ James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023), 83.

²⁰ Ibid, 84.

sexual self.”²¹ Here Gagnon wanders into his own bias drawing a conclusion that strays from what can be responsibly found in the biblical text. Further, his assessment is profoundly ironic. For gay men and women, “something distorted” happens when forced to attempt conformity to a culture prescribing male-female orientation as the “right orientation.”

An additional conversation that becomes important when looking at Old Testament texts is the distinction between what is purity practice and what is sin. Via offers insight in his discussion of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The verses sit in the midst of long lists of requirements for the people of God for the purpose of making them holy.²² Via distinguishes between sin acts and unclean conditions by defining the sin act as, “a conscious, intentional, personal attitude and act” that has a moral quality. In contrast, uncleanness occurs from contact with some physical object or process... It has nothing to do with motive, intention or the disposition of the heart.”²³ In the Septuagint the Greek word used to characterize same-sex relations, βδέλυγμα (*bdelugma*) translated abomination, uses the same root that is used in the listings of impure practices or conditions that make one unclean.²⁴ Via sees the terms as “synonymous” providing a lens to see the condition not as “sin,” but as a violation of “purity” practice.²⁵

Conversely, Gagnon links sin acts and impure acts citing Leviticus 18:24-30, “it is the “iniquity” or “sin” (*awon*) or the aforementioned “abominations” (*to’evoth*) that brings about defilement (v. 25).”²⁶ Gagnon also points to behaviors still viewed as morally reprehensible: incest, pedophilia and bestiality, then asserts that one could

²¹ Via, Gagnon,, 65.

²² Ibid., 6-11.

²³ Ibid., 5-6.

²⁴ Ibid., 8.

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid, 66.

legitimize these on the same basis same sex relations have been legitimized.²⁷ Gagnon highly offensive conclusion misses crucial distinctions when we see that the context in all instances of the ethically unacceptable listing of paraphilia clearly indicates the psychological and social vulnerability of one partner that in no way characterizes the reality of the equal, consensual, loving relationships experienced by modern day adult gay couples.²⁸

Finally, a responsible reading of the holiness codes is impossible without looking at the New Testament's reinterpretation of what is required for holiness. The Acts 10 account of Peter's vision provides a new definition of what is pure and what is impure and opens a radically revised understanding of what it means to be included. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 builds on the dramatic reimagining of holiness codes through Peter's instruction to the apostles, elders and Pharisees concerning circumcision, "why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors or we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of Jesus just as they will (Acts 15:10-11)." A renewed vision of holiness defined by faith in Jesus Christ becomes a transformational lens through which we must see the holiness codes of the Old Testament.

In summary, Old Testament texts raise three central arguments regarding the biblical view of same-sex relations. 1) The Sodom Narrative: A simple reading of the passage considered within its context and related passages releases the use of the Sodom account as a basis for a negative view of same-sex behavior. 2) Creation, Male and Female: The canonical contextual implications of the creation story are important to

²⁷ Via, Gagnon, 67.

²⁸ Psychology Today, "Paraphilias," accessed August 1, 2015, last reviewed February 17, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/paraphilias>.

consider. The creation stories are primary narratives in scripture. Yet, the creation accounts fail to overtly condemn same-sex relations. 3) Purity Ritual or Sin: A descriptive reading of the Holiness Code shows a clear imperative against same-sex relations. The contextual patriarchal consideration deepens an understanding of how the imperative became embedded in the life of the community of Israel. When moving to a hermeneutical mode for the present, the distinction between what is purity practice and what is sin greatly shifts the weight of our understanding. The New Testament lens through the Acts accounts unveils the explicit reimagining of holiness codes that must be recognized as we seek to discover what is required for a faithful contemporary application.

New Testament

The primary New Testament references to same-sex behavior are found in I Corinthians 6:9-11, I Timothy 1:10, and Romans 1:18-32.²⁹ Importantly, Gagnon adds a view of Jesus's probable perspective on same-sex behavior.³⁰

Gagnon's argument for a condemnation of "homosexuality" through Jesus's teachings is based primarily on what Jesus, being a Jew, would have assumed.³¹ I will not argue against Jesus's adherence to the heart of the holiness code. However, in his argument, Gagnon does not explore the cultural environment that was most likely influencing the assumed view of same-sex relations. Additional comments on the context of the culture will be offered later in this survey.

As we look at Paul's writings Hays affirms, "[Paul] speaks out of a Hellenistic-Jewish cultural context in which homosexuality is regarded as an abomination

²⁹ Hays, 382-389; Via, Gagnon, 11-14, 67-88; Gushee, 19-21.

³⁰ Via, Gagnon, 68-74.

³¹ Ibid.

and he assumes that his readers will share his negative judgment of it.”³² Hays points out the Greek terms sometimes translated as “homosexual” are *malakoi*, slang for the ‘passive partner,’ and, *arsenokoitai*, ‘men who bed males.’ Hays and Gagnon note the Septuagint’s *meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos* (Lev. 20:13) as the source of the noun.³³ For Hays, Paul, through the use of this particular noun, “presupposes and reaffirms the holiness code’s condemnation of homosexual acts.”³⁴ Gagnon echoes Hays stating, Paul “was using purity language in line with much of his scriptural heritage” when addressing sexual immorality as sin.³⁵

Questions raised within these Pauline texts center around two considerations. 1) There was no word for “homosexual” in the Hellenistic first century world.³⁶ To translate the texts in this way without a contextual analysis of the world within which they were spoken can lead to a gross misrepresentation of the intention of the meaning. The word “homosexual” was first used as a translation of the two Greek words in the Revised Standard Version of the bible in 1946. The details of that usage and its full impact are beyond the scope of this paper. 2) Hays’s and Gagnon’s word study of the *malakoi*, passive partner, offers clues to the kind of sexual practice that was called sin.³⁷ David P. Gushee finds in the work of James Brownson a basis for the 1 Corinthians verses to have possibly referred to “those involved in exploiting the vulnerable for sex.”³⁸

We now turn to what Gushee calls the “Big Kahuna.”³⁹ Hays declares Romans 1:18-32, “the most crucial” and “the only passage in the New Testament that explains the

³² Hays, 387.

³³ Hays, 382; Via, Gagnon, 67.

³⁴ Hays, 382.

³⁵ Via, Gagnon, 67-68.

³⁶ Hays, 382.

³⁷ Hays, 382-383; Via, Gagnon, 82-83.

³⁸ Gushee, 20.

³⁹ Ibid.

condemnation of homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological context.”⁴⁰ The core of the passage, “the one sickness of humanity as a whole,” is found in Romans 1:25 “...because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator....”⁴¹ This verse sets up the subsequent condemnation of same-sex relations. Hays describes the purpose of the passage as “not merely a polemical denunciation of selected pagan vices; it is a diagnosis of the human condition.”⁴² By naming the bull’s-eye of the passage the scholar helps us to separate the primal meaning that transcends cultural bounds from the culturally informed specific examples.⁴³

Anderson University Campus Pastor Emeritus, Don Collins, cautions, “The Bible is the *Word of God* through the *words of men*.... The *words of men* are limited by the cultural understandings of their zeitgeist....”⁴⁴ Collins further suggests, any reading of Romans 1 that discounts this reality, “disregard[s] the wide separation in cultural progress in the understandings of [twenty-one] hundred years.”⁴⁵ To rightly understand these crucial verses, we are led to dig deeper into the culture in which Paul’s strong admonitions were shaped.

Gushee reminds us that often in the Greco-Roman world same-sex behavior “looked like pederasty, prostitution, and master-slave sex criticized by pagan moralists and not just Christians.”⁴⁶ Classicist Sarah Ruden goes to Greco-Roman literature to get a look through the lens by which Paul would have seen his world. In her book, *Paul Among*

⁴⁰ Hays, 383.

⁴¹ Ibid., 385.

⁴² Ibid., 385.

⁴³ Ibid., 386.

⁴⁴ Don Collins, “Thoughts on the General Assembly’s Stance toward Homosexuals,” July 2015, Don Collins source.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Gushee, 21.

the People, she describes a culture that was infused with the selling of vulnerable young boys for the purpose of a lifetime of brutal sexual indulgence by their male masters.⁴⁷ Emphasizing the short-lived nature of the boy's service she says, "His retirement was not likely to be a happy one; he kept the stigma of passive sodomy but he lost the protection of his close relationship with his master while usually remaining bound to the same household and the other slaves with their accumulated grudges."⁴⁸

Ruden also imagines Paul's own probable boyhood experiences as he walked to and from school and the vulnerability he may have felt were it not for the protection of his own parents and the Jewish community.⁴⁹

To become aware of the context of Paul's world we intentionally place ourselves in the position of feeling the shocking discomfort of this description so we might experience a realistic look at the inhumane treatment that was inflicted on many of that culture's most vulnerable. As Gushee states, "We could all agree that a culture like this was depraved."⁵⁰

When Romans 1:18-32 is read in the context within which it was written we can see the illustrative power of the images Paul uses to describe the larger point he makes. Paul's purpose, the "broad indictment of humanity" was made most impactful in the use of the Greco-Roman culture's darkest expressions of selfish rebellion.⁵¹ To authentically translate Paul's statement for the contemporary church we would need to draw upon equally disturbing behaviors such as human trafficking.⁵²

⁴⁷ Ruden, 45-71.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁰ Gushee, 21.

⁵¹ Via, Gagnon, 76.

⁵² Gushee, 20.

Returning to the creation story, Gagnon points to the “intertextual echoes [from Romans 1:23 and 26-27] to Genesis 1:26-27.”⁵³ He considers the Genesis account of creation, as describing what is “natural” in contrast to what would be “unnatural” citing the reciprocal anatomy and description of the creation of the pair.⁵⁴ This one-dimensional reading of the creation account and its echo in the Romans 1 verses falls short of the multi-dimensional grand story into which the Creator has invited us.

To value the Creator’s image stamped on the good creation of male and female, is not in conflict with a deepening of how we understand and relate to each other on a spectrum of gender defined creatures. It is helpful to note, “Sexual orientation is different from gender identity, which refers to the internal sense of whether one is male or female.”⁵⁵ The distinction allows us to see a clear honoring of the creation of gender and responds to the ongoing revelation of the world and how humanity lives and moves within it.

To reassess what is “natural” and what is “unnatural” is a time-honored journey in which a wide range of understandings and revelations have been accepted and enacted including the following, with broad strokes: awareness of the nature of the earth’s elements and its interactions with the solar system and the galaxies beyond; the relationship between the environment and human interaction; an evolving view of female and male interactions through the lens of an egalitarian value; and, an understanding of equality and value of all humankind with regard to race and ethnicity. To disregard

⁵³ Via, Gagnon, 77.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 64-65, 77-80.

⁵⁵ American Psychiatric Association, “LGBT-Sexual Orientation,” accessed July 29, 2015, <http://www.psychiatry.org/lgbt-sexual-orientation>.

current science and psychology concerning sexual orientation and gender identity is a disregard of God's good gift to us as God's called partners in creation.

In summary, New Testament texts introduce four arguments primary to the discussion. 1) Jesus's View: We can assume from a descriptive reading, because of his Jewish descent, Jesus supported adherence to the Holiness Code. However, he did not speak to the issue directly. The synthetic task asks that the central character of our story with God be taken seriously. It is striking that we find no direct indication of Jesus addressing this issue in stark contrast to the Church's tenacity in defining same-sex behavior as sin. 2) Cultural Context: The hermeneutical task demands an honest look at context. Descriptions of the biblical culture within which same-sex relations were so strongly condemned show us that the behavior in that day was not the kind of loving, consensual, adult gay relationships observed and experienced today. Instead, the behaviors tended to be abusive and predatory in nature. 3) Romans 1:18-32: The descriptive and synthetic readings place this text as central in Paul's statements about the human condition. The synthetic task teaches us to look at the central point of the text. The "abomination" of same-sex relations characterized by unequal power is the example used to undergird the primary reality of everyone's status before God. Within the cultural context from which the example was taken, it is irresponsible to make a case against present day, committed, loving, consensual same-sex relationships.

The Sciences

Exploring the Hermeneutical Task

Psychology is nuanced in its understanding of the formation of sexual orientation. Essentialism "perceive[s] [sexual orientation] as biologically determined, fixed across the

life span and existing in discrete categories (e.g. homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual).”⁵⁶ Numerous studies over the past four decades explore this perspective (e.g., Bailey and Pillard/1991, Hamer/1993, Zietsch/2008). Contemporary psychology includes the possibility of socialization being a contributing factor in the development of sexual orientation.⁵⁷ Dr. Vern Norris, Anderson College sociology professor, summarized well when he wrote, “Perhaps the most prevalent theory among professionals today is that our sexual orientation, through the interaction of both genetic and psychosocial factors, is most often established within us before school age. And, once established it is highly resistant to change.”⁵⁸ The American Psychiatric Association further indicates, assumptions that being gay was “the result of troubled family dynamics or faulty psychological development...are now understood to have been based on misinformation and prejudice.”⁵⁹

“In 1973 the [APA’s] Board of Trustees removed homosexuality from its official diagnostic manual” finding a person’s sexual orientation did not fit the criteria for a mental disorder.⁶⁰ Further, in a 1998 statement, the Board opposed any “reparative” or “conversion” therapy designed to change a person’s sexual orientation.⁶¹

The APA also notes, “Numerous studies have shown that the children of gay parents are as likely to be healthy and well adjusted as children raised in heterosexual

⁵⁶ James S. Morandini, Alexander Blaszczynski and Michael W. Ross, “Essential Beliefs, Sexual Identity Uncertainty, Internalized Homonegativity and Psychological Wellbeing in Gay Men,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* vol. 62, no. 3 (2015): 413; Alvaro D. Moreira, Perry N. Halkitis and Farzana Kapdia, “Sexual Identity Development of a New Generation of Emerging Adult Men: The P18 Cohort Study,” *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity* vol. 2, no. 2 (March 30, 2015): 160; Via, Gagnon, 17.

⁵⁷ Morandini, Blaszczynski, Ross, 413; Moreira, Halkitis, Kapdia, 160; Via, Gagnon, 17.

⁵⁸ Vern Norris, letter to Jim Lyon, June 2, 2015.

⁵⁹ APA, accessed August 3, 2015.

⁶⁰ APA, accessed July 29, 2015.

⁶¹ Ibid.

households. Children raised in gay or lesbian households do not show any greater incidence of homosexuality or gender identity issues than other children.”⁶² The Board highlights the only hurdle that is unique for a child of gay parents is the societal stigma.⁶³

Among his arguments for a traditional stance against same-sex behavior Hays cautions the wider community, both homosexual and heterosexual, against finding their identity in sexual fulfillment.⁶⁴ However, for persons who identify as gay, lesbian and the wider LGBTQ+ community sexual fulfillment is one small aspect of identity. With strong faith-based and societal disapproval the reclaiming of identity becomes a vital factor to those for whom fundamental aspects of their identities have been so greatly demeaned or worse, denied of existence.

Therapist Douglas Withrow says anecdotally of his gay clients, “What I notice is when a client is able to acknowledge their sexual [orientation], the urge to act out drops significantly. They often say, ‘I just feel like I’m in my own skin again.’ Those who struggle with accepting [their orientation] and try to figure out how to ‘not be’...continue to struggle.”⁶⁵

Withrow suggests, when any part of a person’s identity is fundamentally rejected or judged to be wrong by a perceived authority, parent, peer or religious representative, the result is shame.⁶⁶ Vulnerability researcher Brené Brown offers, “Guilt says: ‘I’m sorry I made a mistake.’ Shame says: ‘I’m sorry I *am* a mistake.’”⁶⁷ The path for shame often forces the pursuit to fit into a prescribed mold. For the person who identifies as gay or

⁶² APA, accessed July 29, 2015.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Hays, 390-391.

⁶⁵ Douglas Withrow, M.Div., MSC, LMFT, S-PSB, Psychological Counseling Services, Scottsdale Arizona, phone interview by author, July 28, 2015.

⁶⁶ Withrow.

⁶⁷ Brené Brown, “Listening to Shame,” *TED Talk* (March 2012) accessed August 5, 2012, http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame?language=en#t-853469.

lesbian there may be an attempt to live a straight life, to marry, to have children, and to suppress or to rehabilitate the “wrong” identity.⁶⁸ Withrow cautions, the damage shame creates upon a person’s psyche will not correct itself without a concerted effort on the part of the person and a loving person or community to take “corrective action.”⁶⁹ This life-giving action and communication can restore the person and create within them an authentic sense of self.⁷⁰

Tradition

Exploring the Pragmatic Task

Hays states, “[T]he *moral* teaching of the Christian church has, for more than nineteen hundred years, declared homosexual behavior to be contrary to the will of God.”⁷¹ In contrast, he suggests there has been a comparatively brief two-decade emergence of the questioning of the church’s perspective on this subject.⁷² In a 2015 article in *Time* magazine depicting religious rights controversies, Rod Dreher articulates the Church’s traditional negative view of same-sex behavior stating: “...this goes way down to the foundational beliefs of our religions.”⁷³

Sexuality in general has been a convoluted subject through the centuries for faithful followers. A fifth century Augustine reflected the negative view of sex even for opposite sex relationships, seeing the celibate life as the higher path.⁷⁴ The gnostic view of the body as the vessel of evil also influenced the negative portrayal of sexuality in all

⁶⁸ Withrow.

⁶⁹ Withrow; Via, Gagnon, 30-35.

⁷⁰ Withrow.

⁷¹ Hays, 397.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Rod Dreher, “Are These Laws Necessary: Yes. Traditional Christians find themselves under siege,” *Time* vol. 185, no. 13 (April 13, 2015): 32.

⁷⁴ Jay Wood, “What Would Augustine Say?: God’s Blessing or Humanity’s Curse,” *Christianity Today*, (July 1, 2000), accessed August 5, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/2000/issue67/10.36.html>.

forms early in the life of the church.⁷⁵ The Church's long-standing negative stance on same-sex relations as sin is iconic.

In the following paragraphs I will note two stories, standing in contrast to the traditional view of same-sex relations. These stories, born out of the Church of God in particular, are a part of our tradition.

As a representative for the Commission for Social Concerns in a statement dated November 15, 1977, Dr. Val Clear advocates for gay men and women, reminding readers of the abolitionists who fought slavery and the suffragettes who paved the way for women to have equal value in the sight of the law.⁷⁶ His statement concludes with this challenge, "The great religious and social issues are always fought by indirection and by camouflage. Euphemisms, evasions and rationalizations are the language of controversy. School bussing is opposed as if out of sympathy for a child required to spend an hour on the bus each morning rather than because of an objection of white females being in classrooms with black males. We always find good reasons for doing ungood things."⁷⁷

A more recent indication of the pulse of some in the Church of God Movement is reflected in the summer of 2014 Facebook posting of the Raven Safe Haven Open Letter written by Anderson University Alumni. The letter shows support for the LGBT community and invites others within the Anderson University community and beyond to embrace and include LGBT persons in all aspects of community life and leadership.⁷⁸ With an option to sign the letter as a show of support, the letter had 933 signatures at the time this survey was first published.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Wood, accessed August 5, 2015.

⁷⁶ Val Clear, "Statement on Homosexuality," For the Committee on Social Concerns, Anderson University Archives, (November 15, 1977).

⁷⁷ Clear.

⁷⁸ Raven Safe Haven, Open Letter, accessed August 2, 2015, <http://www.ravensafehaven.com>.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Experience Exploring the Pragmatic Task

Hays affirms, gay advocates “have their most serious case when they appeal to the authority of *experience*.”⁸⁰ It is to this authoritative voice we will now turn.

The Church of God Community

The proposal was offered to the General Assembly with the intent to protect pastors and churches within the movement from legal retribution when the pastor and/or church denied any request to officiate or host the marriage of a same-sex couple. The scenario played out at the North American Convention, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma at the Crossings Church of God in June of 2014. The proposal passed. All Roberts Rules were followed yet there was a part of the story that may remain untold if one views only the results of that vote.

The full story would note those who stood in line at the microphones wanting to continue the discussion but were cut short by the appropriately mediated call for the vote. General Assembly minutes for June 26, 2014 indicate 394 members voted to close the discussion, a significant 106 members voted to continue the discussion.⁸¹ The full story would convey the reality that the community of the General Assembly, as represented by the pastors and leaders of the movement, had many voices on the subject that were not necessarily all represented by the final quantitative result of the vote on this particular proposal. The community of faith is speaking.

The Community of Gay Believers

⁸⁰ Hays, 398.

⁸¹ Jesusisthesubject, “Minutes of the 96th General Assembly of the Church of God,” Church of God Ministries, June 25-26, 2014, accessed August 13, 2015, <http://www.jesusisthesubject.org/files/downloads/documents/ga/MinutesOfThe96thGAOfTheCHOG-2014.pdf>

The stories of those who have questioned and often battled with their sexual orientation are deeply compelling as the church considers a transition in how gay persons are included in the faith community. Here, two generous persons share their stories. Pseudonyms have been used.

Meredith is a thirty-something, fourth generation, Church of God, faithful, Christ-follower. Meredith attended Anderson University and in her transition from late teens to early twenties began exploring her sexual orientation through dating women as well as men. As she reflected on her high school through early college years she came to know herself in the light of a pansexual orientation. For Meredith, this was an acceptance of who she was and is. Meredith has since shared her realization with her parents and, though it has not been an easy transition, she has found a loving response from both of her parents and, more recently, from her extended family.

Meredith contributes to the local community in thoughtful and life-giving service and has found a welcoming faith environment in a local church outside the Church of God. Meredith cherishes her Church of God roots, yet, has been hurt by the Movement's stance on same-sex behavior. Meredith hurts for her parents having to worry about what their friends in their church think of her, and of them, because of her. It is painful for Meredith that her family may not know for sure that she is not going to hell because of who she loves. They have come to their own conclusions about God's grace and forgiveness out of their experience with their cherished daughter. Meredith has a voice in our community.⁸²

Early on *Donald* named his dilemma "same-sex attraction," a label offered by those who encouraged him toward rehabilitation from a sexual orientation that did not fit

⁸² Meredith, interview by author, Anderson, Indiana, July 27, 2015.

into the mainstream of Christianity. So, with diligence, Donald sought consistent counsel from two pastors, Christian therapists, and many trusted lay leaders. He threw himself into the *Exodus International* “conversion therapy” model.⁸³ Donald, a gifted musician, even promoted the organization by writing and performing songs that echoed his desire to change. For nearly a decade he battled his natural sexual orientation because of his commitment to Christ and to the community of the church. Notably, *Exodus International* shut down in 2013 issuing an apology for “years of undue judgment upon the gay community by the organization and the Christian Church as a whole.”⁸⁴

Today Donald has accepted his sexual orientation as a part of his identity. He resents labels and resists settings in which the issue is made an “issue.” Donald has been in a monogamous, loving relationship for over thirteen years. The couple does not currently have plans to marry but hopes to live life peaceably, thoughtfully contributing to the communities of which they are a part including a local Church of God congregation. Influenced in his growing up years by both Baptist and Free Methodist faith disciplines, Donald has been an active part of the Church of God movement for the nearly three decades since his graduation from Anderson University. Donald has a voice in our community.⁸⁵

Conclusion

Exploring the Pragmatic Task

“A Christian community is a healing community not because wounds are healed and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pain become openings or

⁸³ Ed Payne, “Group apologizes to gay community, shuts down ‘cure’ ministry,” CNN (July 8, 2013) accessed August 11, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/20/us/exodus-international-shutdown/>.

⁸⁴ Payne, accessed August 5, 2015.

⁸⁵ Donald, interview by author, Anderson, Indiana, June 2015.

occasions for a new vision.”⁸⁶

I am uncomfortably aware of the potentially divisive nature of the subject discussed in this document. Yet, it is unthinkable to me to continue to ignore the voice of LGBTQ+ friends and colleagues who have for lifetimes lived with condemnation and shame from the very source that should have brought them encouragement and nurture. As the Church moves forward I offer two priorities of action: 1) Dialogue: intentional times and places where stories of those from the LGBTQ+ community and their families may be shared and be heard, where questions may be asked in emotional safety by all participants both LGBTQ+ and straight, where biblical texts may be explored, and where prayer and love for neighbor is uncompromisingly central, 2) An Active Embrace of the LGBTQ+ Community: an intentional inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in the life of the faith community, an intentional creating of safe environments for persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities, and an intentional partnering in ministry with LGBTQ+ leaders who are called to ministry. Through the sciences, through a vital experience of the community of faith, through a faithful reading of scripture, and through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, we are invited to see, hear, and act in response to a transformed vision of the Church’s teaching on same-sex love and its implications for the broader community.

⁸⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1979).

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