

"Homosexuality - An Issue for Compassion and Concern in the Church Today"

by Michael Cassidy, International Director, African Enterprise

I want in this essay to tackle the vitally important but highly sensitive issue of homosexuality. It is an issue calling, I believe, for great compassion and great concern in the church of Jesus Christ today.

Right at the outset I want to register a principle which I feel is critical - namely, that to express the view that homosexual practice or behaviour is not morally or biblically acceptable is not to be equated with homophobia. Homophobic responses to this issue are totally unacceptable and not in line with the biblical requirements of compassion, love and understanding.

In my own experience I have been ministered to and blessed by homosexually oriented people who were sexually celibate and deep Christians of integrity who carried out effective and significant ministries. Beyond that, I have had the privilege of ministering to practicing homosexuals for whom I felt profound Christian love, compassion and acceptance. And the fact that I accepted them and believed they could either be healed to normal heterosexuality or find fulfillment and contentment in celibacy was seemingly significant to them in our pastoral encounters.

So it is against this backdrop that I share in this essay the following reflections and responses to arguments from those who consider homosexual practice to be "normal" and/or sanctioned by the Bible.

Steps for Securing in our Time a Judaeo-Christian Morality Let's begin, first of all, with some steps alluded to in previous essays as we try to reach a proper and biblical perspective on the present marriage and sexuality situation generally and homosexuality more specifically.

1. Accept that the Bible is the supreme authority for the Church in all matters of faith and morals.
2. Grasp by faith and demonstrate from Scripture and experience that we live in a God-created universe of physical, spiritual and moral law.
3. Grasp that, if Jesus is the Cosmic Christ, the agent in creation (John 1:3), and the Logos or self-expression of God who was and is God, then the universe as His creation will have a moral fabric and a Jesus Way for behaviour built into it.
4. Ascertain how the Scriptures generally - and Jesus and the Apostles specifically - view the divine way for sexuality in terms of creation's plan and the creation ordinances.
5. Underline to the world around us that non-Jesus ways don't work in terms of our fullest happiness, greatest fulfillment and our maximum health.
6. Affirm and reaffirm without loss of nerve the Bible's way for sexuality, marriage and family life. These simple principles must guide our reflection, rather than the world's constantly vacillating verdicts on faith and behaviour.

Homosexual Arguments and a Biblical Response Argument

Argument 1: Homosexuality is genetically determined. Homosexuals are made thus by their genes and cannot be otherwise. This is often heard in the media, but most in the scientific community would not agree.

One of the foremost authorities on the subject is Dr Jeffrey Satinover. Educated at Harvard, Yale, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he diagnosed one of the first patients in North America to contract Aids. In a book called *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* he asserts that "recent articles in the media create the mistaken impression that scientific closure on the subject of homosexuality will be reached." He also claims that "the sociological - not medical or scientific - transformation of the opinion of mental health professionals regarding homosexuality has greatly influenced the current research." In other words, society (rather than medical and scientific professionals) is determining the conclusions of many researchers.

Satinover makes a third point as follows: "Demonstrating that any behavioural state (let alone one so complex, diverse in its manifestations, and nuance as homosexuality) as not only biological but genetic is well beyond our present research capacity."

Dr John Moaney, a sex researcher from Johns Hopkins University in Maryland has said: "No chromosomal differences have been found between homosexual subjects and heterosexual controls. And on the basis of present knowledge there is no basis on which to justify a hypothesis that homosexuals or bisexuals of any degree or type are discrepant from heterosexuals."

Lest we think that this is only the opinion of anti-homosexual groups, Dr John de Cleckoe, a homosexual himself, speaks in the *Journal of Homosexuality*: "The idea that people are born into one type of sexual behaviour is foolish." One of the famous researchers on this is Dr Simon Levay, himself a homosexual, who sought to prove a genetic cause for homosexuality. Notes Dr Colin Warren, another researcher in the field: "Even Dr Levay himself finally admitted that neither his study nor that of any other oft-quoted study by homosexuals had proved anything." Levay himself, speaking as a homosexual scientist and researcher, said in *Newsweek* magazine in February 1992: "We can't say on the basis of my study what makes people gay or straight."

Masters and Johnson, in their book *Human Sexuality*, have said: "The genetic theory of homosexuality has been generally discarded today. No serious scientists suggest that a simple cause/effect relationship exists."

Still other scholars will acknowledge that, even if there is some genetic predisposition in some to homosexuality, this never overwhelms or supersedes environmental or social conditioning factors.

Suppose, however, we were to concede the theory of genetic predisposition. In a sense my reply would be: "So what? Are not you and I, as fallen sinners, all genetically conditioned, if you like, to be adulterers, liars, deceivers, or whatever? I should think the average man, if he were honest with himself, would be able to say: 'I am genetically conditioned to be adulterous. My instincts are polygamous. I often have unfaithful thoughts to my wife. I am genetically that way.'" So, even if we were genetically conditioned, it does not remove moral responsibility from our behavioural choices, or excuse either homosexual or heterosexual sin on either genetic or environmental grounds.

Argument 2: Homosexuals make up 10 percent of the population. Ten percent is normal. Normal equals natural. Natural equals acceptable. The first thing one has to say here is that numbers do not in themselves establish the morality of an activity. We do not get morality by majority vote. But in any event, the statistic is totally wrong.

Neil Whitehead and Thomas Schmidt¹, both top authorities from New Zealand and USA respectively, agree that the statistical incidence of homosexuality worldwide is likely to be no more than 1 percent. The 10 percent figure is a myth which is contradicted by almost all recent studies. Schmidt says the number of currently active homosexuals in the United States is 0.6 percent to 0.7 percent. In Britain it is established at 1.1 percent. In the Netherlands 3.3 percent of men and 0.4 percent of women are homosexual.

Argument 3: There can be nothing wrong with long-term committed monogamous and faithful same-sex unions.

First of all, people can only say there is nothing wrong with monogamous homosexual relationships if they choose to elevate contemporary society's current verdict above the teaching of Scripture.

But we must also register that same-sex unions, though with some occasional exceptions, are not in fact generally monogamous in the long term. The most thorough statistical work and study on this has been done by two American researchers, A B Bell and M S Wynberg,

1. My responses to the pro-homosexuality arguments in this essay have been bolstered and partially informed by, as well as statistics gleaned from, Thomas Schmidt's compelling and persuasive book, *Straight and Narrow? -Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1995. who produced a book called *Homosexualities*. The authors identified a class of homosexual relationships which they termed "close-coupled" (in other words the nearest approximation to marriage among homosexuals), which involves cohabiters in a quasi-marriage where the amount of so-called "cruising" (sexual encounters extraneous to the primary relationship) has to be low. They say only 10 percent of male homosexuals generally and 28 percent of female subjects were found to fit into this category. The rest of the gay population behaves quite differently: 74 percent of male homosexuals report having more than 100 partners in their lifetime and 28 percent report having had more than 1 000 partners in a lifetime. The research found that, in just a one- year period, 55 percent reported 20 or more partners. Fifty percent of homosexual men over the age of 30 and 75 percent of homosexual men over 40 experienced no relationships that lasted more than one year.

The conclusion of Schmidt, in his book *Straight and Narrow?*, on the basis of these and other statistics is that "promiscuity among homosexual men is not a mere stereotype and it is not merely the majority experience, it is virtually the only experience." The numbers for homosexual women were considerably lower: 60 percent reported fewer than 10 partners in a lifetime, only 2 percent more than 100 partners. Even so, the picture of long-term, monogamous, quasi- marital lesbian relationships did not register well either in terms of the faithfulness factor. Its validity, therefore, as an argument is highly questionable. In other words, lifelong faithfulness is extremely rare in both the homosexual and lesbian experience.

Argument 4: The Bible does not really condemn homosexuality. It only condemns unloving relationships, such as rape, pederasty (the love of an adult male for a pubescent boy), promiscuity, etc. And if there is condemnation, it is culturally conditioned. And even

then the interpretation of the text is from heterosexual interpreters and therefore biased and prejudiced. As for Jesus, He had nothing to say on the subject. At this point, we must pause to reiterate some basic hermeneutical principles (i.e., principles of scriptural interpretation) relating to the Bible. Believing that God has granted us a progressive revelation in our biblical text, we should hold to the following hermeneutical principles: that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament; the Epistles interpret the Gospels; the clear interprets the obscure; the universal interprets the local and cultural; the systematic and didactic, like Romans and Galatians, interprets the historical and incidental. Beyond that, we assert that Scripture has a basic clarity which is based on what we call the grammatico-historical method of interpretation. This method is simple. First, it asks: What does the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of the verse or passage say? Second, what did it mean in the original historical context? Third, what does it mean in our context now?

So, when we have our hermeneutic clear, we come to the texts of Old and New Testament and we ask: "Does the New Testament affirm and reaffirm the Old Testament text on homosexuality, or revoke and reinterpret it?" To me it seems very clear that the New Testament affirms, reaffirms and even strengthens the Old Testament posture of hostility towards homosexual acts (e.g., Leviticus 18:22-23; 20:13). We then ask as part of our hermeneutic: "Is there a universal set of texts or principles on this subject to interpret those that might seem obscure or confusing?" Again, I believe we have to say: "Yes, there is a clear set of affirmations in Scripture on a universal norm for sexuality, rooted in creation and in the natural and divinely constituted order of things."

The key biblical principle, affirmed in Genesis and confirmed by Jesus relates to how God has established and structured His will and purposes for human sexuality. So Genesis says: "Male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27). "Therefore a man leaves his mother and father, cleaves to his wife, and the two become one flesh" (2:24). This is the divine plan for marriage and sexuality established as a fundamental and basic creation ordinance. Jesus then, picking it up in the New Testament, affirms this creation ordinance by saying: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning (i.e., at creation) made them male and female and said 'for this reason a man leaves his father and mother, is joined to his wife and the two become one flesh; they are no longer two but one.' What God has joined together let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:4-6). Jesus makes no space for any other expression of human sexuality. So, as John Stott says: "Seeing Jesus has made this affirmation, no other kind of marriage or sexual intercourse is provided for in Scripture because God has provided no other alternative."

Meeting in Dallas, Texas, in September 1997, 45 Anglican bishops and four archbishops put the point this way: "A biblical theology of sexuality must reckon not merely with specific texts but with the whole biblical story, which tells of God's purposes for human life and identity from creation to new creation. It is not from isolated texts but from the consistent teaching of the whole of Scripture that lifelong heterosexual monogamy emerges as the God-given norm for sexual relationships. Scripture offers no positive examples of non-marital sex; and it contains specific condemnations of fornication and homosexual practice as sin." I believe the Bishops are right, this group of Bishops anyway!

Then, to say that Jesus said nothing about homosexuality is a very two-edged sword. Because if He said nothing that explicitly and specifically condemned homosexuality, it was only because it was not necessary to say anything. He simply left the Old Testament hostility to it firmly in place and He did not revoke it. He didn't say more because He didn't need to. So, too, with Paul. In Romans 1 he takes this high ground of the creation ordinance and nature and the constituted order of things, and condemns homosexual practice as "changing the natural use (of

sex) to one against nature" (Greek: para phusin - v 26). When it comes to Jude, talking about Sodom and Gomorrah, he writes: "They went into fornication and going after strange flesh" (KJV). But more recent translators are absolutely clear that what is referred to there is "unnatural lust" (RSV). The Amplified Bible says "unnatural vice and sexual perversity". The NIV uses the word "perversion". In other words, the basic New Testament word on homosexuality speaks about that which is against nature and the divinely created natural order.

This posture also is in line not only with all other world religions, but with 20 centuries of Christian moral theology. I have one book which quotes from the patristic right the way through to modern times, and it is only in the last couple of decades that anybody anywhere has questioned the interpretation of the Christian church over 20 centuries on this subject.

The Importance of Ministry to the Homosexual In light of all this, it is clear that Christians must minister with deep compassion to the homosexual, gay or lesbian person, believing that such a person can be healed.

This point deserves much fuller treatment than space here allows. There are many testimonies of people who have been healed of homosexual proclivities. A friend ministering for Christ in gay bars in San Francisco told me she had first-hand experience over a couple of years of no fewer than 27 homosexuals who were healed and restored to sexual normality. Also notable is Andrew Comiskey, who wrote a book called Pursuing Sexual Wholeness. The book tells of Comiskey's own story of healing and in the foreword Leanne Payne states: "In many years of praying for and seeing the healing of men and women who suffer with gender inferiority and confusion, I have been rendered almost incredulous at times to see how quickly these people can mature into strong Christians, even creative leaders in the Body of Christ. Andrew Comiskey is a prime example. Barely more than 30, busy with education, marriage and a family that has quickly blossomed into three sons and a daughter." An awesome transformation. And I believe what can happen to one can by God's grace happen to all, though I also am aware that, just as with people who have physical challenges or handicaps, not all homosexually-oriented people always find the healing they seek, yet many still manage to live in obedience to the Lord with substantial joy, fulfilment and contentment.

Conclusion: In closing, let me quote from a statement similar to the one already mentioned from Dallas. This came out of another Anglican conference held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in February 1997. The 80 delegates represented the Anglican churches in the entire southern hemisphere which contain between 80 percent and 90 percent of all Anglicans worldwide. It was unanimously endorsed and contained the following excerpts: "The whole body of Scripture bears witness to God's will regarding human sexuality which is to be expressed only within the lifelong union of a man and a woman in (holy) matrimony."

The statement mentions later the deep concern of the delegates over "the setting aside of biblical teaching in such actions as the ordination of practising homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions." In other words, this whole issue is more about Scripture than about sex. It is therefore a watershed issue.

Notwithstanding some powerful dissenting voices in both Anglican and other major denominations, these statements from Dallas and Kuala Lumpur, as well as innumerable other voices that have spoken out from both Church and scientific circles, further convince me, and profoundly so, that the line taken on the subject in this essay is correct. It represents, I believe, the one most in-tune not only with Jesus, nature, creation, and Scripture, but with 20 centuries of Christian moral theology plus the verdict of all major religions on Planet Earth.

Nevertheless, we reiterate the importance of deep compassion, care and concern for those who have become caught in homosexuality. Others of us are caught in other things. Thankfully the ground at the foot of the cross is level for all.