

"Is homosexuality changeable?"

No human condition is beyond the power of Christ to forgive, heal and transform. That is the claim of the Bible, the witness of Jesus' remarkable years of ministry upon earth, and the promise of the Apostles' preaching. "He will forgive anything, but He overlooks nothing," sums George MacDonald.

There has been a debate about whether ministries that seek to "reorder" a person's sexuality by the power of Christ are effective – or even right. The experience of many people who have been involved in these ministries is that if a person is highly motivated, the Holy Spirit is indeed willing and able to either "reorder" their sexuality (so that fulfilled heterosexual marriage is a possibility) or bring a deep sense of contentment in a single life lived abundantly for Christ.

What is important to say at the same time, however, is that as with any reordering of human sin, redemption is a step by step process that is only fully completed in the life to come. In our days upon this earth, we must face down ongoing temptation, depend upon the support and love of fellow believers, bring every emotion and attitude to Christ for healing, and seek by prayer and faith a supernatural work of transformation by the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

In 1 Cor 6, Paul draws together a long list of human sins that had been the experience of many believers in the Corinthian Church, including various kinds of sexual brokenness, and then said,

"and that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." 1 Co 6:11 (NIV)

Geoff Chapman, Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry graduate, member of Trinity's Board of Trustees and Rector at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Sewickely, PA offers commentary on the General Convention's affirmation of the Rev. Canon Gene Robinson's election as the Bishop of New Hampshire as well as its decision to allow individual dioceses to affirm the blessing of same-sex unions.

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Clear Answers to basic questions

The Church seems to be hung up about sex. Aren't there more important issues to focus on?

Geoff Chapman

"The Bible says to do all kinds of things that we no longer do. Why do we pick some things and exclude others?"

Christian interpreters have looked at the Old Testament for centuries and made a distinction between the ceremonial, civil and moral law. Ceremonial law most often had to do with ritual purity and religious behavior. Civil law focused on the structure of the state of ancient Israel. Moral law focused on God's ethical commandments. Sometimes these laws were found in sequential chapters or verses (just read through Leviticus 17-19!), but these three categories help to clarify their purpose. What Jesus claimed and Paul affirmed in the New Testament was that in Christ (and his Church) the fulfillment of the ceremonial (and civil) law is found (cf. Mark 7:19; Matt 5:17-19; 19:7-9; Col 2.13-23) – the moral law, however, is still binding.

So while we no longer worry about wearing clothing with two kinds of fabric (Lev 19.19), we are still focused on loving our neighbor as ourselves (Lev 19.18). Under the teaching of Jesus, the moral law has taken a more penetrating and challenging turn; while external behavior is still its focus, the thoughts of our minds and the attitudes of our hearts are now included as well (Matt 5.8, 28)!

"The Bible was written thousands of years ago for an ancient patriarchal people. Don't we have to reinterpret it for our modern culture?"

One of the challenges in reading the Bible is to try and understand how what was said "then" applies to how we live "now." Many people today take a "post-modern" approach to interpreting scripture. They import their own thoughts into the pages of scripture, and believe that the meaning of the Bible should be supplied by the reader, rather than the writer. This does violence to the Bible and to the function of language itself, and can make any sentence of any book mean almost anything!

The far better and far more honest path to follow is the one chosen by Christians throughout the centuries. When reading the Bible, first understand the intent of the author. The intent of the original author(s) is the primary principle for understanding what the scriptures say to us today. Changing the words and phrases to mean what they never intended to mean is dishonest, deceptive, and dangerous.

"What does the Bible have to say about homosexuality, anyway?"

The Bible's teaching about homosexuality is best set out by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1.16-32. There Paul gathers up the full sweep of the Biblical understanding of human history, starting with the Creation and the Fall. Paul tracks a downward spiral in the human condition starting with the rejection of God (vv 20,21). In sequence, human minds, hearts, and behavior were "darkened." All of this flowed from worshiping created things rather than the Creator (vv 21-25).

Three times in the passage Paul said that God "gave them over" to the sin that was sought, until every part of human experience was disordered, including a "degrading" of the gift of sex. The downward spiral continued, Paul says, and men and women "exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones" (vv 26-27). The spiral spun lower yet, into "penalty" born in our bodies (vs 27) and a "depraved mind" (vs 28) – so that we actually end up applauding behavior that destroys people (vs 32)!

In sum, the Bible speaks of homosexuality as one of a family of sexual disorders that flows from our passion for pleasure. Worshiping created things – including human bodies and passions – always leads to degradation and unnatural passions that turn and destroy us. God is irrevocably against these things (vs 32) not because He is mean-spirited or harsh, but rather because they loose humiliation and destruction upon the very people God created and loves.

Other passages that deserve careful attention include Gen. 19:5-8; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Deut. 23:17; Judg. 19:22; 1 Kin. 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kin. 23:7; Rom. 1:24,26,27; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 1 Tim. 1:9,10 (For an excellent intensive discussion of these and other passages, see "The Bible and Homosexual Practice" by Robert Gagnon [Abingdon]).

"Jesus did not say anything about homosexuality, why should we?"

While Jesus did not make direct references to the subject of homosexuality, He made frequent references to

the subject of sex, pointing back to Genesis 2:24 as the touchstone and norm. Life-long marital faithfulness between a man and a woman is the God-created place for sexual intimacy (Mark 10.1-12); anything else misses that mark. Jesus also referred to the coming judgment of Sodom (Matt 11.23,24), and spoke against "sexual immorality" (Matt 5:32; 15:19; 19:9) which includes not only sexual activity outside of marriage, but impure sexual thoughts as well (Matt 5.28).

It is a mistake to pretend that Jesus' teaching is different than that of the rest of the Bible. He pointed forward to his own Apostles and affirmed the authority of the letters they would later write (John 15.20). He repeatedly upheld the moral teachings of the Old Testament, saying that it was His task to fulfill the Scriptures, not overturn them (Matt 5.17-20).

"The Church's understanding of what the Bible teaches about the role of women and the treatment of slaves has proved to be wrong. Will we not find this to be the case with same-sex relationships?"

It is true that there was serious dissent during the years of Prayer Book revision and women's ordination (1970s). Though some left, most stayed or quietly drifted away. But there are several reasons to think this is a much more serious situation. The first is that while everyone thought the issue of women's ordination was important, far from everyone thought that it rose to the level of a fundamental issue of the faith. It was (and is) also true that people with a high view of scriptural authority were found on both sides of the issue. Most conservatives, however, believe that the sexuality issue squarely sits upon the fundamentals of the faith, including the authority of scripture, the nature of a "Communion" (are we a federation of independent Provinces, each free to go their own way... or a Communion with a deeply held common faith?), the doctrine of marriage, the call to discipleship, and the very power of the gospel to change us.

Any fair reading of the New Testament in its cultural setting makes it clear that Jesus and His apostles championed the dignity and value of every human life in a way that shook contemporary social structures and leveled the ground upon which humanity stands in the sight of God. This New Testament vision of the

value of every person is the foundation upon which the best of modern liberation movements have been built.

But the New Testament above all champions liberation from sin dwelling within us, including every distortion of the "way things were" in the creation before the Fall, and every deviation from the way Christ Himself lived. It is important not to confuse "liberation" from external oppression with "redemption" from internal sin. They are both important, but they are also different. To make external liberation our aim and to ignore the need for internal redemption will not be faithful to Christ and the forgiveness He promises, nor will it be helpful to the people we love.

A second reason this is likely to be a church-splitting issue is that in the last century evangelical churches, deeply rooted in scriptural authority and historic Christianity, have become the vast majority in world Anglicanism. The Episcopal Church, for example, has less than 3% of the world's Anglicans, while Nigeria has more than six times as many members and is growing rapidly. Anglican Christians from the Global South are alarmed at what they see as the spreading illnesses of the western cultures. Furthermore, many of the third-world leaders have suffered acutely for their faith, and are not likely to be swayed by cultural imperialism or financial pressures from declining and spiritually compromised churches in America and Great Britain.

The international condemnation of the Episcopal Church's actions has been swift, extensive and sharp, setting up a struggle for the soul of this church between the Provinces of the South (who are growing, newer, larger, materially impoverished but spiritually vital) and the Provinces of the West (who are in control, older, diminishing, far wealthier and revisionist in theology).

We have been talking about sex for a long time, partly because sex is so important! Some people believe that what you do with your body doesn't matter to your spirituality, but Christianity has always believed exactly the opposite. We believe that God intends to dwell inside us by his Spirit, turning our bodies into his own temple (1 Cor 6.19), that our bodies are made for his honor and indwelling presence, and in the end that he intends to resurrect and completely transform our bodies. What we do with our bodies matters!

There are two other reasons we've been focusing on sex for so many years, though. One is that our culture has "sex on the brain" (which C. S. Lewis remarked is a strange place to have it!) We are obsessed with sex, turn-

ing a great gift of God into a massively captivating and destructive force. Sexual brokenness is rampant in western society, shattering millions of relationships and lives. The church is either going to be a part of the solution or a part of the problem. We need to help.

The other reason why this issue is so important is that at this moment there are Christian leaders who are trying to change the church's long held beliefs about sex. They seem to be taking their guidance from our sex-obsessed culture, favoring same-sex relationships and other sexual practices which Christians across the world and throughout the ages believe to be immensely destructive and against the clear counsel of Scripture.

"Isn't Christianity supposed to be inclusive and welcoming?"

There is no doubt about it; the Bible speaks of God's love as the most inclusive force in the universe. God famously loves the good and the bad, and he has a special love for sheep who wander from the fold and people whose lives are marked by failure.

Though God welcomes us sinners, He does not intend to leave us unchanged. Rather He intends to transform us into His own likeness.

"From the very beginning God decided that those who came to Him... should become like His Son..." Rom 8:29 (LB)

This famous partnership between His unconditional acceptance and His transformational purposes are found time after time in the scriptures. Take, for example, Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery...

Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." Jn 8:10-11 (NIV)

Jesus' special concern for the sexually broken came through repeatedly in His years of ministry. It was not only the woman caught in adultery, but also the prostitute who anointed his feet with her tears (Luke 7), the woman who had had five previous husbands (John 4) and a prodigal son (Luke 15) who were astonished by His love. Note that every time His love proved to have a direction, a forgiving, redeeming purpose.

Jesus reminds us in this that love and tolerance are not the same. Because God loves people does not mean that He tolerates sin. Exactly the opposite is true; He loves us deeply enough to hate our sin. And, at great expense to Himself (the cross), He has set out to forgive it and remove its power from our lives. When you genuinely love

someone, you hate and fight against the things which destroy them. As the old proverb goes, "Love the sinner and hate the sin".

"People in favor of the gay agenda argue that homosexuality is innate. Is this true?"

The sources of homosexuality's origins are complex and hard to understand, but seem to include three primary sources: nature (how we were made), nurture (the influence of our families and culture), and choice (decisions we have made over the years).

When people argue that homosexuality is innate and unchangeable, they are saying that because it is so deeply a part of my emotions, my attitudes and my history, it is therefore a matter of my "nature," a part of how I came into this world and a part of how God created me. So, it is argued, it must be accepted and celebrated.

But it is degrading to say that every longstanding impulse, desire or drive inside us ought to be accepted and celebrated. Some of our most destructive impulses, such as pride, self-worship, anger and lust, seem to be innate and almost beyond our control, leading to addictive behaviors. Where do these things come from? The Scriptures speak frequently of our "sinful nature" (Galatians 5.13-26) that is the inherited experience of all humankind, and the heritage of the Fall of Adam and Eve. Here is the powerful source of these twisted impulses. Our fallen nature contrasts sharply with our unblemished human nature found in creation (Genesis 2) and with our destiny found in the person of Jesus Christ. Instead of looking within ourselves to find our true nature (in our twisted impulses and desires), we do far better to look to our creation (before the Fall) and to Christ. There we discover our true selves and – by God's grace – our final destiny.

But our individual fallen human nature is not the only source of sexual brokenness. The influence of our culture and of our families can also play an important role. Add the decisive power of our own decisions and you have a potent recipe. Like many other human disorders, homosexuality is the result of a convergence of these three powerful forces in varying portions, our sinful human nature, the nurture of our culture and homes, and the choices we have made. Homosexuality is something that is "caught" (a part of our fallen human nature), "taught" (by our culture) and "bought" (by our own decisions). That is St. Paul's argument in Romans 1.16-32.