

Why We Can't Talk:

The Homosexual Rights Movement in the Church

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Why is the issue of homosexuality so divisive in the Church? We alternate between uneasy silence and strident shouting, with very little dialogue. Why can't we talk?

From a Lutheran perspective, disagreement about moral issues need not be divisive in the Church. The Gospel, not our obedience to the Law, gives us our identity and unity. Sometimes, because of our sin and also because of our human limitations, we disagree with one another about how Christians should behave. The question of Christian participation in war, for example, has led to deep divisions between those who refuse to fight and those who see it as their duty to fight. But if both sides recognize and confess a common identity in Christ, then at least the argument can go on without leading to a complete break. In fact, mutual admonition between brothers and sisters in Christ is an expression of unity, not a violation of it. In any case, our common identity comes as a gift in Christ. Our expression of that identity in our actions is on an entirely different level, where conscientious difference need not threaten unity and sometimes can even strengthen it.

The problem with the issue of homosexuality is that the argument for the acceptance of homosexual behavior is carried on at the level of identity, not

at the level of behavior. The homosexual rights movement within denominations ostensibly presents the Church with a position on a moral question to be justified on the basis of a shared Christian identity. In reality, however, the homosexual rights movement presents a different gospel, a different identity. This identity is not an identity given to persons from outside themselves in Christ, but one that they find within themselves, or, more precisely, one that they construct on the basis of what they find in themselves. On the basis of this identity homosexual behavior is morally justified.

Many people in the Church sense that something fundamental is being lost here and feel deeply uncomfortable with this position. Unfortunately, a few react with shrillness, hostility, and occasional violence. Their response shows that they, too, are reacting on the level of identity. Despite their espousal of traditional Christian doctrine and morality, they also get their identity from within themselves and not from Christ. Forgetting that Christians have their righteousness only in Christ, they believe that they are righteous within themselves and so feel justified in harassing and persecuting those who do not meet their standards. But such persons surely represent a small minority in the Church, even in quite conservative

circles. Most people in the Church merely feel a profound discomfort. They do not wish to judge or hurt those who deal with the issue of homosexuality. On the contrary, they would like to be supportive and helpful. But they cannot feel quite comfortable with the agenda of the homosexual rights movement because, while it uses traditional gospel words, such as “grace” and “acceptance,” it seems to mean something quite different by them. Torn between their desire to be compassionate, on the one hand, and their disquiet over the seeming implications of the homosexual rights agenda, on the other, many in the Church are at a loss as to how to respond.

For the sake of those who struggle with the issue of homosexuality, we urgently need to move the discussion from the level of identity to the level of behavior. On the basis of a common Christian identity, we need to ask about what courses of action might be right for those who deal with this issue. But first we need to be sure of what that common Christian identity is. And before we can recover that common identity with clarity and hope, we need to probe and uncover the different identity that is being offered to the Church.

This last task is the goal of this essay. This essay does not address the moral question of homosexuality. Instead, its task is to show why it is impossible to address the moral question of homosexuality, given the way that the homosexual rights movement has presented the issue.

For it turns out that much more is at stake here than one particular moral question, as important as that question is. The deeper question is absolutely fundamental: Will we find our common

identity outside ourselves, in Jesus Christ, with the result that he, in turn, is the ultimate source of our moral norms? Or will we insist that our true identity is the one we construct from the desires and feelings we find within ourselves, with the result that our desires and feelings become the source of our moral norms? Our decision about the issue of homosexuality in the form that the homosexual rights movement now presents it to us will determine whether we will be Christians at all—or whether, instead, we will choose another identity, another gospel, another lord.

Homosexual Rights and Civil Rights Movements: A Flawed Analogy

The first task is to examine the nature of the homosexual rights movement. Advocates of the homosexual rights movement repeatedly draw an analogy between their own struggle and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, in which African-Americans worked to gain the rights enjoyed by other Americans but denied to them on account of their skin color. Just as African-Americans struggled to gain equal rights and equal acceptance in society, they say, so also people who claim a homosexual orientation are struggling for equal rights and equal acceptance. Just as African-Americans are discriminated against on account of their race, so also people are discriminated against on account of their homosexual orientation. But can this analogy between race and sexual orientation be sustained?

The original civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King and his associates was a vigorous attack on the concept of race as a moral

category. Racists allege that outward physical appearance is an indicator of the moral worth of a person. Those with dark skin and African facial features are morally inferior, they claim, and therefore should be in a subordinate position in society. Superficially, King's campaign for full civil rights for African-Americans may seem to have been a call for tolerance. But "tolerance" could be interpreted as tolerance of African-Americans even though they are morally inferior or even as tolerance of the idea that race is related to moral worth. King, on the contrary, called for intolerance of the whole question of the relation of moral worth to physical appearance. Not only did he insist that physical appearance has nothing to do with morality; he insisted that to make physical appearance a moral category is itself immoral. As he famously stated in his "I Have a Dream" speech, "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Perhaps the deepest test of the success of King's movement is the extent to which it is today disreputable even to bring up the question of the relation of skin color and moral character.

For King's struggle was to disentangle the alien element of race from our moral discourse. His plea was that a common moral standard should be applicable to all, regardless of race. The concept of race was introduced in the first place in order to justify the immorality of slavery and oppression and its continued presence in our moral discourse hideously distorts our ordinary standards for what is right and just. King appealed here most basically and deeply to the Christian tradition. A large number of Americans, white and black,

north and south, regularly went to church where they heard that God created all people as a single human race and that Jesus came for all people and that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34). This teaching of the essential equality of all people before God is such a pervasive implication of the Christian Gospel that it cannot ever be entirely suppressed, even when the Gospel is preached within the most racist contexts. (This concept is also a major theme of Judaism, helping to spur the significant participation of Jews in the civil rights movement.)

Moreover, the classic liberal political tradition, of which the United States is a product, affirmed the same thing, no doubt in dependence on Christianity. Almost every school child memorized the words from the Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..." The notorious "separate but equal" justification of segregation, which admitted that a "separate and unequal" policy was immoral, was an attempt to dodge the combined force of the Judaeo-Christian and liberal traditions.

But the two traditions vigorously reject both separateness and inequality. King's strategy was to force Americans to confront the contradiction between their own deeply held convictions and the continuing existence of racial discrimination. Faced with the nonviolent suffering of those who refused to be put in their place, Americans could no longer take refuge in lies about "separate but equal" or assurances that change would come

about gradually sometime in the future. They had to face the full implications of their beliefs and act on them and make real changes in society, in politics, and in their own behavior and attitudes. The result would not be more tolerance, but less. Not only racism itself, but even the question of whether racism might be true, would become intolerable. Race as a moral category would be rendered out of bounds and excluded from our moral discourse in order to restore a moral discourse more in line with our deepest convictions. Moral judgments would be colorblind.

How does this compare to the homosexual rights movement? In the civil rights movement the identifying characteristic of the group in question is race—outward physical appearance. In the homosexual rights movement, the identifying characteristic of the group is homosexual orientation, the tendency to experience sexual desire for persons of the same sex rather than for persons of the opposite sex. By analogy, the goal of the homosexual rights movement is the recognition that sexual orientation is a nonmoral category. Therefore, persons who experience sexual desire primarily for persons of the same sex should not be treated as if they were in some way morally inferior to other persons just because of their desire. Just as race must be excluded from moral discourse, so must sexual orientation.

In part the analogy seems to hold. By the standards of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and the liberal democratic tradition, discrimination against persons merely because they experience homosexual desire is reprehensible. The mere experiencing of desires that differ from those of the majority is no reason for making a moral judgment on a person and certainly no

reason for denying that person's inherent dignity as a human being and full membership and participation in society and in the Church. The analogy, however, quickly breaks down. Skin color and sexual desire are not, in fact, simply analogous human characteristics, since sexual desires, like many other sorts of desire and unlike skin color or bone structure, are necessarily the subject of moral evaluation in any ethical system.

Moreover, the homosexual rights movement means something more by sexual orientation than merely the private experience of a sexual desire; sexual orientation, in their definition, includes acting on that desire. As a moderate statement of the pro-homosexual movement in the ELCA states, "today we know homosexual activity is engaged in and experienced as natural by those whose homosexual orientation goes to the core of who they are" (The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective—First Draft of a Social Statement, Division for Church in Society, Department of Studies, ELCA, 1993).

"Natural," here, certainly means "morally good." (The word "natural" casts a penumbra of wholesomeness and goodness on anything to which it is applied, without necessarily meaning very much, as modern advertisers know. Simply labeling something "natural," as here, is a way of begging the moral question rather than answering it. Because of this potential for abuse, it may be a good idea for ethicists to avoid using the word altogether, despite its venerable history and potential usefulness when carefully defined.) The presumption is that both the desire and acting on the desires are in principle good. This means that the goodness of

homosexual activity as such may not be questioned. Indeed, suppressing homosexual desire because it is homosexual is precisely what the homosexual rights movement rejects. The minority they envision is one in which homosexual desire is expressed in action. The homosexual rights movement equates a minority that faces discrimination and moral condemnation because of its members' physical appearance with a minority that faces discrimination and moral condemnation because its members act in a certain way. Just as no moral judgment should be made based on race, so also, they say, no moral judgment should be based on sexual orientation in its expanded definition that includes both experienced desire and acting on that desire. In other words, sexual orientation—always including the implicit justification of acting on that orientation—is outside the realm of morality. The only immorality involved is bringing it within the realm of morality.

But this move overthrows morality as such. As soon as an action that springs from a desire, and not the mere experiencing of a desire, is exempted from moral consideration, then there is no morality. Morality, by all accounts, appeals to some authority to decide which desires should be expressed and which desires should be suppressed and to what extent. To declare a desire “natural” and good and rule out ahead of time any moral evaluation of the expression of that desire in action short-circuits morality. Desires are not the source of morality but that which morality evaluates and regulates. Morality is what intervenes between the desire and the action. The sureness and skill with which persons now restrain, now express one desire or

another in accord with their moral training just is “the content of their character.”

Christian morality appeals, finally, to the Scriptures as the external source of moral norms. This appeal does not mean that the Scriptures must be interpreted as a law code whose every precept is directly applicable to us today. The Lutheran tradition, for example, insists that the Scriptural Law can be discerned only from the perspective of the Gospel, the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. From that perspective, the tradition insists, the Scriptures provide a coherent view of the basic shape of a human life consistent with God's redeeming work, which also reflects God's work as creator and sustainer of the world. For example, the tradition clearly teaches that, according to the Scriptures, marriage is rooted in God's creative intention (Matt. 19:4–8) and finds its final fulfillment in God's redemptive work (Eph. 5:32). From such a Christological perspective, it is possible to evaluate all the Biblical texts related to marriage, including some we may find problematic, and construct an authoritative Biblical answer to the question about how we should conduct ourselves with respect to this area of life. Our needs, desires, prejudices and preferences do not have any authority in this process. Of course, we can't fully escape such things and inevitably they color our interpretation. But the constant work of Biblical interpretation, under the power of the Holy Spirit and aided by the communion of saints in space and time, aims precisely at eliminating such factors from the Church's teaching so that the Church may discern the will of God. The Church's moral debate is internal to the tradition. If we are to revise our moral teaching, we must do so

on the basis of the Scriptures themselves within the context of our tradition of interpretation.

The homosexual rights movement, however, insists that the discovery of a “homosexual orientation” in and of itself demands a revision of the Church’s moral teaching. Some people, they say, experience sexual desire for persons of the same sex as “natural” and its expression in actions is therefore in principle good. But here the moral judgment is made before ever consulting the Scriptures or the Church’s teaching of the Scriptures. The desire is declared good ahead of time and whatever the Scriptures say will have to agree with this judgment or else be rejected. Advocates of homosexual rights in the Church may believe they want to change only one plank in the Church’s moral position. But in reality they reject the authority of the Scriptures and the Church’s teaching altogether.

Indeed, they reject morality as such, for if desires are their own moral justification, then all values are overthrown. Of course, most advocates of homosexual rights in the Church do not consciously intend to overthrow morality as such. In church circles the pro-homosexual argument usually maintains that homosexual relationships should be morally evaluated by the same standards as heterosexual relationships. Such relationships ought to be loving, faithful, mutual, compassionate, and so on. What is not legitimate, according to this position, is to pose the question of whether homosexual activity is right or wrong simply because it is between two persons of the same sex. But why does the homosexuality of homosexual desire have such a privileged position? If the expression of homosexual desire as such cannot be morally evaluated, then by

what right, for example, do we morally evaluate the desire to have impersonal and promiscuous sex, whether homosexual or heterosexual? If desires are their own justification, then such values as love, respect, and commitment must also give way to any desires to the contrary. Any restriction on desires they might imply is an attack on a person’s identity, “the core of who they are.” This, in fact, is the position of the homosexual rights movement outside the Church, and it is the basis of the whole sexual revolution. So the basic position of the homosexual rights movement within Christian circles requires that the values its members may want to retain, such as love, respect, and commitment, are deprived of all validity. Morality as such is overthrown. While King’s struggle was for the purification of moral discourse, purging it of an alien element that distorted it, the homosexual rights movement is an attack on moral discourse itself, making any evaluation of behavior or character logically impossible.

Someone might reply: Granted, sexual orientation is not very much like outward physical appearance. But what about right- or left-handedness? Surely this is a kind of compulsion. Formerly, some parents and teachers considered left-handedness a moral issue and punished children for using their left hand to write or to eat. Now we consider it wrong to treat left-handedness as a moral issue. This would seem to be an analogy to sexual orientation. If we have excluded handedness from moral discourse, making it positively immoral to evaluate the dominance of either hand in moral terms, then we also can exclude sexual orientation from moral discourse. And, presumably, we can do both without thereby attacking all morality

whatsoever because we have made a distinction between desires that ought to come under moral scrutiny and those that ought not to come under such scrutiny.

But this argument fails to grasp the essential point. We can decide whether a desire ought to come under moral evaluation or not only on the basis of a moral tradition. We have seen that King appealed to a powerful confluence of the Christian and liberal traditions to insist that race as a moral category was intolerable. A similar appeal to the same traditions, though perhaps less explicit, underlies our present belief that the impulse to favor one hand or the other similarly ought not to be made a moral issue. There is nothing in the normative Judaeo-Christian and liberal democratic traditions condemning the use of the left hand where most use their right and the issue is irrelevant to life in community and to its institutions, such as marriage, family, government, and the economy. According to these traditions, making left-handedness a moral issue is an arbitrary distortion of the moral order.

Similarly, homosexual desire must come under the scrutiny of the moral tradition in order to determine whether its expression in actions ought to be a moral issue. In other words, is the mere fact that persons having sex with each other are of the same sex morally relevant or not? Only a moral tradition can answer this question.

The End of Dialogue

The whole point of the homosexual rights movement, however, is to rule the moral question out of bounds ahead of time. Homosexual

desire is a part of one's identity and any moral examination of that desire that does not automatically affirm it as morally good is a personal attack on one's identity. The result is the end of the dialogue, especially moral dialogue. Confrontation and violence (verbal and otherwise) become the order of the day.

The violence at the heart of the homosexual rights movement is a manifestation of a much larger phenomenon—the descent of Western society into nihilistic individualism and moral relativism. Today, for large numbers of people, moral positions are understood mostly as mere personal preferences. The only sin left is to say that there is a sin, explicitly or implicitly criticizing a person's lifestyle choices from a moral point of view. The homosexuality issue has become so painful because it exposes the extent to which even people in the Church have accepted this common viewpoint. We have already crossed many boundaries. We have accepted divorce, cohabitation outside marriage, and premarital sex. Many of us, however, hesitate to accept homosexuality. Those who identify themselves as homosexual are understandably furious. The prevailing logic is irresistible: if it doesn't harm anyone else and it makes persons feel happy and fulfilled, how can we condemn it? Reluctance to accept homosexuality can only be a prejudice, a form of bigotry. Since there is no common moral framework, moral arguments make no sense. So moral arguments against homosexuality, when they are made, can only be interpreted as personal attacks. The breakdown of dialogue on the issue of homosexuality is a symptom of the larger moral fragmentation of our society.

The parallel with the civil rights movement may again be instructive. Prominent African-American leaders turned away from King's vision, especially after his death in 1968, and retrieved race as a moral category. A concept originally invented to justify oppression now became the basis for a positive identity and a matter of pride. Significantly, it was at this time, too, that these leaders increasingly turned away from Christianity to various forms of Marxism and an idiosyncratic form of Islam. (Normative Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, is resolutely antiracist.) From a Christian and liberal democratic point of view, their reappropriation of the concept of race for the purpose of instilling a unique identity reintroduced a distortion into moral discourse, destroying the fundamental equality and solidarity of humankind. Black racism was no improvement on white racism and it was also a betrayal of Martin Luther King's dream. King tried to correct an injustice in society condemned by that society's own moral authorities, thereby reinforcing and strengthening those moral authorities. Some of his successors abandoned and attacked those very moral authorities by asserting race as its own moral authority. Similarly, the homosexual rights movement has exalted sexual identity to a positive identity, the shaping force for persons' lives. But it has an advantage that the black power groups did not enjoy. However hard they struggled to articulate their new racial identity, in the end, the black power movements found it hard to conceal the violence at their center. It was hard to mistake them for groups that might be beneficial or even innocuous to the goals of most people, including African-Americans. The homosexual rights movement, by

contrast, has a much easier time. Its goal is the setting free of desire. This goal fits in well with the individualistic "pursuit of happiness" and ethos of tolerance so prevalent in Western society, which seeks as much as possible to let each person find and express his or her individual identity, without interference or fear of oppression. This goal seems, in the short run, to be no threat to the larger society. On the contrary, it promises harmony as the policy of "live and let live" prevails, allowing a rainbow of lifestyles and identities to express themselves.

But the sweet reasonableness is deceptive. At the core of the movement is not reasonableness but a demand that there be no reasonableness. It is the sheer demand that their identity—that is, their desire and its expression in action—must be fully accepted and approved without question. When it meets resistance to this core demand, the movement shows the violence at its core. Since it has no reasoned arguments—its very essence is the rejection of reasoned argument—the only way it can maintain its position is by launching personal attacks on anyone who tries to bring up the moral question. Those who say that the morality of the expression of homosexual desire must be determined on the basis of an external moral authority are, they claim, merely acting out of fear and hate. They are "homophobic," trapped in their own narrow prejudices against those who are different from them. In this way, they bully their opponents into silence and make political headway. At the core of this movement is sheer willfulness and violence, which is death to any community, not only in the Church, but also in the larger society.

The Gospel of “Acceptance” and the Religion of Unfettered Desire

When advocates of homosexual rights bring this position into the Church, they attack Christianity at its center. For Christianity is precisely the gift of a new identity, one that is given to us from outside ourselves, in Jesus Christ. And this new identity that a person gains in “putting on Christ” is one that makes “no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom. 13:14). It is not that the desires of the flesh are evil in and of themselves, but that none of them is innocent. They are disordered and misdirected and need to come under the control of the Spirit of Christ. Christian morality agrees with all morality in denying that our desires can ever be the source of moral authority, as if a desire could be its own moral justification. They are, on the contrary, precisely what morality regulates. In the Christian account, they are what must come under the control of Christ. So, for example, the heterosexuality of heterosexual desire is not what morally justifies sexual intercourse within heterosexual marriage. Marriage is the externally given moral order that regulates when and where and how heterosexual desire may be expressed in sexual acts. Moral justification is simply external to desire. But homosexual rights activists within the Church deny that there is any greater external authority than our own desires. The fact that many of them are better than their ideology should not blind us to the real implication of their position: There is no God except our own desire. In other words, they propose an entirely different religion—the religion of unfettered desire—under the guise of

Christianity. Adherents of the homosexual rights movement enshrine desire, in this case sexual desire, in the heart of their identity and have reinterpreted the Christian Gospel as the unconditional acceptance of that identity. They have overlaid Christian language on the pursuit and satisfaction of sexual desire and called it the experience of God. “Grace” is identical to fully accepting one’s desires as gifts of God. God provides the blessing for what each person does anyway—pursue fulfillment as defined for him or her solely by his or her own desires. (Marilyn Bennet Alexander and James Preston, *We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God’s Grace for Lesbians and Gays*. Louisville, 1996). “We were baptized too” does not refer to the granting of an identity in baptism. The meaning of baptism is that God fully accepts and affirms an identity already granted, in this case, a homosexual identity. The creed runs something like this: “God accepts me and wants me to accept and affirm what I am and calls on others to accept and affirm what I am too.” Sin is not primarily refusing to accept a new identity granted in baptism; it is refusing to accept and affirm one’s own and others’ identities as they find these identities in themselves. Refusing to accept a person’s homosexual identity is the sin of homophobia. The sin of homophobia resides primarily in the heterosexual majority, and only derivatively in homosexuals insofar as they internalize rejection by the heterosexual majority.

In this view the slogan “love the sinner and hate the sin” is a particularly odious manifestation of homophobia. Since the concept of sexual orientation includes both the desire and the acts that flow from that desire, any judgment on a

person's acts is really a judgment on that person's whole identity. Any distinction between a "sinner" (that is, the person as created and loved by God) and his or her "sin" is precisely what is forbidden by the concept of sexual orientation, for the desire within the person is by definition innocent and good and the expression of this good desire, in and of itself, cannot be a sin. The only real sin is to make the distinction, to condemn the action as sin, while pretending to love the person from whom that action flowed as an expression of his or her inherently good identity. This complete merging of identity and actions fails to leave space for even the most elementary notion of human responsibility. If "love the sinner and hate the sin" is illegitimate, then even a person who is supposedly good can never be held responsible for occasionally missing the mark and failing to live up to his or her own goodness. Much less, then, could one ever come to an awareness of original sin, that one is fundamentally and hopelessly a sinner. If we cannot even recognize sins in the plural, individual moral failures, certainly we cannot recognize sin in the singular, a power that holds us in bondage. A vehement rejection of "love the sinner and hate the sin" reveals an extraordinarily comprehensive nihilism that rejects both ordinary morality and the possibility of an encounter with the Gospel.

The result is that the Scriptures—and the whole Christian tradition—become sources of metaphors, symbols, and paradigms for self-liberation. They have no authority except insofar as they can be conscripted into the service of liberating us from external forces denying our desires, thereby prompting us to become persons who are accepting of others because we no longer

recognize moral restrictions on our own or on anyone else's desires. So the texts become almost infinitely plastic and are often made to say the exact opposite of what they actually say. A good example is the usual pro-homosexual interpretation of the most important Biblical text condemning homosexual desire and acts, Romans 1:26f. This interpretation states that the homosexuality Paul was familiar with was exploitative prostitution, usually involving adults abusing children. He knew nothing of sexual orientation as an identity that persons find in themselves without their choosing it. Therefore, the argument goes: Paul's statement is irrelevant to the question of whether the homosexual acts of those with homosexual orientation might be good in adult, non-exploitative contexts.

But the moral issue at stake is precisely the legitimacy of this modern concept of sexual orientation: Can an identity constructed on the basis of a desire justify the actions that spring from that desire? These interpreters merely assume that homosexual desire must be something pristine and that it is out of bounds to question its goodness. But the desire is precisely what needs to come under moral examination. Paul speaks of homosexual behavior as a manifestation of idolatry. Is homosexual desire, in and of itself, inherently a temptation to idolatry? The text is never allowed to address this question. One suspects that the defenders of homosexuality are not merely doubtful that the Biblical texts can be used to provide a positive justification for homosexual acts. They are hostile to the whole idea of any external moral authority. They deal with Biblical texts only in order to disarm opponents who might still look to these texts as authoritative. Their intent is not

to explain the texts, but to explain them away. For nothing must be allowed to challenge the authority of an individual's desire, in this case the desire that is enshrined and celebrated in the modern concept of sexual orientation.

So those who wish to provide a Christian gloss to the religion of unfettered desire touch very lightly on the Scriptures indeed. Here and there they glean bits and pieces, narratives or concepts that can be made useful for their cause. The hermeneutical principle is that the individual and the individual's desires are sovereign and the text must serve them. Everything that threatens the sovereignty of those desires is discarded and everything left over boils down to the "gospel" of unconditional acceptance. This "gospel" creates a certain kind of community. The "gospel" is the news that God welcomes, embraces, and includes us, evoking a like response in human beings. They "come out" in vulnerability and so affirm both God's acceptance of them and become accepting of others. The Church is the communion of vulnerability. Vulnerability arises from the public sharing of one's deepest desires, including sexual desires, that others may consider wrong. This vulnerability is protected within the community by the shared rule that everyone will accept everyone else's desires as part of each person's God-given identity. In other words, the community enforces a strict uniformity. Nobody is allowed to question anyone else's identity. The result is that no one is allowed to say anything important. All lifestyles are accepted, but no one is allowed to ask what makes for a good lifestyle. By defining moral discourse as inherently oppressive, the community enforces a strict code of silence. If in

spite of this "gospel" of acceptance some new class of victim is found who is not yet fully accepted, it is required of everyone to join in the ritual denunciation of this new "ism." The community gains further solidarity by joining in condemning all beliefs and persons and institutions that impede anyone's full expression of his or her desires.

Beyond accepting persons and so sanctifying their desires, God has little to do. God is justified and justifies God's people by solidarity with victims—those whose desires are impeded by oppressive systems and ideologies. The Church has tried to "closet" Christ and make of him an instrument of its own power. If the Church would really understand the cross, it would become accepting of the shunted-out victims (those whose desires the Church wanted to thwart), just as he was. Therefore, those persons with homosexual desires can sympathize with God's frustration. God wanted to share his divine glory (God's acceptance of everyone) and people refused. Those persons want to share God's glory that they have discovered in their homosexuality and they were forbidden to do so.

When homosexual activists identify themselves with God in their victimhood, they grant themselves virtually unrestrained license to condemn any opposition to their demands as opposition to God. Their core conviction is their own innocence, that their own inner desires are the very voice of God. And so they feel justified in themselves. To be sure, they may hide this feeling of superiority under rhetoric about being loving and accepting and the need to be patient with opponents until they come around. But the note of condescension in this rhetoric is

unmistakable and it normally doesn't take long to discover the judgment and rage behind it.

This self-justification and the violence to which it leads is nowhere more evident than in the characteristic genre of the homosexual rights movements, the testimony. Advocates of homosexuality frequently offer the stories of persons claiming a homosexual identification in an effort to break down opposition to the full acceptance of homosexual lifestyles. These stories usually have the same general content. They recount how persons as children or teenagers came to recognize their sexual feelings for persons of the same sex. Feeling guilty and ashamed, they struggled for a long time against their homosexual desires. Liberation came only with finally accepting these desires as good, but this liberation had a terrible cost: rejection and condemnation by the Church and society. These stories always have a moral—I am good and the Church and society is bad—but they do not make a moral argument.

On the contrary, they remove all bases for a moral argument. The only imperative is that sexual desire must be expressed and the only sin is forbidding or even questioning that imperative. The blame for everything falls on those who make moral arguments based on any other authority. The heroes of these stories are themselves absolved of all moral responsibility. The breaking of marriage vows, the abandoning of children, clergy breaking promises to live according to the standards of their church community, the hurt that family and friends suffer—all this is excused based on the overriding imperative of the expression of sexual desire. The guilt for living a double life of deception and

seeking sexual satisfaction in promiscuous and impersonal relationships is laid squarely on those who question the morality of expressing homosexual desires: church and society did not allow them healthy venues for expressing their sexuality and drove them to unhealthy ones.

Advocates of homosexual rights regularly confront us with a parade of persons robbed of all dignity and responsibility, reduced to the status of mere victims. But as mere victims, they are also sacrosanct; being abstracted from the common run of humanity, they are untouchable. We cannot engage with them as equals and struggle alongside them with the dilemmas of our human condition, including the problems posed by our sexual feelings. Instead, they can only become clubs used to bludgeon opponents into submission.

The violence that destroys moral discourse attacks all discourse and distorts and disrupts any honest investigation of our world and the human experience. If the only truth is my own desire, then all other claims of truth must fall before it, including truth that can be gathered from empirical investigation. For advocates of homosexual rights, this means that the results of the scientific investigation of homosexuality must conform to their ideology.

The announcement several years ago of the discovery of a marker on the X chromosome of many homosexually active males gave considerable hope to advocates of homosexual lifestyles. If homosexual desire is simply inherited and not a choice, then, supposedly, it is "normal" and ought not to come under moral scrutiny. Subsequent research has failed to show that there is a "gay gene," and most researchers now believe that

environment plays a far larger role than heredity in the development of homosexual orientation (Merton P. Strommen, *The Church and Homosexuality: Searching for the Middle Ground* (Minneapolis, 2001) 27f.).

But most activists continue to resist evidence that environmental factors may contribute to the development of homosexuality. There is some evidence, for example, that the failure of boys to gain masculine identities from their fathers and male friends, exposure to homosexual pornography, sexual abuse by an adult man or older boy in early adolescence, and the encouragement of adolescent boys who admit to homosexual feelings to “come out” as gay may, in some cases, be causes of homosexual orientation in men (pp. 29ff.). But homosexual rights advocates dismiss this evidence as mere slander.

Even more offensive for pro-homosexual activists is the suggestion that homosexual orientation can be changed. The orthodox view, which has become prevalent among psychologists and psychiatrists and is embodied in their codes of ethics and diagnostic standards, is that homosexual orientation cannot be changed and that even to try is abusive. This is an ideological stance, not a scientific one, for there is evidence that people can and do change, that it can be accomplished in a responsible and respectful way, and that the change can be long-term.

In spite of this evidence, homosexual activists ridicule and attempt to silence ex-gays and ex-lesbians. When the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), which investigates and promotes re-orientation

therapy, held its 1998 conference in Los Angeles, homosexual rights protestors stormed the hotel and had to be removed by the police. One protestor carried a placard that read: “NARTH—National Association of Repression, Tyranny and Hatred” (p. 50). Evidently homosexual rights advocates fear any suggestion that homosexual orientation can be changed, or even that anyone should want to change it. According to them, homosexual orientation is a sacred part of a person’s identity and empirical or clinical evidence that calls its permanence or desirability into question must be dismissed or suppressed.

On the other hand, those who think that homosexual desire, like all desire, should come under moral scrutiny have nothing to fear from science. They can follow resolutely where the evidence leads. Racism rests on pseudo-science, which supposedly shows the superiority of certain “races.” True science provides no evidence for that claim. The Judaeo-Christian moral tradition, however, does not rest on science at all, but on the revelation of God, which declares that all human beings are of equal value. Even any differences that science might discover between so-called races would not shake that conclusion. The same is true of homosexual desires. Science does not know how such desires arise. But even a definitive answer to this question would not affect the moral question. For science can give data for moral deliberation, but it cannot give moral norms. Even if homosexual feelings can be shown to be completely genetic in cause, the moral question would not be answered. The moral question can only be answered by appeal to moral traditions.

Advocates of homosexual rights have no such rooted-ness in any tradition and therefore have a vested interest in what science must discover in order to undergird their position. It must not discover that adults can move from having primarily homosexual feelings to having primarily heterosexual feelings. It must not discover that homosexual orientation may be caused by such environmental factors as the sexual abuse of children. All such conclusions call into question the core assumptions of the movement that homosexual orientation is good. So the homosexual rights movement must keep a wary eye on research and clinical work lest anyone produce results not in accord with its ideology. But the religious and moral traditions have nothing to fear from that quarter and can let researchers pursue the evidence wherever it leads them. Those who are grounded in a moral tradition, perhaps most particularly the Judaeo-Christian moral tradition, are not only free to engage in true moral debate that does not need to finally degenerate into name-calling and violence. They are also free to engage in free exploration of the world without the need to predetermine what the outcome of that exploration must be.

The Spirit Comes from Outside Us

The controversy surrounding the movement for homosexual rights within the Church is a flashpoint that reveals a much larger and deeper phenomenon: Everywhere in American Christianity the Gospel is in danger of becoming nothing but a religious cover for what is essentially a religion of unfettered desire. We identify what is inside of us—our desires, our dreams, our ideas—

with the voice of the Spirit and our lives become a non-negotiable demand that these desires, dreams, and ideas must be realized here and now.

This, of course, is what Luther called Schwärmerei, spiritual enthusiasm. Schwärmerei often has an outward veneer of plausibility. Its impulse is to purify the Church, to purge it of immorality and idolatry. It was difficult, therefore, for Luther to oppose Karlstadt's destruction of the images in Wittenberg. After all, Luther himself had declared that worship before the images was idolatry. How then, could he oppose their removal? Similarly, it is difficult to oppose being "accepting" of those who identify themselves as homosexual. How can Christians be against compassion and acceptance?

But the so-called reforms of Schwärmerei are a fraud. When Karlstadt demolished the images, he was really just substituting one form of idolatry for another. Instead of worshipping images, tearing them down was now deemed to be pleasing to God, thus instituting a new form of idolatry. Meanwhile, peoples' hearts, where idolatry truly resides, remained unchanged (Luther's Works 40: 85). Karlstadt was forcing his will on the congregation instead of letting the congregation be turned to true faith by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word. He substituted his own violence for the power of the Gospel. Similarly, we have seen that the appeal to "compassion" and "acceptance" by the homosexual rights movement in the Church is a thinly disguised effort to bludgeon opponents into silence. What is at work is an alien spirit, not "the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Is. 11:2), by which we confess that "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor.

12:3), but a proud spirit that itself wants to be lord. The error is Christological, pneumatological, and anthropological.

The Christological error at the root of Schärmerei is the attempt to claim that Christ is pro nobis (“for us”) while losing sight of his being extra nos (“outside us”). Salvation is outside us in Christ, who is other than us. Only so is he ours, by faith alone. Truth and righteousness are not our possession, something we have within us, even as believers. What we have within us is sin and untruth. Our reason, our desires, and our feelings are captive to sin. We cannot discern by introspection what in us is God’s good creation and what is sin. We are God’s good creation turned entirely away from God and therefore we are entirely sinful. This is true also of our sexual desires. If in the past we have tended to regard them as especially sinful, we should not now fall into the opposite error of regarding them as somehow uniquely innocent. Our righteousness and truth is outside of us in Christ and it is ours because Christ is for us. We have done nothing and have nothing to boast of. In ourselves we are beggars; our only boast is in Christ and his deed for us.

The pneumatological error is the separation of the Spirit from the Word. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. We know we are encountering the Spirit of God when we hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ and he is offered and given to us as our righteousness before God. The Spirit directs us outside ourselves, to the God revealed in the Scriptures and finally given in Christ, the one we finally cannot confuse with ourselves. But when we lose the extra nos, then we lose the connection with the reality of Jesus, the Israelite who died and rose and lives for us. The Spirit, then, is not the Spirit of

Christ, but instead a kind of free-floating spirit without embodiment. We, in turn, then feel compelled to give it embodiment by taking whatever we find inside of us and trying to make it real in this world.

This leads to the anthropological error of Schwärmerei: the human self loses all sense of boundaries and wants to take hold of others and shape and control them according to its own ideas. Claiming to possess the truth, we impose it on others. We become tyrants, trying to shape the world according to our own conception of how it ought to be. To do this, we become a law to ourselves, abolishing the given moral order and constructing our own. The essence of Schwärmerei is violence that not only overthrows the Gospel, but also morality, including the structures of society.

The only guard against this disaster, humanly speaking, is to rightly distinguish the Law and the Gospel and the two-fold rule of God. God rules this world through the Law, an external moral order not of our creating. Through this moral order he restrains sin and prepares the way for the Gospel. But God also rules the world through the proclamation of the Word. Through the proclamation of the Law he convicts persons of sin and through the proclamation of the Gospel he brings them into his true, eternal kingdom as a gift, without human cooperation at all. If the two-fold rule of God is confused, then we lose contact with the Triune God of the Scriptures, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and in his place we have a god of our own constructing, who is merely a cover for our desires. Then we are left alone, without any restraints, and our neighbors are at our mercy. Either

we have the two-fold rule of God, or else we have the rule of Satan.

Becoming Theologians Again

In short, we need to become theologians again. We need to seek again the standpoint in Christ from which we can regain sight of God's good purposes in this creation and what the shape of our lives ought to be in order to in accord with those purposes.

If we reject this false religion and begin to find our true identity in Christ, then—and only then—can we begin to face the issue of homosexuality as a moral question. With our identity given in Christ, we can inquire about how we ought to behave. That is the task of Christian ethics.

Our basic authority must be the Scriptures. Here we must hold fast to the basic clarity of the Scriptures and reject the cynical and simplistic notion that the Scriptures are hopelessly unclear and contradictory on moral questions. Illumined by the light of Christ, the Scriptures reveal definite structures for our lives that correspond to the truth revealed in Christ. This moral order is something other than the Gospel, although it is in dynamic relationship to the Gospel. The moral order lays down quite concrete structures for our lives that make no claim to save us, but only to preserve us and keep us and provide us with the earthly blessings God wants to give us. These structures provide opportunities for love by giving that love concrete shape. For example, a child is not merely to love its parents abstractly, but “honor” them, which implies a very specific kind of relationship with specific duties. While there is room for great variety in styles of child-raising,

we are not at liberty to invent a fundamentally different parent-child relationship. Moreover, we will have to ask about the pastoral care of persons in specific situations. For example, we may decide that divorce is contrary to God's objective moral order, but how do we uphold that decision in cases of severe spouse abuse?

When facing the issue of homosexuality we will have to ask about the structures of human relationship authorized by the Bible and ask whether any such structure provides a warrant for approving of genital sexual expression between persons of the same sex. The issue is difficult and complex, especially when we go beyond mere general pronouncements to pastoral application, and no doubt there will be conscientious differences of opinion. But if we reject the disastrous apostasy inherent in the homosexual rights movement and instead proceed on the basis of a common Christian identity, then we need not fear that facing this issue will result in any true disunity. In Christ, no one is stigmatized and no one is exalted over anyone else. All are sinners struggling each day to live in obedience to God, relying ultimately on the grace promised in the Gospel. It is in this true Christian community that persons truly find dignity and hope. And it is in this true Christian community that, finally, we can talk.

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