

disease. How could I tell him I didn't think there would be any DDI treatments or any miracles? "OK Sam, if you think you'll be more comfortable in the hospital, it will certainly be easier on your mother." This was my last visit. Sam went to the hospital.

After three days in the hospital Sam died. He never understood that the red tape of bureaucracy scuttled his DDI treatments. His faith in modern Western medicine precluded his experimenting with

alternative treatments. His faith in God remained strong. God would not watch him suffer; God would suffer with him. Sam knew, and all those who loved him knew, that Job's comforters were wrong; his suffering was not retributive justice.

But Sam was not like Job. Job, after his long suffering, was restored to health and his wealth was returned to him twofold. He lived another one hundred forty years.

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## Homosexuality, Theological Ethics and AIDS

by Brian H. Childs

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*While it is not accurate to associate AIDS exclusively with the homosexual population, many people still do. Further, many Christians believe that homosexuality is contrary to natural law or Scripture. This essay investigates some problems caused by defining human nature in terms of sexuality; complexities of biblical interpretation in discussing sexual behavior; and difficulties in both liberal and conservative positions on homosexuality. Finally, the essay argues for the right of theological ethics to make judgments about sexual behavior and suggests that AIDS should be detached from its identification with the homosexual population.*

I begin this essay with two caveats. First, my perspective reflects my own experience in a particular branch of Protestant Christianity, the Reformed, specifically the Presbyterian tradition. This tradition does not have any codified source of dogma to which all believers must adhere in order to be members in good standing. Our approach to Scripture allows a certain fluidity of interpretation and diversity in application. Unlike Roman Catholics, Protestants do not have a curia, an official administrative arm of the church that decides orthodoxy (right belief) or orthopraxis (right behavior) except in rather general terms. Many Protestant Christians, for instance, recognize that such notions as "faith not works," the providence of God, or the rule of love may have various possible interpretations when one is confronted with particular ethical problems. While Roman Catholics place high regard on individual conscience in moral decision making, most Protestant Christians give it an even greater role in the personal experience of faith and practice. When

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each one of us, in faith, reads Scripture as a guide for right living, then our action becomes authoritative. While this attitude is open to abuse (as social critics and historians have pointed out) it does di-

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rect us to what some have called the Protestant Principle: our beliefs and practices are formed and are always reforming in the face of new ethical dilemmas and social situations. AIDS is one example of a new challenge that older ways of thinking and believing may not address.

Second, it is clear to me and many other Christians that AIDS can no longer be considered a problem for the homosexual alone. Even a cursory reading of the daily newspaper tells us that the spread of AIDS is growing more rapidly among

heterosexual women and intravenous drug users. It must also be emphasized that the AIDS epidemic internationally, particularly in West Africa and Thailand, is more of a problem for the heterosexual population. That AIDS was first associated with homosexuality is, from my perspective, as much a political issue as a public health issue. I will return to this briefly at the end of the essay.

Regardless of these two personal caveats, it is nonetheless common for many Christians to associate AIDS with the homosexual population. It is also true that many Christians consider homosexual behavior contrary to God's will for human sexuality and therefore sinful. How should we approach this common perception? In this essay I will at least point to the theological, psychological, biblical and political questions that must be raised in considering this question, particularly as it relates to AIDS.

We begin by acknowledging some obvious but important facts. Homosexuals are not a group of people "out there" in the population. They sit in the pews of most churches, they are our friends and family members. We are not talking about "them" but about "us" and sometimes about "ourselves." It is also the case that homosexuality usually evokes strong reactions from all concerned. Most discussions of homosexuality raise questions about sexual and personal identity. Because sexuality is so much a part of personal identity, it can be an emotional and explosive issue. Most people do not simply

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have opinions about homosexuality, they have intense feelings as well. There is widespread confusion in society and in the church about human sexuality and appropriate sexual activity. That the church can exercise some opinion about sexual activity is generally assumed by most Christians. Sexual relationships, as with all relationships, have ethical meaning in terms of who we are in the eyes of God and how God expects us to behave.

It also must be acknowledged that those who study human sexuality disagree vigorously about the origin of homosexuality. Is homosexuality an acquired and learned form of behavior or is it the result of genetic encoding? There is no clear answer to that question. Some authorities have suggested that homosexuality occurs in much the same fash-

ion as does, say, left-handedness. It just happens and knowing why or how may be of secondary importance.

It is not surprising that Christians hold seriously different views about homosexuality. While it is

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true that homophobia is as much a reality in the life of the church as in society as a whole, not all Christians who believe homosexual behavior is incompatible with Christian faith are necessarily homophobic. Nor is it true that one cannot be a faithful Christian (regardless of one's sexual orientation) and believe that the church has been mistaken in its generally negative understanding and treatment of homosexuality. Faithful Christians can be found on both sides of this issue.

Many Christians insist that the church's position on homosexuality should be settled on the basis of biblical authority. Homosexuality, however, is an excellent example of the problem of biblical hermeneutics, or principles of interpretation. A careful, critical reading of texts such as Genesis 19, Leviticus 18 and Romans 1 suggests that it is not at all clear that what these texts describe is the same as what we mean by "homosexuality."

If one cannot discover an answer from the Bible to the questions posed by homosexuality, that does not mean, as some Christians have concluded, that the Bible is silent on the subject, and its silence renders it irrelevant to the church's discussions and decisions. On the contrary, as is the case with most social issues, the hermeneutical problem is both exegetical and theological. The Bible may not give us a blueprint for structuring human relationships in general or human sexuality in particular, but it does press upon us theological symbols, themes and convictions which are as relevant to Christian faith in the twentieth century as in the first. The importance of making and keeping promises, of covenant and commitment, of faithfulness, is a Jewish and Christian conviction about the nature of God and God's relation to the world which informs how we should live in relation to one another. That God entered into covenant with the people and remained committed to that covenant even in the face of the

people's unfaithfulness, is the normative model for our human relationships. Indeed, the issue of human relations may not be so much its sexual orientation but rather its faithfulness. The issue may be more one of promiscuity and not sexual orientation.

One exegetical and theological issue of particular importance is found in Romans 1:26-27 ("For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another . . ."). Is there a normative pattern for human sexuality? Has God created and ordained one form of human sexuality such that any-

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thing contrary to it is "unnatural" and violates not only custom and convention but also an order or law of nature? Some Christians read Romans 1:26-27 in precisely that way (see Hays in the bibliography at the end of this essay. It must be clear that Hays' persuasive argument also includes a plea for avoiding sinful homophobia). And when Romans 1:26-27 is read in conjunction with Genesis 1:26-27 (" . . . and God created man and woman . . ."), it can be argued that what God intends and hence what is "normative" for human sexuality is heterosexuality. Despite the fact that Christians traditionally have linked these texts, why should they be the primary basis for what the church considers normative in human sexuality? Were there not other factors, psychological and sociological, at work in the church's selection of them? John Boswell makes this argument in an historical study of the church's thinking about homosexuality. Boswell suggests that the church's condemnation of homosexuality has been inconsistent. He found that Christians treated homosexuality differently depending on their social and cultural situation. According to Boswell's analysis, Christian intolerance of homosexual behavior gained theological superiority in the defeat of "urban" tolerance of sexual practices by "rural" intolerance of wide-ranging sexual practices. The social and legal necessity for protecting rights of property and inheritance took on theological weight and excluded the ambiguous nature of homosexual unions.

Other theologians insist that it is simply unclear what Paul meant in Romans 1:26-27 by "natural"

and "unnatural" relations, and whatever he did mean does not necessarily provide a basis for "natural law." Modern philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have rejected the notion of a static or fixed concept of "human nature," in part because empirical evidence overwhelmingly attests to the plurality and diversity of human beings. What does this imply for our understanding of human sexuality?

Important theological considerations emerge in practically every discussion of homosexuality. I have already alluded to the significant themes of covenant, commitment and promise keeping. These themes suggest that human faithfulness is an imperfect reflection of the faithfulness of God and that Christian faith cannot accept every form of human behavior. This is more to the point of Romans 1. Those who use Paul to condemn homosexuality in Romans 1:26 need only read on to Romans 1:28-32. Here Paul, in a clever rhetorical way, lulls his readers into condemning themselves as they condemn those who practice "unnatural" sexual behavior. Paul argues that if one condemns "unnatural" sexual behavior then one must also condemn other behaviors fairly common in humanity: envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, gossip, slander, bragging, disobedience of parents and ruthlessness. The point here probably is a theological one and not a behavioral one: humanity is in rebellion against God, and a sign of this is depravity and confusion. One should be wary of condemning others for we are all under the condition of "sin" as a condition of human existence. For Paul, one frees oneself from

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### *Has God ordained one form of sexuality such that anything contrary to it is "unnatural"?*

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this condition not by good works (be it conventional behavior or prophetic rebellion) but rather by grace through faith. At any rate, Paul is quite democratic in his exhortations no matter what the sexual orientation of the reader.

It is clear that in Christian faith and life, promises and commitment have important implications not just in marriage but for all forms of human relationship, including that between sexual partners, heterosexual and homosexual. Christians who call themselves "liberal" should not turn Christian love into "cheap grace." We can be accused of subscribing to cheap grace when we suggest that any form

of human behavior is acceptable to God or that God's love does not hold us ethically accountable for our decisions.

At the same time, Christians who call themselves "conservative" must not assume that the category of "sin" can be applied to any form of sexual activity that is not heterosexual. Is homosexual practice sinful? If homosexuality is, as some medical researchers insist, not an orientation that an individual has chosen, not the result of voluntary decision, then in what sense is it sinful? Theologians have argued that the doctrine of original sin means that sin is both a human act and a condition which transcends human acts, but this does not mean human-

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*Historically, Christian treatment of homosexuality depended on the social and cultural situation.*

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ity itself is to be understood as sinful in all ways (not even Paul would go that far). What God created God called "good."

Some Christians argue that it is not the person's sexual orientation but the act or the practice which is sinful. Homosexuals who want to live within the church must therefore choose to be sexually inactive, or at least not to practice their sexuality in a homosexual manner. Yet sexuality and its expression are part of what it means to be a human creature. While some Christians may voluntarily choose celibacy as an expression of their commitment to Christ, should the church insist that regardless of whether an individual has a call from God to celibate ministry that person must renounce an essential dimension of his or her humanity in order to be a faithful Christian?

Two other theological topics relevant to this discussion are love and justice. Christians often insist that they must not be separated from one another. Love without justice leads in the direction of cheap grace, and justice without love degenerates into graceless legalism. Love and justice should never be separated in personal relationships or in social organizations. To love is to be accountable for our decisions and to be just is to protect individual rights including the right to love. One cannot subsume the other. But what do love and justice imply about the Christian community's response to homosexuality?

It may be appropriate for Christians to begin not by discussing the sinfulness of homosexuality

(whatever that is), but by acknowledging the homophobia pervasive in society and the church. As I have suggested, those who believe that homosexual activity is contrary to Christian faith are not necessarily homophobic. Faithful Christians may hold this position. But those who do should acknowledge that the sin of homophobia is widespread in society, and they might ask whether it plays an unacknowledged role in their negative appraisal of homosexuality.

Christian love does not mean that human sexuality is an utterly private matter or that the Church must accept whatever sexual behavior individuals choose to practice. Christians must struggle with what commitment and promise making mean in relation to all forms of sexual activity. Sexual activity has meaning beyond the physiological. Its relational quality places it within the purview of an ethic of responsibility and commitment. It is not clear, for instance, that sexual promiscuity is more prevalent among homosexuals than heterosexuals (as the incidence of AIDS among heterosexuals indicates). Yet the church has every right to ask about the faithfulness of those living in homosexual relationships.

It is clear, from a public health point of view, that AIDS is not an issue for the homosexual population alone. While it is true that certain sexual practices (either heterosexual or homosexual) are high-risk behaviors, there are other high-risk behaviors such as I.V. drug use. In many ways it is the homosexual community, particularly in urban areas, that has used its considerable influence to force the public health and research issues to a high political and

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financial priority. But even with this impact not enough funding for research and treatment is available.

There may be a danger to identifying AIDS only with homosexuality. AIDS is a general public health issue that affects just as many heterosexual people as it does homosexual people. Many of these people are part of the social and economic underclass in our culture and they are far too easy to ignore. As grateful as we should be for the influence of gay activism, it is often the voice of the economically

privileged and politically influential. Many people dying in our public hospitals do not have any influence. As Christians our call is to act justly toward people who are marginalized and compassionately toward people we wish were invisible. If love and justice are focus points for Christian ethics, then those who are isolated or denied their rights must be the subjects of our concern and resources. Our neighbors who have been pushed to the edges of society, who are dying alone and in squalor, call for our attention and energy. To associate AIDS too closely with homosexuality could further blind us to the reality of these people's lives.

Finally, whatever Christians say about homosexuality should be said with a large dose of modesty and humility, rooted in an awareness of the sinfulness of our personal lives and in the knowledge that there is much about human sexuality we do not understand. Indeed, it may well be that one hundred years from now Christians will look back on what twentieth century Christians have said about homosexuality with the same embarrassment we feel when we examine what our nineteenth century parents in the faith said about Charles Darwin and evolution.

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