

Breaking new ground

As part of a debate that is becoming ever more urgent, and because the Old Catholic Apostolic Church chooses to ordain men and women, regardless of their sexual orientation, we invited His Excellency The Most Rev'd Dr. Jonathan T. Hughes BTh PhD OSMM, the Presiding Bishop of United Liberal Catholic Church International to write a piece for our Oratory, discussing sexuality from a liberal Christian stand point.

The Bible

In our Judeo-Christian society, the documents collectively known as the Bible serve as the primary guide on most issues. It is interesting that many Christians take literally the references to homosexual acts, while interpreting other text with great flexibility. One person reported listening to a nationally-known woman speak in her campaign against homosexuality. She spent quite a bit of time quoting impressively from Leviticus. The listener accepted much of what the speaker said until he realized that, by Levitical standards, the crusader herself had broken many biblical laws – she spoke in church (1 Corinthians 14:34), she taught men (1 Timothy 2:12), she was wearing a dress made of cotton and polyester (Deuteronomy 22:11), and others of which he was probably unaware.

What does the Bible really say about homosexuality? Actually, very little. Most significantly, Jesus said nothing at all. Considering the relatively small amount of attention the Bible pays to the subject, we must ask ourselves why this is such a volatile issue. Other subjects about which the scriptures say a great deal (e.g. judgment, pride, hypocrisy) receive much less passionate attention. Before looking at specific passages, it is important to note that everyone understands the scriptures based on, and through, the light of what they have been taught. The Bible was not written in a cultural void, and many of its instructions and laws are simply classified as less relevant today (e.g. prohibition against eating pork).

Nowhere does the Bible actually address the idea of persons being lesbian or gay. The statements are, without exception, directed to certain homosexual acts. Early writers had no understanding of homosexuality as a psychosexual orientation. That truth is a relatively recent discovery. The biblical authors were referring to homosexual acts performed by persons they assumed were heterosexuals.

The Sodom Story

A chief text used to condemn homosexuality is the Sodom story (Genesis 19:1-29), often interpreted as showing God's abhorrence of homosexuality. In the story, two angels, in the form of men, are sent to the home of Lot in Sodom. While they are there, the men of the city “both young and old, surrounded the house - everyone without exception” and demanded that the visitors be brought out “so that we might know them.” (Genesis 19: 4-5) Lot begged the men to leave his guests alone and take his daughters instead. The men of the city became angry and stormed the door. As a result, they were all struck blind by the angels.

There are several problems with the traditional interpretation of this passage. Whether or not the intent of the men of Sodom was sexual, the inhospitality and injustice coming from the mob, and that generally characterized the community, were “the sin of Sodom.” (Ezekiel 16:49-50, Isaiah 13:19, Jeremiah 49:18; 50:40) Jesus himself refers to the inhospitality of Sodom. (Luke 10:10-13) If the men were indeed homosexuals, then why would Lot offer them his daughters? What is threatened here is rape. The significant point, then, is that all rape is considered horrible by God. The story deserves another reading.

It should be noted that not all of the men of Sodom could have been homosexual or there would have been no need to destroy them. If they had all been homosexuals, they would have all died off leaving no heirs. Quite likely, they were a mixed group of evil men attempting to be abusive to people who were different. Ironically, lesbian and gay people are often the victim of that same sin.

Although the traditional interpretation of the Sodom story fails as an argument against homosexuality, there are several other Old Testament passages that do condemn homosexual acts. Again, it should be noted that these passages do not deal with same-sex orientation nor is there any reference to genital love between lesbian or gay persons.

Homosexual Acts

Of thousands of Old Testament passages, only two make explicit reference to homosexual acts: Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13. Both of these passages are a part of the Levitical holiness code, which is not kept by any Christian group. If it was enforced, almost every Christian would be excommunicated or executed. It has been logically argued that science and progress have made many of the Levitical laws irrelevant. For example, fundamentalist author Tim LaHaye states that, although Levitical laws prohibit intercourse during menstruation, medical authorities do not view it as harmful, and, therefore, it should not be viewed as sinful. He further explains, "Those laws were given 3,500 years ago before showers and baths were convenient, before tampons, disinfectants and other improved means of sanitation had been invented." (The Act of Marriage, p.275) With that, LaHaye makes this law irrelevant and rightly so. Ironically, though, in his book, *The Unhappy Gay*, the Levitical laws are one of the chief cornerstones of his arguments. Much of the holiness code is now irrelevant for us as moral law. Thus, having children, which was of exceptional importance to the early Hebrews, is now made less relevant by overpopulation, just as the prohibition against eating pork and shellfish has been made irrelevant by refrigeration.

The Bible never addresses the issue of homosexual love, yet it does have several beautiful examples of same-sex love. David's love for Jonathan was said to exceed his love for women. (Samuel 2 1:26) Ruth's relationship with Naomi is an example of a deep, bonding love, and Ruth's words of covenant to Naomi are often used in heterosexual wedding ceremonies. (Ruth 1:16-17) The Bible clearly values love between persons of the same sex.

Jesus' Attitude

In the New Testament there is no record of Jesus saying anything about homosexuality. This ought to strike us as very odd in light of the great threat to Christianity, family life and the American way that some would have us believe homosexuality is. Jesus saw injustice and religious hypocrisy as a far greater threat to the Realm of God.

Episcopal priest Dr. Tom Horner has written that the Gospels imply in two places that Jesus' attitude toward lesbians and gays would not have been hostile. (Jonathan Loved David, p. 122) The first is found in the story of Jesus healing the Centurion's servant. (Matthew 8:5-13) The word used for the servant is "pais," which in the Greek culture referred to a younger lover of an older, more powerful or educated man. Clearly, the story demonstrates an unusually intense love, and Jesus' response was wholly positive.

The other hint of Jesus' attitude is seen in his comments about eunuchs. (Matthew 19:10-12) Jesus opposed divorce in opposition to the abuses experienced by women. It is in the context of marriage that Jesus said "some eunuchs were born so; others had been made eunuchs and still others choose to be eunuchs for the Kingdom's sake." Jesus' remarks about celibacy and castration are clear, but a male child being born without testicles is a rare birth defect. It is only in our day that the Kinsey Institute has demonstrated that sexual orientation is likely determined prior to birth. It could well be that those to whom Jesus refers as being "born eunuchs" are the people we call lesbian or gay.

Jesus' attitude toward eunuchs differed greatly from the fundamentalist Pharisees of his day. To them, eunuchs should have been excluded from the covenant and barred from worship and participating in the community of faith. Jesus' graceful approach to eunuchs is beautifully pictured in the promise of the prophecy of Isaiah, "To the eunuchs...I will give them an everlasting name that will not be taken away." (56:4-8)

In Jesus' day there were three types of persons called eunuchs: celibates, those who were slaves and were castrated so that children would not be born to them, and those who were "born eunuchs," or homosexuals. Royal and wealthy households used castrated slaves to work with and guard the concubines and female slaves. However, when assigning slaves to female members of the royal family, they would choose homosexual slaves. With female members, the concern was not just unwanted pregnancies but also rape.

It is against this background that we must read the story found in Acts 8:26-40. In this passage, the Holy Spirit sends Philip the Deacon to witness to and baptize an Ethiopian eunuch of Queen Candace of Ethiopia. One of the earliest converts to Christianity was a person excluded for sexual reasons from the Old Testament community.

St. Paul's References

Paul's statement in Romans 1:18-32 has been taken as the strongest New Testament rejection of homosexuality. He is concerned about the influence of the pagan culture on the Roman Christians. After giving a detailed description of a world that "exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator," he continues, "Therefore, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lusts for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty of their perversion."

A complete reading of these passages, in their original context, clearly shows that what Paul was actually referring to was homosexual temple prostitution, which was performed by various cults (though far more cults used heterosexual prostitution). Again, Paul is not referring to same-sex love, and he clearly has no concept of persons for whom this lifestyle is "natural."

Paul's other reference to homosexual acts in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 is similar to 1 Timothy 1:8-11. These two passages contain lists of persons to be excluded from the Realm of God. The interpretation of these passages depends on two Greek words that have always presented a problem for translators. In the King James Version, they are translated "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind." In the Revised Standard Version, they were combined and rendered as "homosexuals," however, these are not the Greek words for homosexual, so these translations reflect the scholars' bias.

The New International Version illustrates the difference in these two words by translating them "male prostitute" and "homosexual offenders." The Jerusalem Bible uses the terms "catamites" and "sodomites." Catamites were youth kept especially for sexual purpose, who were usually paid large sums of money. Neither passage refers to persons of same-sex orientation but to people who used their sexuality for personal gain.

The Love Of Christ

Jesus did a great deal to change many social customs and ideas. He elevated the position of women, and, ultimately, they were his best and most faithful disciples. He did this by example and by commandments that were absolutely inclusive of the rights of all people. Yet, in the name of the Christ whose love encompassed all, the Church has been the most homophobic of all institutions. This should not be surprising when we realize that the Church is still the largest institution which is primarily racially segregated.

The final, and central, message of the New Testament is that ALL persons are loved by God so much that God's Son was sent as a means of redemption from a disease by which we are all afflicted. The cure for this disease cannot be found in any set of actions. Neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality is redemptive. God's love through Christ was given to all people.

The Theological Reflection

For the Christian, sin must be understood as a disease that results FROM a broken relationship with God and that results IN a broken relationship with one another and with ourselves. Hence, Jesus' supreme command is to love God and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Christianity is not a religion with new rules and laws but rather is a new relationship with God. Those things that the legalists are fond of labelling "sins" are actually just symptoms of the much deeper disease of alienation and estrangement. Much of the energy of the Church has been spent dealing with symptoms while leaving the disease intact. Jesus did not seem overly concerned about the legal transgressions of those to whom he ministered. Rather, he was much more concerned with healing the physical, spiritual, emotional and relational

brokenness of people. Perhaps if the Church would again give itself to the healing/reconciling ministry of Jesus, then some of the symptoms about which we are so concerned would begin to disappear.

That brings us to the question: Is homosexuality a symptom of brokenness? In a very few cases, perhaps. Yet, pointing fingers of blame and accusation is not Christ's way. Rather, Jesus accepted people as they were and allowed love and acceptance to work its miracle. However, most lesbians and gays have been lesbian or gay for as long as they can remember. For them, it is as much a natural characteristic as their eye colour or their handedness. Kinsey Institute research (University of Indiana, 1981) has suggested that homosexuality may well be genetic or, at least, linked to some prenatal factors. (Sexual Preference, Bell & Weinberg) Certainly most competent psychologists would concur that sexual orientation is set prior to the age of five in most persons. It is, therefore, not a matter of choice, so it cannot be a moral or ethical issue.

Many Christians insist that God can change/cure the homosexual. In the book *The Third Sex* there are six reported cases of homosexuals whom God has "cured." Of these six, at least four are known to have returned to their gay lifestyle. (Christianity Today, February 1981) Many lesbians and gays spend most of their lives trying, with no success, to persuade God to change them. It is like trying to get God to change your eye colour. What option, then, is left to these persons? They have been told that they can't be gay and Christian. Since all efforts have failed in their struggle not to be gay or lesbian, then their only recourse, according to the Church, is that they can't be Christian. So, the Church has discounted or discarded as much as 10% of the population.

If they are excluded from the life of the Christian community, who, then, will tell them of God's inclusive love and of Jesus' reconciling death? Are they left to assume that God is so narrow-minded as to exclude them for something over which they have no control and for a choice they did not make? When will the Church finally be brave enough to say with Paul, "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female," gay or straight? God has enough love for all! +