

What About Homosexuality?

Sermon by Pastor Dan Scott, Christ Church Nashville

I Corinthians 6: 9-20 / Romans 1

A few weeks ago, a reporter called to tell me that a congregation from Kansas was sending a group to demonstrate in front of our church. He said they would be carrying nasty signs about homosexuals. When he asked me for a statement I said, "They're nut cases!"

"Can I quote that," he asked? "Yes", I said. "I hope you do."

Then he asked, "So, what exactly is Christ Church's stance on homosexuality?"

I said, "Well, let's just say that if a left-wing group comes that same day to protest our church, it will be a perfect!" I got my wish. Two groups from the opposite sides of the spectrum showed up with signs denouncing one another. Then, both of them went away after discovering that the media was busy with a flood.

I had actually felt the need to address the subject for some time. However, it had been difficult for me to find the right words and the right tone. It also never seemed to be the right Sunday to talk about it. Perhaps that is why most Evangelical pastors in America have been avoiding this subject.

The American public has actually been debating homosexuality for most of my life. For a long time, it was easy for most of pastors to escape the discussion. It's easy to see why: the vast majority of Christians – of every sort, in every culture and in every era of time – have taken it for granted that the Bible prohibits homosexual behavior.

In the first chapter of Romans for example, St. Paul claims that homosexuality is the natural fruit of paganism. Paganism is, in turn, the spirituality of most people who do not follow God's revealed Word. People become Pagans, he claims, when a culture suppresses the truth

about God. The people in those cultures become idolaters, sacramentalizing unholy things. Eventually, they turn sexuality into an idol. They become hedonists -- or worshippers of pleasure. They continually invent novel forms of amusement because they are bored and hungry for the Living God their fathers suppressed. They become disconnected from God's law that is clearly revealed through nature. Finally, God stops trying to deal with such a culture. He turns away and allows the people to reap the fruit of their waywardness.

That is a quick summary of the first chapter of Romans.

Paul deals with the same subject in 1 Corinthians, chapter six. In that passage, he includes homosexuality within a list of sins from which Christians have been delivered by the power of God. He goes on to say that a Christian's physical body is not his or her own. A believer's body is, he says, the "temple of the Holy Spirit." Therefore, we should not go to places -- such as a brothel -- where immorality is practiced. God has entrusted us with His presence. He is counting on us to not connect His presence with debauchery and unholy actions.

St. Paul is not alone among the Biblical writers in warning us about living immorally. Nor he is the only Bible writer who labels homosexuality as sin. The Old Testament sternly warns us about the consequences of accepting homosexuality as normative. The first place the Old Testament gives this warning is in Genesis nineteen, as it tells the chilling story of Sodom.

Lately, some Protestant theologians have been rewriting the meaning of that story; trying to undo the common conclusions of twenty-five hundred years of biblical scholars.

However, lest we miss the point, the Book of Deuteronomy clearly makes homosexual behavior a crime.

This Biblical background is the main reason why Christian leaders have not needed a personal opinion about homosexuality. The Bible, Christian theology in all its varied forms, Christian tradition, and contemporary Christian communities around the world – especially outside Europe and the United States -- have been united in their stance about homosexual practice until very recently. That’s why, if you ever asked a pastor about homosexuality, he probably pointed to the common Christian opinion and then turned his focus toward more “practical” issues – such as an upcoming potluck dinner!

In the last decade however, several trends have been moving American Christianity away from this traditional consensus. As a result, Christian leaders are now divided about homosexuality – or have simply become silent.

This has left local pastors – like me – burdened with the responsibility of forming our own opinion about homosexuality and other moral issues. I have been trying to do that for some time.

I want to share with you the process of thought that has led me to the conclusions I have reached.

Let me begin with a little background.

I don't have enough time in this message to address all the factors that have led our culture, including many Christians within this culture, to view homosexuality so differently than our ancestors.

I will briefly (and superficially) mention a few of them.

Our View of Scripture

The most important change within the Christian church in our times – and perhaps since the apostolic age -- has been how we view scripture.

Over a hundred years ago, certain methods of interpreting scripture began shaking Protestant's confidence in the Bible. As a result, the Bible has slowly become only one important influence among many for forming a believer's views and governing his or her behavior. It makes a great difference, you see, whether one views the Bible as the Word of God or is simply a human work *about* God.

Most of our great Protestant denominations – especially in Europe and The United States -- now define the Bible as a record of how the ancient Hebrews thought about God, ethics and justice. In this view, one may certainly use these ancient Hebrew stories to shine light on our contemporary issues. However, viewing the Bible as a revelation of God's law, applicable to all times and all cultures, seems hopelessly antiquated. It even seems like a dangerous misuse of Holy Scripture.

Christians who think of themselves as “conservative” or “orthodox” naturally reject the liberal Protestant view of scripture. Nonetheless, Bible studies are not at the top priority for most self-professed conservative believers either. In fact, many conservative churches have replaced their historical Bible-centeredness with mere cultural conservatism. That approach has removed any sense of moral authority from Evangelical preaching. To the culture around us, our opinions now seem to rest merely upon our conservative tastes and cultural habits; not upon the foundation of eternal Truth.

Unbelievers are asking us, “What makes your personal tastes and cultural values more important than ours?”

This question is getting harder for us to answer.

Our loss of the Bible - by liberals because of their deliberate intellectual shift away from orthodoxy, and by conservatives because of intellectual sloth and a worship of numerical and material success— have gradually gutted the American church of its ability to shepherd its flock. This has resulted in making our views about homosexuality look like a pathological overreaction to people whose personal choices just happen to differ from ours.

Our view of the Bible is therefore crucial. Without it we do not have a solid basis for addressing homosexuality or any other contemporary issue.

The Challenge Of Science

Several scientific discoveries in the twentieth century, particularly in physics and biology, shook the faith of many Christians; much as Galileo's discoveries in astronomy shook the theologians of late Medieval Europe. Few Conservative or orthodox Christians have seemed interested in these discoveries, or, if so, they have often demonstrated serious naiveté about their implications. However, the steady rhythm of the twentieth century's advancing knowledge -- from Einstein and Planck in the early part of the century to James Watson and Francis Crick in the later half -- introduced ideas into the collective consciousness of educated Western people that became an intellectual tsunami, overpowering the belief system of many believers.

Several generations of Christian leaders staggered from the scientific and technological innovations of last century.

The fact is, my grandfather lived in a world that was (in many ways) more like that of St. Paul than like my grandchildren's world. But although these changes deeply affected Christian world view, we rarely mention them from our pulpit or in our Sunday school classes. That led many Christians to either embrace liberal forms of the faith or to form the self-help therapeutic Jesus-centers that we still call churches.

As a result, to many Americans, Conservative Christianity appears like a frightened retreat into the past. They believe we are simply trying to escape into a time when our faith was largely unchallenged. If we intend for our children to remain faithful to the Lord in this new century, we must find a way to seriously address the issues of culture.

One thing this church is going to do is make it possible for several of our spiritual leaders to become theologically trained. There will soon be a flood of people from our church preparing us to do more than just getting angry at our emerging culture. With the help of informed leaders, we will actually offer our culture a real “change that we can believe in.”

Societal Shifts

The definition of “church” and “pastoral ministry,” has seriously changed, even in my lifetime.

We pastors have made, in effect, an unspoken contract with contemporary America: we get to keep our jobs if we define our work in mostly ceremonial and therapeutic ways. In other words, we can keep our religious traditions alive, comfort those who are frightened by contemporary life, robe up for weddings, and say sweet things at funerals. This will provide our culture with an important stress-relief valve.

To do this work, we are free to create church businesses that comfort and encourage people. We are not expected within the parameters of this unspoken contract with contemporary America to voice our suspicions about its values or to encourage our people to live contrary to what it defines as normal.

This new view of pastoral ministry has seriously weakened our ability (and even our desire) to address significant issues such as homosexuality. Those pastors who do address political and cultural trends usually are usually repeating the words of some secular thinker

from the right or the left. It has become rare to hear a pastor address any contemporary topic from a scriptural perspective or from the standpoint of historical Christianity. It has become even rarer to find an audience – even a Christian audience -- who wants to hear him. Therefore most of us just preach encouraging words about how God will bless our careers and comfort us in sorrow.

It may seem as if I am far from the point: that I am saying nothing about homosexuality. However, I have raised these issues about the cultural changes we are facing and about the church's responsibility to teach the Word of God for a reason. I want you to realize that Christians have no right to address homosexuality unless we really believe that the Bible is God's Word. We must decide if it really teaches us how to be saved and how to live our lives.

Mere cultural conservatism will only anger (or amuse) that man or woman who believes that his or her homosexuality is biologically determined. Why should anyone turn away from intimacy, love and sensual pleasure simply because our grandparents were not comfortable with same-sex relationships? If, as some studies suggest, there is a genetic, neurological or biochemical basis for same sex attraction, then a culturally conservative stance against homosexuality comes across as nothing more than one person's opinion versus that of another. It even seems cruel. We need something more than personal opinion.

Our credibility not only requires a rootedness in scripture though: It requires compassion.

Most people don't just decide one day to be homosexual. Although homosexual practice is indeed a choice, it is not a simple choice or one that anyone quickly makes. It is a fruit of many factors, not all of which are personal or conscious.

For example, the steady dissolution of traditional family has been a huge factor in the increased viability of homosexual behavior in our culture. The battering of the family, sometimes by deliberate and intentional forces (but more often by forces that meant the family no harm) has seriously altered our view of human relationships.

It was economic factors that uprooted the majority of American families from their ancestral home places. In the decades following the Second World War, millions of Americans left behind their uncles, cousins and grandparents. Economic opportunity became a higher value than intergenerational community. We moved across the continent in search of our personal star.

We moved again.

And again.

And yet again.

The family – now ripped from its traditional context – degenerated further. It became increasingly easy for parents to leave their spouse and their children in pursuit of their own personal fulfillment. It no longer felt reasonable that men and women should view their offspring as their most important responsibility or their central focus of life. American parents replaced their children with themselves; often giving little thought about the affects of their

choices upon generations to come. We gave our children nice toys. We thought they would be okay. Unfortunately, children who raise themselves tend not to turn out well.

This witches' brew of family dysfunction, acute and purposeful alienation from the past; a descent into ignorance of geography, history, literature and of civilization itself; the adoption of a me-centered method of judging what is and what is not reasonable behavior; and, the equation of financial wealth with personal value; has profoundly destabilized American culture, including, American Christianity. As a result, we have become ill prepared to answer any challenge to our faith, especially the one forced upon us by homosexuality.

In many cases, a young person becomes homosexual in order to find intimacy and comfort in the midst of this continual moral and economic stress we have come to tolerate and even accept as "the real world."

Our response to homosexuality then cannot be about personal disgust or rage. We must approach this sin as we do other sins –as indeed St. Paul approaches it – as one more manifestation of that sinful nature from which Christ came to deliver us.

While repentance and becoming accountable to a godly community may not "cure" a person's sexual orientation, it will make the struggle for sexual purity bearable (and even joyful) as the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit transforms us into His likeness.

Homosexual Culture

By now, you should clearly understand that I sincerely believe that the Bible teaches against homosexual behavior.

I am even more certain however that the Bible teaches against the dangers of homosexual culture. It is homosexuality as a culture –as a philosophy – that has seduced American culture in general (and is in the process of seducing American Christianity) away from the gospel of Christ. Those churches and denominations that embrace homosexuality will soon discover that they have ceased being Christian altogether. In their attempt to be spiritual entities without regard for the authority of scripture, what they have actually embraced is that very form of paganism – the worship of sensual experience as the ultimate source of meaning and purpose – that St. Paul warns us against in Romans, chapter one.

As St. Paul insists, and as the rest of the Bible affirms, a certain type of culture tends to develop around homosexuality. History has left us a record about what the culture looks like: in Ancient Greece, in late imperial Rome and, of course, in the Biblical city of Sodom.

Stereotypically, we think of homosexual culture as celebrating aesthetic excellence and sensual pleasure. That is the perception we are continually fed by media. However, any civilized man or woman celebrates aesthetic life.

It is better to eat a finely prepared meal in a beautiful setting than to eat spam out of a can.

And, art is indeed important to human life -- as important as science and math. We are, after all, much more than economically productive units. We are creatures made in the image and likeness of God. Because God is True, Good and Beautiful; those who love God ought to value knowledge, goodness and beauty.

Some people value barbarism over culture because they view civilized culture as effeminate. I reject that attitude about culture as simply a form of social anarchy and cultural sloth. I'm uninterested in any form of Christianity or political life that sneers at civilized behavior.

So I do not fault homosexual culture for valuing aesthetics.

However, there is a difference between valuing beauty and in worshipping beauty.

Worshipping beauty is idolatry. It places the reflection of God in the place of God.

This is a serious point and it is the one St. Paul makes in Romans. This is what separates homosexual culture from Christian faith. Indeed, it constitutes a more fundamental challenge to the faith than all the various sexual acts we usually think of as defining a person as "homosexual." A person who commits a homosexual act can repent – indeed, the Lord invites them to repent. However, a person who embraces homosexual culture gradually hardens his heart against the teachings of scripture. This is what St. Paul warns us about in Romans, chapter one.

The Episcopal Church USA has already fallen into this very apostasy. The Presbyterian Church USA is wobbling toward it. The Evangelical Lutherans have nearly fallen into it as well.

These churches are still filled with millions of believers. But the denominations are no longer legitimate expressions of orthodox Christianity. They have been seduced away from the gospel by homosexual culture – hedonistic paganism – refined narcissism – whatever one wants to call this perversion of Christian belief that they have embraced. Whatever you call it, the apostasy is deeply at odds with “the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.”

We cannot follow these churches. We cannot redefine Holy Matrimony to include homosexual unions. We must repent. We must abandon those ideas and behaviors that the Bible says leads to death. Either that or we must admit that we are no longer Christian.

The first commandment tells us that we must not place any object in the place of God. It forbids us to worship nature or the objects of nature – including our sexuality. We cannot worship human artifacts or human experience and remain Christians. This is the summery of St. Paul’s teaching about homosexuality in Romans and 1 Corinthians. Nothing in contemporary life leads me to think he was wrong.

Jesus said that we cannot worship two masters. We cannot worship both God and money. We cannot worship both God and sexuality. We cannot worship both God and country. We cannot worship both God and art. We cannot worship both God and career. To worship God means making Him first. When we do that, all other things in our lives – even the things we deeply love and cherish – must take a second, third, and fourth place in our lives.

So what are those who feel attracted to people of the same sex to do? That is the real question, and I hope to answer it as tenderly as I can. The important thing is that we not wrap our thoughts about homosexuality in the spirit or rhetoric of our current culture war. Our

position on homosexuality is not related to us being “on the left,” or “on the right;” it’s about us being “holy.” “Holy” is a Bible word; it means “other,” or “set apart.” Like God’s commandment in Eden not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He commands us to govern our sexual lives. That does not make sense to our contemporary culture but to those who are called to be saints, it is the way of life.

Are Homosexuals Really Born That Way?

I do not think it is productive to keep arguing about whether or not people are born with a predisposition to homosexuality. I predict that twenty years from now, we will still be arguing about whether it is “nature” or “nurture” that determines a person’s sexual orientation. This is an hot argument right now between the different sides of our culture war. However, from a Christian point of view, “orientation” is not that important. In fact, from a biblical perspective, one’s natural inclination toward any behavior is not very important. The important thing in biblical spirituality is whether we intend to govern and manage our natural inclinations by the light of God’s Word instead of by animal instinct.

This not only affects a person with a homosexual orientation. I am a heterosexual but have been painfully aware throughout my life that my natural inclination is not always toward monogamy. I wish that were not true. Unfortunately though, a large part of my spiritual struggle has been about learning to contain my natural inclinations within the boundaries of holy matrimony.

This perspective – that instinct and orientation does not have the final word in human behavior -- sends chills up the spines of secular thinkers. It is however, a Biblical one and is therefore the way believers learn to think and behave.

In his book *The Beginning of Wisdom*, Leon Kass claims that a core theme of the stories in Genesis is how men learn how to govern their sexual lives. He says that the Book of Genesis is mostly about how to form a special kind of family; one that delights in learning and living the ways of God. To create this sort of family, men had to learn how to be faithful to a wife and a family. That was the way to become a real father. Women had to learn how to become matriarchs. Learning to manage the power of Eros, he says, is one of the main components for forming covenant families. Indeed, covenantal life was not possible without sexual restraint.

For all these reasons, I am willing to conclude that a person's private temptation – or "orientation," to use the contemporary word – is quite beside the point. We each have a sinful "orientation" that affects some part of our lives. "All have sinned and come short of God's glory." It's what we do with our orientation that matters to God.

In Conclusion

Finally, my friends, as much as we might like to, pastors cannot ignore homosexuality. We can't just "love people" and "live and let live" as people often urge us to do. Covenantal life is a moral obligation; not a mere "personal" choice. To reject this principle is to reject Christ

and all His teaching. For it was Christ who said, “If any man would be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” That covers a lot more than sexual sin!

Those who struggle with same-sex attraction and who keep coming to our church, do so because they want to follow the Lord. They realize that some churches have changed their teaching about homosexual practices and have chosen not to attend such churches. Therefore, I must conclude, they want to worship and have community with a people who are trying their best to teach and practice the “faith once and for all delivered to the saints.”

This brings this message full circle. That Sunday, when those two groups came to our church to protest, it offered us a great picture of the challenges we face. We are beset on both sides by two equally grievous errors – just as the Lord was beset by the ancient Sadducees and Pharisees. On one hand we are offered a loss of truth; a rewriting of the law of God. On the other we are offered a loss of charity and grace; a plunge into hatred and rage covered with god-words. We must stay the course and not move toward either of these false paths because Christ is absent in both.

“For God sent not His son into the world to condemn the world but that through Him all might be saved.”

In the same passages where Paul warns against the dangers of homosexuality, he reminds us that “such were some of you. But now you are cleansed. Now you are children of God.” “Now,” he says, “act like it!”

By God's grace, we want to help one another do just that; whatever private struggle we may have.

In the end, the homosexual struggle is not really different from any other type of moral struggle. In every moral struggle, one must die to self. The spiritual journey contains a cross. It is that cross that crucifies self so we become like Christ. Transformation therefore requires our attention. It requires our submission to the Lord of glory. It requires our faith that He will gradually transform our cross into a crown. We must take time to be holy – not self-righteous or judgmental, surely, but holy. We must become God-reflecting believers whose words and actions – whose very being, manifests the love and power of God within this broken world.

As we walk this path, we are able to shout our gratitude with all the saints the powerful lyrics that Geron Davis was once inspired to pin: "If anybody knows about the power of Jesus, I do!"

In the end, whatever is our personal besting sin, we can only be victorious through repentance, humility and gratitude. There is no room for any of us to boast. We are all saved by faith; bought with a price by the precious blood of Jesus.

To Him be glory forever and ever!