Homosexuality: Theological and Pastoral Considerations

Ray S. Anderson, Ph.D. Professor of Theology and Ministry
Fuller Theological Seminary


Abstract

The concept of homosexuality as both an orientation and a practice is a modern one unknown to the ancient world. The biblical texts which mention same sex relationships consistently condemn the practice. Many scholars interpret these texts as culturally based and therefore not relevant for contemporary forms of homosexual relations which are based on mutual love, fidelity and commitment. A response to these views is presented based on a theology of sexuality grounded in creation. Male and female differentiation is shown to be grounded in the divine image and expressed through biological sexual differentiation. The theological and moral implications are considered with respect to recent research which indicates that some forms of homosexual orientation might be due to genetic predisposition, and not due to choice. Issues of discrimination, human rights and moral guidelines are discussed with regard to homosexuality. Concluding observations provide guidelines for the church in providing a place for Christians who are homosexuals while, at the same time, upholding God's preference for heterosexual expressions of human sexuality.

The ancient world had no word for or concept of "homosexuality" as it is currently used today. The word "homosexual" was not coined until 1869, when a Hungarian physician writing in German used it with reference to male and females who from birth are erotically oriented toward their own sex. The word first appeared in English in 1912, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, and its earliest use in an English Bible was in 1946, in the first edition of the Revised Standard Version rendering of 1 Corinthians 6:9 (Furnish, 1994, p. 33).

The Biblical Data

Examination of the biblical texts must therefore take note of the problem of translation into English of the original Hebrew and Greek terms used. Theological reflection on the subject of homosexuality from within the Judeo-Christian tradition begins with an examination of the biblical data. Unfortunately, the question, "What does the Bible say about homosexuality?" has not led to answers upon which all can agree. Some have even argued that an appeal to Scripture cannot settle the issue at all as it is basically a moral and not a theological concern (Pronk, 1993, p. 323).

Same sex relations are mentioned in the Bible, however, and so the biblical data must be taken into account in theological consideration of homosexuality as it relates to Christian faith and practice.

There is no biblical passage referring to homosexuality as a "condition" or "orientation." The word "sodomite" appears nowhere in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, not even to designate a person living in ancient Sodom. The Hebrew term translated as "sodomite" (qadesh) in the King James Version refers to a male temple prostitute (Deut. 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:22-24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Joel 3:3). Though the English word "sodomite" is used twice in the New Revised Standard Version (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10), it is an incorrect translation of the Greek words malakoi and arsenokoitai.

The story of the incident at Sodom (Genesis 19:1-25), which can be read as an attempt to rape Lot's two male visitors by a mob of other males, is not often referred to in subsequent Scriptural references as a sin of a homosexual nature. In Ezekiel 16 the sin of Sodom is named as greed and indifference to
those in need. In Matthew 10:12-15 and the parallel passage in Luke 10:10-12, Sodom's sin is described as inhospitality in general. In Matthew 11:23-24 the city's destruction is recalled as a reminder of what happens to those who rebel against God (Furnish, 1994, p. 19). The book of Jude, however, identifies the sin of Sodom as sexual immorality in which they "pursued unnatural lust" or, as the Greek puts it, "went after other flesh" (sarkos heteros) (Jude 7 NRSV). Much more was wrong with the citizens of Sodom than the sexual intent described in the story. But as David Wright (1989) points out, this consideration should not be allowed to eliminate the sexual element from the text and the moral judgment implied.

Based upon the Levitical texts (18:22; 20:13), and the New Testament texts (1 Romans 1:26-27; Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10), some have argued that homosexuality is an "unnatural affection" and contrary to God's will. In this interpretation of the texts, an assumption is made that a male having sex with another male is forbidden in the holiness code of Leviticus 17-16, and thus homosexual practices of all kinds are forbidden, including contemporary homosexual relations between non-promiscuous partners (Grant, 1991).

The context of the Levitical prohibition indicates that such an act by two males, where one takes the part of the female, is a violation of the maleness of both partners as the Hebrew text literally says, one partner is required to "lie the lying of a woman" (Furnish, 1994, p. 20). The Hebrews did not appear to make a distinction between same sex practices and a same sex orientation or condition. Rather, the emphasis was upon an objective act which violated the holiness code which separated "clean" from "unclean" actions and objects as a representation of Israel's separation unto the holiness of God.

There is no record in the gospel traditions of Jesus making any comments about same sex relations, while he did offer clear teaching concerning fornication, adultery and remarriage (Mark 10:6-9; cf. Matthew 19:4-6). The silence of Jesus on this point, however, does not necessarily constitute approval. It would be unlikely that the practices which the Pauline texts forbid in the context of the Hellenistic Jewish community would have been unknown during Jesus time. It is more likely that the immediate context of Jesus' ministry amidst the Hebrew speaking Jews did not present situations demanding his response. Paul, and the Pauline text in 1 Timothy, make specific references to same sex relations in three specific texts, and each with a negative connotation.

"Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers--none of these will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, NRSV).

"For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Romans 1:26-27).

"This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching" (1 Timothy 1:9-10).

What is at dispute is the exact meaning of the terms used by these texts. The Greek word malakoi, translated "male prostitutes," literally means "soft ones." From this, some have concluded that the word denoted the passive partner in a same sex relation as being "effeminate" (Furnish, 1994, p. 24). The second word used by Paul is arsenokoitai (1 Cor. 6:9; cf. 1 Tim. 1:10), which the NRSV translates as "sodomite." The word is actually a compound word including the words for "male" and "bed." Furnish suggests that the word was coined by Paul and refers to a male who has intercourse with another male (1994). Other sources suggest that arsenokoitai was in use in at least a limited sense prior to Paul (Moulton and Milligan, 1972; Wright, 1984).

Paul's statement in Romans is explicit regarding same sex relations and is descriptive in nature rather than prescriptive. In this text Paul does not state what Christians should or should not do, but rather,
he describes the consequences of rebelling against God and turning to one's own passions as an object of desire and even worship (Ro. 1:25). At the same time, in reading Paul's statement in Romans 1:26-27, it is difficult to conclude otherwise than that Paul would say that those who are "righteous" would not or ought not do these things. The word "unnatural" (1:26) is a translation of the Greek phrase para physin which is standard terminology in other ancient texts for homoerotic acts (Hays, 1994, p. 17). From this, it can be argued that Paul clearly identifies homosexual relations as sinful and contrary to God's purpose for men and women (Ratzinger, 1986; Comiskey, 1988; Grant, 1991).

The biblical concept of sin is not restricted to specific acts but addresses the fundamental structure of all that is human, including sexuality. This is the context of Paul's statement concerning homosexual relations. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness," Paul writes. Therefore, none are better than another, for all are "under the power of sin" (Ro. 1:18; 3:9).

At no point does Paul elaborate on his reasons for his negative view of same sex relations. From other contemporary sources, however, scholars have discovered that homoerotic acts were viewed as "willful" disregard for one's natural relations with the opposite sex and "lustful" excess of sexual desire extending beyond what was "natural" within the marriage relationship (Furnish, 1994, pp. 26-27). According to some theologians, the context of the biblical texts which appear to condemn same sex relation are culturally determined. They suggest that what is forbidden is not consenting, committed same sex relations grounded in love, but rather the use of same sex relations in idolatrous worship, the sexual use of a boy by an adult male, and as a threat to what was considered to be "natural" sexual relations between men and women. Consequently, some conclude that the Bible is silent regarding contemporary same sex relations grounded in love and fidelity (Nelson, 1994; Siker, 1994; Scroggs, 1984; Edwards, 1984; Boswell, 1980).

While the purpose of this article is not to resolve the debate on purely exegetical grounds, one can hardly dismiss all of these texts as irrelevant. Robert Johnston has reminded us that the context of Paul's statements in Romans 1 deals with more than human lust and disorder within one's nature. Homosexuality, while not the worst sin, is nonetheless listed by Paul among those sins which are regarded as distortions of God's intended order (1979).

Those who argue that the "Bible is silent" with respect to homosexual relations which are grounded in personal love, fidelity and mutual openness, will dismiss the Levitical texts as well as Paul's statement in Romans 1 as irrelevant. But for those who say that the "silence is broken" by the Genesis 1:26-27 text, the Romans 1 and Jude 7 texts confirm the view that same-sex genital relations are contrary to God's intended purpose for humans created as male and female in the divine image. In response to the question about grounds for divorce, Jesus responded: "From the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female" (Mark 10:6; cf. Matthew 19:4). In saying this, Jesus reminds us that we must go back to the beginning and search out the contours of human sexuality as originally designed by God as the theological context in which the subject of homosexuality is to be discussed.

The purpose of this article is to present critical theological reflection on the issues concerning homosexuality as both an orientation and practice within the contemporary christian community. The following points summarize my conclusions drawn from the above discussion and serve to introduce the next and major concern of the article.

First, it is admitted by all that there are no positive statements in the biblical literature regarding same sex relations, regardless of what the context may be. At best, those who argue that same sex relations which take place between committed and loving human partners are within God's purpose, must argue from silence.

Second, the argument from silence requires that one dismiss the unique and original appeal to nature in Paul's statement in Romans. The allusions to nature in vs. 20, 25 suggest that Paul held to a divinely created order with regard to human sexuality. Other statements in the Pauline literature regarding the significance of the one-flesh heterosexual
relation (1 Cor. 6:16; 7:1-9; cf. Ephesians 54:31-33) make it inconceivable that Paul would contravene that order by allowing for same-sex genital relationships (Wright, 1989).

Third, the distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual acts, as understood today appear to have been unknown or, at least, of little concern to the Hebrew people. Indeed, the concept of a psychological or biological predisposition to homoerotic relations appears to be a modern one quite foreign to a biblical world view (Hays, 1994).

Fourth, the moral issues relating to homosexuality are not determined solely by whether or not homosexuality is an orientation or a practice but by the way in which one's sexuality is related to the intrinsic nature of human personhood as created in the image of God. This leads us to the deeper issue of the nature and purpose of human sexuality itself as taught by Scripture.

Fifth, a theological and pastoral approach to the issue of homosexuality within the church must take into account a wider spectrum of biblical teaching than merely the few texts which condemn specific homosexual acts. The theological predispositions, I will argue, are more significant than discussion based solely on homosexual references in the biblical text.

Theological Assumptions

If the biblical texts which mention homosexual acts are read in such a way that the intent of the author is disregarded in favor of a reading that is relative only to the cultural context of its own time, this "deconstructs" the text in such a way that no certain meaning can be gained which speaks to our present situation. If the biblical texts are judged to have no relevance for contemporary issues concerning homosexual orientation and practice, the use of such texts will only lead to a standoff. The result will be an impasse which makes serious discussion of the moral, theological and pastoral issues involved impossible. There will remain differences, to be sure. But what is important is that these differences be grounded in the basic assumptions which are held concerning the nature of human sexuality itself as related to the image of God. The purpose of this article is not to resolve the impasse created by scholars who argue the fine points of linguistic exegesis, though that work remains to be done. What I attempt here is what might be called a theological exegesis of the biblical teaching concerning human sexuality, both in the original intention of creation as well as in its fallen and often tragic state.

Theologically, we only see perfection through the grace of God experienced through imperfection. We are not first of all concerned, then, with homosexuality but with human sexuality and specifically, with human personhood as bound to human biology.

The biblical teaching regarding human sexuality is linked with the statement that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, male and female. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.; So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27).

I have chosen two modern theologians, Emil Brunner and Karl Barth as representative of two approaches to the theological question as to the relation of human sexuality to the image of God. Brunner separates the statement concerning the divine image from the statement concerning male and female. This interpretation allows for the divine image as constitutive of human personhood to be located primarily in the person as a spiritual and moral being without regard to biological sexual differentiation. Barth, on the other hand, links human sexual differentiation at the biological level with the divine image including both.

These two ways of relating sexuality to the image of God will account for differing views as to the relation of homosexuality to human personhood. Those who hold that sexual differentiation is not an essential aspect of the divine image will tend to view the moral issue of homosexuality as grounded solely in the quality of the personal encounter. Others, who hold that sexual differentiation is an essential aspect of the divine image believe that sexual orientation as well as sexual
practice is part of the intrinsic order of human personhood. Let us consider each in turn.

**Human Sexual Differentiation not Included in the Divine Image**

Figure 1 presents a schematic diagram of a contemporary approach to human personal and sexual relations based on the premise that human personal sexual relations are not grounded in created sexual/biological differentiation. In this view, the sexual identity of persons created in the image of God does not include biological sexual differentiation as determinative of human sexual relations. Same sex relations are considered to be natural and normal in the same way that heterosexual relations are. The biological and the personal do not overlap, as shown in Figure 1.

![Figure 1](image.png)

The personal and biological spheres.

In this model, the personal I-Thou sphere is only linked with the male/female biological sphere by cultural and ethical structures of society. This understanding leads to the claim that sexual orientation and behavior are a matter of human and civil rights (ideological) in the same way that racial and ethnic aspects of humans are based on "rights" rather than "nature." In this view, to judge same sex orientation and relations as inappropriate or wrong, is to discriminate against the basic rights of individuals to express their personal sexual orientation freely and with the full social acceptance and affirmation as those of differing skin color or ethnic origin.

With regard to human sexuality, Emil Brunner (1970, pp. 183, 195) held that the erotic sexual impulse is an "unbridled biological instinct" which can only be consecrated through marriage, or the ethical demand of abstinence. While Brunner did not develop his view to the point that homosexual relations were appropriate, his only argument against them was an ethical one, grounded in human cultural, and the use of the biblical texts as applying to contemporary same sex relations. As we have seen, to the degree that his ethical position depends upon these texts, any argument against homosexuality will carry little weight with those who see the texts as quite unrelated to the kind and quality of homosexual relations under consideration in our contemporary culture.

When human sexuality is considered as primarily biological and in the same category as race and ethnic origin, the issue of discrimination, equal rights, and justice become the criteria for deciding the issue. There is ample biblical witness in support of such rights and equal justice if homosexual orientation and practice is considered solely from the grounds of human personal relationships with no biological aspect involved.

**Human Sexual Differentiation an Essential Aspect of the Divine Image**

Karl Barth (1958), argued that human sexuality is a manifestation of the image of God as co-relation (co-humanity) and that the mark of the human is this same co-relation grounded in sexual differentiation as male and female, male or female. The only differentiation at the personal and social level with ontological (created being) status is thus human sexuality (Karl Barth, 1958, pp. 186f; 195f; 1960, p. 289). The creation of Eve was more than a replication of humanity in the form of a numerical multiplication, suggests Barth. The solitariness of Adam would not have been overcome by another male for such a one could not confront him as "another" but he would only recognize himself in it (1958, p. 290). Consequently, Barth condemned homosexuality as "humanity without the fellow man" (1961, p. 166).

Barth's view leads to what one might call an "ordered ontology" by which sexual differentiation as male and female is grounded in the personal being of humanity. By "ordered ontology," I mean that every human has an essential created structure which is sexually and personally unique.
differentiated, as male and female, male or female. In this view, sexual differentiation at both the personal and biological level is one aspect of the structured being (ordered ontology) of human life, while skin color and ethnic distinctives are related solely to the biological and cultural.

Figure 2 presents a schematic diagram of such an approach which grounds the personal and biological differentiation of male and female, male or female, in the image of God as created and intended by God and determinative of essential humanity. In this model, the personal sphere overlaps with the biological sphere so that the image of God as constitutive of humanity includes biological sexual differentiation.

![Figure 2. Sexual differentiation and the image of God](image)

If one takes Genesis 1:26-27 as the foundational text for understanding human sexuality as rooted in the divine image, sexual orientation may be considered a personal and biological differentiation expressed through the "ordered ontology" of male and female, male or female. A theological perspective on homosexuality thus does not rest alone upon biblical texts which speak against homosexuality, but also upon the foundational biblical texts which set forth a view of human sexuality as an "ordered ontology" of personal and biological differentiation.

It can be argued, as Barth does, that there is an implicit semantic parallelism between the statement about the divine image and male and female sexuality, not only a formal parallelism. Barth protests that dividing the sentence in the text so as to separate the statement about the image from the statement about sexual differentiation is arbitrary and unwarranted. "Is it not astonishing," Barth exclaims, "that again and again expositors have ignored the definitive explanation given by the text itself [i.e., Genesis 1:26-27]. . . . Could anything be more obvious than to conclude from this clear indication that the image and likeness of the being created by God signifies existence in confrontation, i.e., in this confrontation, in the juxtaposition and conjunction of man and man which is that of male and female, and then go on to ask against this background in what the original and prototype of the divine existence of the Creator consists?" (Barth, 1958, p. 195).

Phyllis Trible (1978), calls the differentiation alluded to in the Genesis 1:27 text, sexual dimorphism, and suggests that this can be used as a basis to establish male and female gender equality as part of the divine image.

Judith Gundry-Volf (1994) argues otherwise, suggesting that the statement concerning male and female relates to the command which follows, "be fruitful and multiply" (1:28), rather than to the preceding statement "in the image of God he created them." Gundry-Volf, following more recent higher critical theories of authorship of the Genesis account, argues against an interpretation of the "male and female" differentiation as a basis for asserting an egalitarian relation between the sexes.

In response I would say that one need not accept Trible's attempt to read gender equality into the Genesis 1:26-27 text in order to appreciate her exegetical point regarding the simultaneous emergence of human being as male ('ish) and female ('issa) as constitutive of the divine image. In the Genesis 2 account, she points out that the specific terms for male and female ('ish and 'issa) are only used after the creation of woman. Prior to the emergence of the female, the 'adam is not a particular person as differentiated from other persons, but rather the creature from the earth (ha-adama)--the earth creature. More important, this creature is not identified sexually (Trible, 1978, p.80).

It follows then that the criticism of an egalitarian exegesis of Genesis 1:26-27 by Gundry-Volf does not relate directly to Barth's thesis for the following reasons. First, Barth argues that the statement on sexual
differentiation in the text has ontological content, not only procreative implications. Barth would allow for the implication of the text with regard to the command to be fruitful and multiply. However, Barth insists that the obvious syntactical connection between the statement on the divine image and the one immediately following on sexual differentiation is evidence of the ontological relation between personal and sexual being.

Second, Barth's interpretation does not address the issue of sexual egalitarianism but of sexual differentiation as constitutive of humanity created in the image of God. In fact some who argue for sexual equality based on the Genesis 1:26-27 text do not accept Barth's thesis, showing that sexual egalitarianism and sexual differentiation are two different issues (cf. Scanzoni and Mollenkott, 1994, Jewett, 1975). If we allow for Gundry-Volf's reading of Genesis 1:26-27 as the basis for the command to be fruitful and multiply, this does not rule out the further conclusion that sexual differentiation is also grounded intrinsically in the image of God.

It is this basic theological assumption that led Barth (1961) to conclude that same-sex genital relations are prone to confusion and distortion of the divine image. In the remainder of this article I intend to trace out the implications of Barth's view of human sexuality as grounded in the image of God with respect to issues arising concerning homosexuality.

I realize that this view presents difficulties, including some recent research which seems to point to the fact that at least some homosexual orientation is caused by genetic factors (Burr, 1994) or, by psychopathological factors outside of the individual's control (Jones and Workman, 1994). In the discussion which follows I will attempt to deal with some of these problems and develop the thesis that human sexuality is grounded essentially in the image of God and is a "created order" represented by differentiation as male and female, male or female. Pastoral implications for dealing with the issue of homosexuality and the church will then conclude the essay.

Discussion: Moral and Theological Issues

I have attempted in this article to show that lying behind the biblical texts which view same-sex relations in a negative way is the positive affirmation of human sexuality as based on an essential differentiation grounded in a biblical doctrine of creation. If we accept Barth's thesis that personal sexual differentiation is expressed through biological differentiation as male and female, male or female, same-sex genital relations would constitute a violation of this divinely created order of human sexuality. In this case, same-sex genital relations can be said to be sinful and involves a moral judgment based on a theological assumption as to our created human nature.

The Moral Issue in the Homosexual Debate.

A moral argument based on nature is what Pim Pronk calls a "naturalistic fallacy." The concept of "unnatural" in the sense of "against nature," argues Pronk, cannot denote a moral defect because nature in the sense of biological determinism has no intrinsic moral quality (1993, p. 323). Pronk charges Barth with committing this fallacy by inferring a moral order out of biology.

Pronk argues that the moral objections to homosexuality based on one's "nature" have no merit. Therefore, theology cannot appeal to either biology or revelation concerning biological nature in search of moral guidelines. The moral criteria for judging all sexual behavior, including homosexual, argues Pronk, derive from the moral instincts of the community as a whole (1993, p. 216).

Is Barth guilty of this "naturalistic fallacy" with regard to his judgment against homosexuality? I do not believe so. Pronk has failed to grasp Barth's central thesis concerning human sexuality and the image of God. While Barth does link human sexual differentiation with creaturely nature, this is not a relation determined by "biology" but by the command of God. The moral basis for human sexuality is not inferred out of biology, as Pronk charges, but out of the command of God which summons humans to live out the divine image under the conditions of their creaturely nature and existence. The essential order of differentiation which constitutes the divine image is not determined by biological sexual characteristics but is "expressed" through one's biological nature (Barth, 1961, pp. 132, 154).

I agree with Pronk that biology alone cannot determine morality. At the same time,
as Barth rightly argues, biological nature is a necessary but insufficient condition for living as human persons created in the image of God. Even as it is morally wrong to injure the physical being of another person, the expression of one's personal being through a physical action constitutes a moral action.

Pronk, it would appear, can be said to follow the basic assumption depicted in Figure 1 (above) which separates personal humanity from biological humanity, leaving culture and ethics to mediate the moral aspects of human sexuality. Thus, Pronk concludes, one should only go to the Scripture to reinforce the position one has found convincing based on other moral grounds (1993, p. 323).

Lisa Cahill (1994) warns against making moral judgments against persons who express same-sex orientation, as though such persons were morally inferior beings. While a heterosexual context may be the "ideal," for sexual practice for Christians, she allows that, especially for persons with a strongly "homosexual identity," same-sex relations may be "objectively justifiable" as exceptional. Cahill ends up closer to Pronk in locating the moral basis for her judgment in the complex situation of human life, though she has more appreciation for biblical revelation as the source for moral criteria.

Following Barth, I suggest that theological criteria derived from biblical revelation concerning human sexuality is the basis for moral guidelines, and not the reverse. If the theological assumption is held that sexual differentiation is part of an essential order rooted in the divine image and expressed through each person's biological nature, it follows that homosexual relations cannot be affirmed as belonging to that order in the same way as heterosexual relations. As I will show below under pastoral considerations, the context of human sexuality under the conditions of fallen humanity is always less than ideal and that moral judgments concerning the sexual life of persons must be conditioned by compassion.

The Genetic Issue in the Homosexual Debate

Some recent research seems to point to the fact that at least some homosexual orientation is caused by genetic factors or, by psychopathological factors outside of the individual's control, though conclusions drawn remain somewhat inconclusive. (Burr, 1994; Pronk, 1993; Jones and Workman, 1994). Burr (1994) cites Hooker's attempt to correlate homosexual orientation to responses to the Rorschach test. Three eminent psychologists interpreted the results and concluded that no such correlation could be found. Her study, along with many others, led to the decision of the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 to remove homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. By and large, psychologists today do not recognize homosexuality to be pathological and thus most do not attempt to change sexual orientation.

Research into possible hormonal and biological predisposition to homosexual orientation has been both promising and puzzling. Burr (1994) suggests that evidence of hormonal factors as a predisposition toward sexual orientation remains inconclusive, and fails to answer the question: If hormones influence sexual orientation, what influences the hormones?

The quest for genetic markers leading to sexual orientation has led to findings which appear to be more compelling, though surrounded by a host of unanswered questions as to the implications. The final irony, says Burr (1994), is that if sexual orientation, like left or right handedness, can be shown to be genetically determined, the conclusion will be morally irrelevant. If God made some persons gay, Burr argues, then the only thing that hurts them is hatred and ignorance.

It is not within the scope of this article to assess the validity of such scientific claims. At the same time, the moral issue remains, particularly for theologians and pastors who are now confronted with the person who argues that sexual orientation is not a matter of "choice" but is rooted to some degree in genetic predispositions. If sexual orientation is not a matter of individual choice in every instance, then how can one pass moral judgment upon the sexual practice of homosexuals whose only "sexual preference" can be toward members of the same sex?

For those whose theological assumption corresponds to the situation depicted in Figure 1, the argument that condemnation of homosexuality is unfair, discriminatory, and a violation of human rights is quite compelling.
Same sex relations, many theologians assert, can have the same moral content and be as expressive of the divine image as heterosexual ones. Heterosexual relations may also fail to express the image of God where the personal aspect is absent or diminished. This has been argued from the Roman Catholic (McNeill, 1976, 1994) as well as the Protestant perspective (Nelson, 1994; Scanzoni and Mollenkott, 1994; Boswell, 1980).

The situation is quite different, however, if one argues that biblical teaching upholds heterosexual relations as God's designed and preferred order for human sexual orientation as well as practice, as Figure 2 depicts. Is it unfair and a violation of human rights to expect all persons to conform to this ideal, especially when some claim that their sexual orientation was determined by factors over which they had no control?

The answer depends upon how we have determined what is "right" and "fair." In a broken world, moral issues are often laden with such complexity and tinged with personal pain that abstract moral criteria when applied can sometimes offend concrete moral sensibilities. No one has a choice with regard to being born and certainly not with regard to the physical, emotional and social conditions and context in which one is expected to enter life. Some regard life itself as unfair and reject it.

**Pastoral Considerations**

There is, as Lisa Cahill has said (1994), an element of the tragic in the sexual arena of life, where persons struggle to find meaning and value in contexts that are less than ideal and fall outside of what society considers normative. Theological assumptions concerning human sexuality, grounded in biblical revelation, must include an acknowledgment of the brokenness and tragic aspects of the human sexual experience as well as of the divine intention regarding it.

Running right through the center of human sexuality is the element of the tragic. When the beauty and promise of human love and intimacy are linked with the capacity for sexual desire and fulfillment, no experience will prove adequate and completely fulfilling. Whatever one's sexual orientation and practice, be it homosexual or heterosexual, the element of the tragic will always be present. The tragic can mean as little as the temporary frustration of sexual desire when there is no partner available or willing to share it. It can also mean the choice to live in a relationship where sexual relations are impossible, whether due to physiological, psychological or moral reasons. Redemption from the tragic does not guarantee perfect fulfillment of every capacity or desire. It does offer grace to bear with what must be borne, and to sublimate self gratification in one area to self fulfillment in another. Every human being is a sexual being and will experience some degree of the tragic in this area.

If a person considers himself or herself to be "born" with a same-sex orientation, does that constitute moral freedom to practice same-sex relations? There are many who would answer yes. But if morality (and sin) is not determined by the freedom of individual choice, but through conformity to God's revealed design and purpose for humanity, then a different answer must be given. The choice for abstinence where sexual practice would violate the moral structure of life as created and commanded by God is tinged by the tragic, regardless of one's sexual preference--but it can be a "good" choice. Genetic or hormonal predisposition toward sexual orientation, as with other factors one inherits from one's parents and psycho-social environment, determine certain options in life, but do not remove from us the responsibility to make good choices in living our life under these conditions.

Richard Hays, writing on behalf of his friend, Gary, a Christian homosexual who chose abstinence out of obedience to Scripture prior to his death in 1990, quoted from Gary's final letter to him: "Are homosexuals to be excluded from the community of faith? Certainly not. But anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning and not merely a place to be comforted or indulged" (Hays, 1994, pp. 14-15).

In the end, I offer these comments as to how the church may respond to the issue of persons with homosexual orientation who seek to belong and live within a community of faith.

There is ample Scriptural authority for establishing both God's **preference** with regard to human relationships and God's
presence with persons in their struggle to fulfill God's purpose for them through the labyrinth of confusion, failure and brokenness that often attends such a struggle. The Old Testament is replete with God's expressed preference for his people, but also contains a multitude of examples of God's presence as one who graciously forgives, restores and empowers within the limits and constraints of consequences and conventions. In using the word "preference" I do not intend to suggest that God merely "chooses" for us what is good in an arbitrary way, but that his preference is designed into the very structure of our existence as personal beings. I mean by preference what some would call the ideal or perfect will of God for our lives. Failing to achieve this ideal in one's life, does not rule out God's gracious presence. Persons with homosexual orientation can receive the Spirit of Christ and become part of Christ's body through forgiveness and mercy the same as those with heterosexual orientation.

The church as the body of Jesus Christ, expresses both divine preference and divine presence in the lives of its members. All members of the body of Christ fall short of God's preference, including Christians who are homosexuals. The church must be as inclusive as Christ's outreach into human society and as clear headed as Christ's vision of the created purpose for humans who bear the image of God.

At the same time, it would be a source of great confusion and grave error for the church to make God's presence the only means of grace and God's preference as the law which died with Christ. Both preference and presence are grounded in the grace of God, and both alike must be upheld in the teaching and practice of the church's ministry. The presence of Christ in the lives of Christians, both heterosexual and homosexual, does not condone behavior and actions which confuse and contradict God's preference, though such actions might satisfy deeply felt needs and desires. The church as the body of Jesus Christ ought to be the place where such struggles and tensions can be experienced with the healing power of hope and love.

It must also be said that membership in the body of Christ does not entail the right to serve in the teaching office of the church simply by virtue of having been received by Christ into fellowship. While the issue of ordination of homosexuals to the ministry of the church is beyond the scope of this article, it needs to be said that inclusion on the basis of God's presence does not grant anyone in the body of Christ right to ordination. Whether or not a person with homosexual orientation should be excluded form consideration for ordination is a matter for the church to decide.

Discrimination within the body as to who should be set aside for the teaching office entails both wisdom and discernment on the part of the church taking into account many criteria, including maturity, domestic stability, personal integrity and spiritual giftedness. Might not these criteria also include sexual orientation as well as sexual practice measured by the responsibility to uphold both divine preference as well as divine presence?

The community of faith can be a community of transformation and discipline for both those with homosexual and heterosexual orientation. The testimony of many is that empowerment to move toward the discovery of sexual wholeness as male or female can also be found through the grace and power of Christ's presence in such a healing community (Comiskey, 1988). When homosexuality becomes a divisive issue within the church it has the danger of shifting human sexuality from a possibility to a necessity under the banner of human rights (Rogers, 1994). This attempt to escape the tragic by trading what is partial for the whole, will, in the end, prove to be a greater tragedy for us all.

REFERENCES


