

Homosexuality (part 1)

It's here (that's clear) – now how are we going to deal with it?

by Johan Tangelder

A sudden social revolution is undermining the family – the foundational structure of our society. The powerful and growing "gay" movement to abolish all moral and legal distinction between marriage and other kinds of "committed" sexual relationships has won many victories. How do we counter the activist homosexual agenda and its power politics? I realize that principled opposition is difficult. Since homosexuals activists demand from churches full acceptance, they are forcing them to come to terms with what they really believe and practice.

Furthermore, even some members in our Reformed and evangelical circles are asking questions about homosexuality. Our youth are looking for answers. Some of these questions are: "Where in the Bible is homosexuality condemned?" "Why would God create people with homosexual tendencies?" "Why do some Christians make such a big deal about homosexuality but turn a blind eye to their own sins?" Some claim that homosexuals weren't born that way, because that would be contrary to Scripture, while others argue that since we're all born sinful, it is certainly conceivable that people may be born more susceptible to certain temptations - one person might find alcohol more tempting, another might pine after money, and yet another could find the homosexual lifestyle almost irresistible.

Courage and sensitivity required

Before I'll answer the questions raised, we should keep in mind that the issue we deal with is neither abstract nor merely theoretical. The homosexual issue is very difficult, and the reason for this difficulty is its very personal nature. It involves parents and children. Homosexuals are people with names, faces, with individual struggles, spiritual conflicts, and emotional pain. Furthermore, the attitude toward homosexuality has changed. Before the 1960s in North America, homosexuality was considered a sin. In the 1970s it was thought of as a sickness, but now our society calls it an alternative lifestyle.

Because of this dramatic shift in moral standards, a rational discussion on homosexuality has become extremely difficult. The secular media present homosexuals as an oppressed minority deserving sympathy rather than as people whose ways need to be changed. Homosexual couples are portrayed as highly attractive people who enjoy stable relationships. Many in our society today refuse to consider the moral implications of homosexuality and tend to view it as a form of sexual expression that merely "differs" from the traditional norm. Homosexuality is now advocated as a perfectly acceptable, normal, and safe way of life.

Even the legalizing of same sex unions is now a matter of debate in Canada and the United States. In Vermont, U.S.A., a 1999 court decision ordered the elimination of practically all distinctions between marriage and homosexual relationships. The Vermont

legislature responded to this judicial ultimatum by voting in favor of eventually providing all of the benefits and privileges of marriage to homosexual couples.

Churches too, no longer speak with one voice on the subject, as I will explain later. Some Christians lack the courage to apply Biblical moral standards to the “public square.” Because of the activities of homosexual lobby organizations and the favorable coverage afforded by the news media, these Christians don't dare speak up lest they be branded “homophobic,” and “bigots.” Some journalists put Christians into the same league as Afghanistan's fundamentalist Taliban. But we may not let the intolerant attitude of the “politically correct” curb our freedom of speech. In our pluralistic society, which tolerates a multitude of conflicting opinions and anti-Christians views, we must preserve at all cost the right to express our Christian convictions. We may not be silent when the Christian faith is assaulted. If we do not speak up now, the freedoms we still enjoy will be lost. We may then believe and practice our faith in home and church, but we'll experience some form of persecution when we take our faith to “the public square.”

Today we have a debate going on, even in many churches, regarding the acceptance of homosexuality. In some mainline denominations many of the leaders attempt to influence, with their politically correct agenda, rank-and-file church members, who are generally resistant to homosexual clergy and the blessing of same-sex unions. For example, at an April 1997 conference of liberal Episcopalians in Pasadena, California, speakers condemned traditional marriage as sexist, patriarchal and violent. Rev. Juan Oliver of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey even said, "I don't want the relationship I enter into with a partner to be the same as heterosexual marriage, thank you." But many evangelicals, who do oppose homosexuality, often resort to platitudinous condemnation while failing to wrestle with issues of sexual ethics. Some of their arguments are tinged with emotions rather than with reason and Biblical clarity. No wonder so many people have become confused and question what the Bible really teaches.

Attacks on the relevance of the Bible

As I answer the questions raised, I want to state unequivocally the fact that on the basis of all the Biblical evidence homosexuality is forbidden. Only outright cynicism can pretend that there is any doubt what the Bible has to say about homosexuality. It has not even the slight hint of ambiguity about what is forbidden or permitted in the area of sexuality. It has straightforward, even blunt, and strong prohibitions against homosexuality. The Bible explicitly teaches that sex is God's gift to be enjoyed within the context of a marriage between a man and a woman. People must suppress the truth if they don't want to see it. I wholeheartedly endorse the 1998 resolutions of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) of which I am a member:

We affirm that Scripture clearly teaches that homosexual conduct is always an abomination in the sight of God for all human beings, both men and women, in all circumstances, without exception (Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27); 1 Cor. 1:6:9) Be it further resolved that we affirm as biblical and do ourselves agree with the position that the Christian moral opposition to homosexual behavior is not and

can never be license for anyone to engage in any form of slander, harassment or violence against one with whom we disagree.

But is it not homophobic and unloving to oppose the acceptance of homosexuality as normal? Not at all! It is unloving not do so. Those who think that the current controversy within the Christian church is only about homosexuality are thoroughly mistaken. Those who justify it must keep in mind the fact that there is absolutely no justification for homosexuality in either the Old or the New Testament. It also deviates from the teachings of the church fathers, of medieval and Reformation theologians, and of most recent theologians within the Reformed/evangelical tradition.

What is at stake? It is the nature and authority of Scripture! If the authority of Scripture is undermined by current ideologies from our dominant secular culture are we still dealing with historic Christianity? Let me explain what happens when the Bible is interpreted by postmodern ideologues. Some pro-homosexual scholars appeal to the silence of Biblical writers to "confirmed homosexuality." They claim, for example, that Jesus said nothing about homosexual behavior. Hence, since Jesus didn't condemn homosexuality, neither should we. But this argument from silence is treacherous and without foundation. Jesus did make six specific references to Sodom.

Some argue that modern, loving, long-term adult/adult homosexual practices were not known in Biblical times and, therefore, are not condemned. Another group of scholars focuses on those passages of Scripture that deal with homosexual practices. They admit that they condemn these practices, but declare that they were written before the modern understanding of homosexual "orientation," and therefore are irrelevant for our times. They argue that we may not use the Bible as a timeless code for moral standards. Times have changed! The prohibitions of male same-sex relations in the book of Leviticus are no more relevant for today than are a host of other regulations recorded in it.

They say, consider, for example, the apostle Paul's condemnation of homosexuality. He merely reflected his patriarchal culture. His stance revealed his rabbinic background and the prejudices of his time. He was not up-to-date. He lived in a different time from ours. Hence, we must reinterpret the teaching of Paul in the light of modern sexology.

Times change, the Bible doesn't

What are the consequences of these views? A total surrender to postmodern relativism! Let me illustrate. Dr. Allen Verhey, Professor of Religion at Hope College, Holland, Michigan, argues that singleness and chastity are an option for both heterosexuals and homosexuals. But what if celibacy is not one's gift? Verhey suggests that sexual relations within the context of commitment and continuity is better than promiscuity and infidelity. He states, "If we allow divorce in a world like this one for the sake of protecting marriage and marriage partners, and if we allow remarriage after divorce, then we must also consider allowing homosexual relationships for the sake of protecting fidelity and mutuality and the homosexual partners." He further suggests the possibility of blessing homosexual unions. As I will show in the second installment on the subject, the views of Verhey and like-minded reveal a deep chasm between the past

and the present. They obviously do not accept the Bible "as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith" (The Belgic Confession, Art. 5).

Revisionist pro-homosexual scholars seem to suffer from amnesia. They forget that the ethical stance of Jews and Christians was unique. Christianity continued to uphold the Old Testament moral standards. It condemned homosexuality. But while the Biblical stance was unique, other societies did not give blanket approval of homosexuality either. Legal rejection and regulation of some forms of homosexuality appear to be a universal practice. The evangelical scholar James B. De Young notes, "The issue is not whether ancient societies proscribed sodomy but to what extent they set boundaries."

Let us look simply at the facts. Since *Reformed Perspective* is a family magazine, we can't go into the sordid details of homosexuality in ancient times. It is sufficient to mention that homosexuality was something with which Greek society was permeated and riddled from top to bottom. One writer has said that it "was not personal but social, a thing indigenous and ingrown." It was ingrained into the Greek character. Well-documented homosexual themes run blatantly through Greek literature. It is in this world into which the Christian ethic came. In spite of everything, to the end of the day, in Greece, homosexuality might be universal but it was regarded as abnormal, and it was never legal. Homosexuality became worse in Rome than it ever became in Greece. The historian Gibbons notes that fourteen out of the first fifteen Roman emperors were practicing homosexuals. But the Romans never tried to legalize homosexuality.

Our times have changed, but God hasn't. He "does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). His Word does not change. The prophet Isaiah declared, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever"(40:6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:6). Our Lord said, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). In other words, we have no right to revise the moral standards recorded in Scripture. God has not given us permission to tamper with His Holy Word. Each generation is not free to produce a new code of behavior, no matter how enlightened it thinks itself. In our twenty-first century we affirm anew the ongoing relevance of biblical morality – what some call its normativity. The German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg's sober warning for Christians, who attempt to revise their attitude toward homosexuality, is still valid: "If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would no longer stand on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic."