

GAY THEOLOGY: A CRITICAL REAPPRAISAL

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A) The Challenge of Gay Theology

1) Traditional Position

- a) The Bible clearly prohibits homosexual practice (hereafter as HP).
- b) For Aquinas, homosexual acts are *peccata contra naturam* (sins against nature)- most serious genus among sins of lust. It is always an injury done to the Creator.
- c) Representative of 17th century Lutheran orthodoxy, Benedict Carpzov even thought that sequeale of homosexual vice are "Earthquakes, famine, pestilence, Saracens, floods, & very fat, voracious field mice".

2) Contemporary Gay Theology

- a) The Bible does not condemn HP as such. (The landmark is Bailey's book.)
- b) McNeill: homosexual acts are good if their intention involves a responsible orientation toward growth & reconciliation.
- c) Catholic Theological Society of America's report: no sexual act is intrinsically wrong in itself; sexual expression should be evaluated only according to values that are conducive to creative growth & integration of human person. Sexual acts are legitimate if they are self-liberating, other enriching, honest, faithful, socially responsible, life-serving, & joyous. Rules should not be commands imposed from without but demands of the inner dynamism of human life.

3) Gay Activism

- a) Gay people are now coming out of the closet & they fight not only for their civil rights but also rights to marriage & to be foster parents.
- b) They charge the larger society of homophobia & heterosexism.
- c) This movement also affects the church. There are now gay pastor & congregation. In Hong Kong, similar movement seems to be starting.

B) Evaluation of Biblical/Theological Arguments for Homosexuality

1) Reinterpretation of Lev 18:22, 20:13

- HP condemned *only* because it was associated with the religious practice & licentious behaviour of Gentile idolators, because it violated the pattern of male dominance (Jewish patriarchy), or because it cut across the culture's superstitious reverence for semen
- no relevance for Christians because God has released the early church from the necessity to keep the Levitical laws

Response:

- a) The interpretation is forced & speculative- the natural assumption is that these practices are wrong in themselves. Other practices mentioned with it clearly have moral significance & not only cultic significance: incest, adultery, child sacrifice, bestiality, spiritism, cursing parents. (Prohibition of intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period is the exception.)
- b) Listing of these practices confirmed the corruption of Gentile cultures rather than the practices being discredited through their use by pagans.
- c) Christians have always recognized that Ex 20-40, Leviticus, & other Pentateuchal

legislations are of continuing ethical significance.

Criteria: i) severity of penalty; ii) repeated endorsement of New Testament.

2) Reinterpretation of Rm 1:26,27

- "against nature" means that it is against the "natural orientation" or inner drives of an individual
- things condemned there only because they issue from idolatry
- Countryman argues that Paul has never called HP sin & the words "lusts (*epithymia*)," "impurity (*akatharsia*)," "degrading (*atimazo*)" etc. can be interpreted in a neutral sense.

Response:

- a) Paul distinctly says that the desires & actions of those mentioned in verses 26,27 are homosexual & in harmony with one another. "Against nature" simply means against God's intention for human sexual behaviour which is plainly visible in nature, in the complementary function of male & sexual organs & temperaments.
- b) That God's creation is the context can be seen from Rm 1:19-20. God is again called the Creator in v.24.
- c) Paul wants to show that one of the religious bankruptcy of paganism is the helpless tendency of its intellectual leaders toward sexual inversion. Disorders in verses 24-32 are then wrong in themselves- only then it can help to prove the spiritual depravity of idolatrous cultures.
- d) In fact, "sin" does not occur in Rm 1,2 but the purpose of these two chapters is to demonstrate the universality of sin (Rm 3:23)! Schmidt (ch.4) has demolished Countryman's case & shown that the words do carry a sense of moral condemnation.

3) Reinterpretation of 1C 6:9,10 & 1 Tim 1:8-10

- Boswell (& McNeill): *malakoi* & *arsenokoitai* = self-indulgent & homosexual prostitutes
- Paul has only people like pederasts in mind & not HP as such

Response:

- a) It is distinctly a minority opinion among exegetes. E.g. Donald Williams: while *arsenokoitai* by the 6th century may mean male prostitutes, here it certainly has a wider reference, 'male Homosexuals'; Arndt & Gingrich's *Greek-English Lexicon of the NT* defines *malakos* as "effeminate, esp. of catamites, men & boys who allow themselves to be misused homosexually" & translates *arsenokoitai* as "a male HM, pederast, sodomite"
- b) Even Bailey agrees that *malakoi* means those who give themselves to passive homosexual acts & *arsenokoitai* means those who engage in active homosexual acts.
- c) In fact *arsenokoitai* is derived from the Greek text of Leviticus which makes no distinction about particular forms of HP:
 - meta *arsenos* ou koimethese *koiten* gynaikos (Lev 18:22)
(with a man do not lie [as one] lies [with a] woman)
 - hos an koimethe meta *arsenos* *koiten* gynaikos (Lev 20:13)
(whoever lies with a man [as one] lies with a woman)

4) Reinterpretation of Gen 19:4-9; Jud 19:22-26; 2P 2:1-22; Jude 3-23

- to know (*yadha*) rarely has sexual connotations => Sodom is not guilty of HP but of inhospitality
- sins of Sodom mentioned in the Old Testament do not include HP (Is 1:10, 3:3; Ezek 16:49; Jer 23:14)
- "unnatural lust" in Jude means "desire for angels"
- at most we can only say people of Sodom are guilty of rape

Response:

- a) Lot's offer => sexual meaning of *yadha*. In fact the word is often used in this way in Genesis.
- b) True that Sodom has other sins; but sexual sins as part of the larger pattern of corruption in pagan world (pride, sensuality, & injustice)
- c) People of Sodom didn't know that the young men were angels!
- d) Only concerning rape? The Israelite who was acquainted with Leviticus would view the use of force as aggravating an evil act.
- e) Message of Judges: Israel was in danger of repeating the errors of Sodom => everyone acts according to what he thinks right => similar to today's world?

C) Evaluation of Ethical Arguments for Homosexuality

1) Argument from Love

Consensual HP is an expression of love. How can it be wrong?

Response:

- a) There are many kinds of love. Perhaps the above principle is correct if "love" means "pure benevolence without any sexual connotations." However, homosexuality is a different kind of love: erotic (sexual) love. The plausibility of the argument trades on the ambiguities of the word "love."
- b) Almost in all societies, the expression of erotic love always has *some* boundaries, e.g. incest. (Perhaps even a majority of people in our modern society still agree to this.) So the defender of HP has also to justify his way of drawing the line.
- c) The alternative is sexual antinomianism which has grave social consequences.

2) Argument from Tolerance

(#) Condemning HP morally is a kind of intolerance.

(\$) Intolerance is always wrong.

Therefore it is wrong to condemn HP.

Response:

- a) "Liberal-minded" people usually move from # to the conclusion intuitively. The premise \$ is suppressed but it is really essential.
- b) Defenders of HP often accuse traditionalists of holding to absolute & therefore oppressive morality. We can see that this presupposes another absolute, i.e. tolerance. This generates a paradox. If (\$) is right, then isn't condemning people who condemn HP also a form of intolerance?
- c) Anyway, tolerance does have limits: we have many laws against all sorts of violence, fraud, public indecency & so on. At least tolerance will not tolerate intolerance! So (\$) seems an over-generalization.

d) (#) is also problematic: it regards all moral disapprovals as intolerant & this leaves hardly anyone to be tolerant! If we adopt a milder interpretation of intolerance as restraining others' behaviour by force, then sheer moral disapproval of HP is not intolerance. Nor will it necessarily lead to intolerance: some theologians do hold that HP is wrong but defend the liberty of citizens engaging in HP.

3) Argument from Freedom of Self-Expression

(#) If a kind of behaviour is a harmless expression of one's preference, then one is always justified to do so.

(\$) HP is a harmless expression of one's preference.

Therefore HP is morally justified.

Response:

a) (\$) 's truth as a whole is doubtful although it is often the portrait offered by the media & the gay activists. Schmidt surveys many research reports & concludes that HP does pose psychological & bodily health risks for both individuals & society (ch.6). (Q)

b) The major problem is with the principle (#). Suppose a person always tell lies which do no real harm to others- he will also be justified by (#) if it expresses his preference => (#) seems to absolutize freedom at the expense of other intrinsic values, e.g. sincerity. More relevantly, in matters of sexual behaviour, (#) will also justify incest, paedophilia, bestiality, successfully-concealed extramarital sex¹ ...

c) We can also raise the question: why stop at the boundary line of harm? Is this arbitrary? Some people may not agree: the strong & the powerful perhaps prefer a bare struggle for survival. Members of secret societies will also contend, as long as they mutually consent, why should blood feuds among themselves be prohibited?

4) Argument from Innateness

(#) If a kind of behaviour is innate, it can't be morally condemned.

(\$) HP is innate.

Therefore we can't morally condemn HP.

Response:

a) Note that HP can be construed as a kind of inclination or a kind of action/behaviour. Some animal behaviours are indeed innate but it is doubtful that HP as *behaviour* is innate². Even if the *inclination* is innate, an action usually requires the person's *yielding* to the inclination. His decision & will are involved & he can't be totally absolved from his responsibility.

¹ It is interesting to note that according to (#), extramarital sex is only wrong as long as it hurts, i.e. if the betrayed partner knows of it or the infidel partner feels bad. If the infidel partner succeeds entirely to cover up the whole thing & remove any residual compunctions, then the affair becomes justified! This seems to be perverse moral reasoning.

² Some contend that since homosexual behaviours are also observed in animals, it further proves HP to be "natural" & good. Firstly, "animals do not engage in long-term homosexual bonding as humans do" (Schmidt, p.134). Secondly, this argument ignores the immense gulf between human beings & animals in matters of rationality & moral consciousness. Thirdly, the same logic justifies women who eat their husbands since we observe female spiders swallowing their mates!

b) The point is that (\$) is again ambiguous. When HP is construed as the concrete acts, (\$) is implausible. When HP is construed as inclination/orientation, though more plausible, it can't help to justify the acts directly unless we further argue that all innate inclinations should be acted out!

c) Whether the homosexual orientation is innate will be treated below.

d) Anyway, the argument fails because (#) is false. We must distinguish 2 moral questions: i) is certain act morally bad? ii) is the agent performing that act morally culpable? Suppose there are irresistible innate inclinations to steal, kill & lie. We wouldn't thereby announce stealing, killing & lying to be morally good though we will not view the agent as culpable. The proper response is not punishment but treatment. Similarly, whether HP is innate has no direct bearing on the moral status of HP though it affects the assessment of homosexuals' responsibility.

5) Argument from "Normality"

(#) If HP is wrong, then homosexuals will show signs of abnormality & perversity.

(\$) Most homosexuals are normal, intellectually, psychologically & morally speaking.
Therefore HP is not wrong.

Response:

a) Certainly, extreme stereotypes of gay people are mostly false but whether gay people are truly gay is controversial. (\$) is not undisputed.

b) Anyway, (#) is false. Some pathological killers are otherwise "normal" & intelligent. An adulterer may even be a brave, compassionate & morally inspiring person, e.g. Martin Luther King. That doesn't prove such act right. Refusal to accept the complexities of life underlies the apparent plausibility of (#).

6) Argument from the Experience of Liberation

Some homosexuals struggle with their internal conflicts until they suddenly realize their innocence. They then experience peace & liberation. This shows that HP is not wrong.

Response:

a) I once read about a philosopher who confessed an immense sense of freedom after he came to believe that all values are relative!

b) Acting out our deep, restrained inner desires can be exhilarating- it can also be deceptive. Ephe 4:17-19 talked about Gentiles who gained "freedom" at the cost of seared consciences. Sexual experience can intoxicate the partners & convince them that what feels so right can't be wrong.

7) Argument from the Lack of Alternatives

(#) Homosexual orientation is unalterable.

(\$) Therefore the only alternatives for homosexuals are active practice or abstinence/celibacy.

(%) Abstinence/Celibacy are inhuman.

Therefore active HP is the only alternative, & hence justifiable.

Response:

a) (#) is again controversial. There are apparent counterexamples (Davies & Rentzel, chs.1-2). Some critics persist to deny such evidences: they either charge the people of fraud or set up an impossibly high standard. For the sake of argument, let me grant that judged by such high standards (#) may be right (for some). However, (%) on this construal is no

longer plausible- only abstinence from persistently strong inclinations might possibly be regarded as inhuman!

b) The belief that satisfaction of one's sexual desires is essential to humanity is perhaps just the culturally conditioned myth of modernity. Abstinence is certainly a hard road but why think that a truly human life must be easy? Facing a totalitarian regime, no one is free from his fears. Who is more human: one that acts against his deepest fear & speaks the truth or one that totally succumbs to it?

c) (%) => we must encourage premarital & extramarital sex among single persons, the divorced, & the widowed. Some say that young people can hold out in the expectation of an eventual outlet for sexual desire. Schmidt's response:

"those who think expectation fosters self-control have not been teenagers for a long time, & those who think marriage is a sufficient outlet for all sexual desire are mostly still teenagers. The problem for all of us is not holding out for thirty years but holding for thirty minutes against the popular notion that sexual gratification is essential to personhood" (p.166).

d) Sexuality is more than sexual acts. Celibate people can express their sexuality & experience intimacy in other ways. Jesus' example.

e) What about unalterable "orientations" of a paedophile or a father who desires his daughter? The presupposition behind is not that frustration is intolerable but that HP is tolerable. This begs the question.

8) Conclusion

The ethical arguments for HP reflect general positions of situation ethics, hedonism, & liberal individualism. Having rejected tradition or religion as basis of morality, the logic of these positions, if fully unravelled, actually pushes towards a kind of sexual antinomianism. Most of the above arguments will not discriminate between HP & paedophilia, incest, bestiality & sado-masochism. In the end monogamy must be queried & there is no ethical defence against open marriage, triadic household or mate swapping. There is a problem here for secular morality: what is the basis for sexual morality & how to draw the line between legitimate & illegitimate expressions of sexuality?

D) Is Homosexuality Inborn?

1) 1991 S. LeVay: brains of 35 male cadavers (including 19 known homosexuals died of AIDS) => part of the hypothalamus (INAH3) was on the average smaller for homosexuals than other men.

Problems:

- a) Small sample size; 6 of the other 16 males died of AIDS => can they be homosexuals?
- b) Perhaps AIDS had affected the volume of the INAH3 by reducing testosterone levels
- c) Possibly sexual behaviour can affect brain development.
- d) Strength of influence truly deterministic?

2) L.S. Allen & R.A. Gorski: the anterior commissure (nerve fibers between the hemispheres) was on average larger in 34 homosexual men.

Problems:

- a) The other study got the opposite result.
- b) Each sample has tremendous variation.
- c) Reliance on subjects with AIDS => direction of influence?

3) Numerous studies of current hormone levels in homosexuals failed to turn up any difference from heterosexuals.

4) Twin research of J.M. Bailey & J.C. Pillard (1991): comparing 110 homosexual men who were monozygotic (identical) & dizygotic (fraternal) twins; 52% of the monozygotic subjects but only 22% of the dizygotic subjects had homosexual twins, while the rate of homosexuality among nontwin brothers was 9.2%. 108 women (1993): 48% of monozygotic subjects, 16% of dizygotic subjects had homosexual twins (14% for nontwin sisters).

Problems:

- a) Doubts about the representativeness of sample- recruited through homosexual organizations.
- b) Other twin studies contradict the results.
- c) Double rate of dizygotic twins as compared to nontwin siblings makes no genetic sense.
- d) Why higher rate of HP among siblings as compared to the general population?
- e) Why not all identical twins share the same orientation?

5) D. Hamer: 34 of 40 pairs of homosexual nontwin brothers had homosexual relatives on maternal sides => link of HP to a small stretch of DNA on the X chromosome (Xq28).

Problems:

- a) No gene can yet be isolated from that region.
- b) What about the other 7 pairs?
- c) Similar theories about depression, schizophrenia, & alcoholism have come & gone after further research failed to confirm.
- d) Correlation not causation. The gene might increase the tendency to identify with one another; might influence novelty seeking, harm avoidance, or dependence => interact with environmental influences on sex orientation.

6) Conclusion:

The biologic theories are not yet proven. There may perhaps be genetic factors that *contribute* to the shaping of a homosexual inclination upon action of environmental forces.

E) The Way Ahead

1) Restatement of the Biblical Position

- a) Against extreme revisionism => HP not conforming to the creation order.
- b) Yet a lot of reflection: isn't the charge of homophobia to some extent valid? Has we exaggerated the vice of HP? Has we allowed the stereotypes to conceal the real faces so that we can ignore the duty to be compassionate?
- c) Awareness that the spirit of Christian ethics is antithetical to the secularist one. We need to reaffirm:

- the essence of man is responsible being; we are bound by a higher law than just desires & freedom
- sexuality is God's gift => God has the right to prescribe the limits of its expression & we have to behave responsibly
- this is a fallen world => we need redemption & a hope

2) The Practical Issues

- a) Decriminalization of HP is not unacceptable (cf. adultery).
- b) Yet Christians cannot agree that homosexuals have *rights* to marriage & to be foster parents.
- c) We need to rethink & develop the ministry among Christian homosexuals. For example, Lovelace suggests a double repentance:
 - i) require gay Christians to have the courage both to avow their orientation openly & to obey the Biblical injunction to turn away from active HP, seeking a heterosexual re-orientation when this is possible & adopting a celibate life-style when it is not;
 - ii) require the church to accept, honor, & nurture nonpracticing gay believers in its membership, & ordain these to positions of leaderships for ministry

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