

Equity and Purity: Homosexuality and the Church

Rev Dr Thomas Harvey

You have bishops in your church who deny the resurrection of Jesus... you have theologians who question the Virgin Birth and the gospel miracles... and you say "hey, we're a broad church. Everybody can have their say." And then along come gay and lesbian people asking for a blessing and you say "hey, we gotta (sic) draw the line somewhere!" At least [he said] if you're going to break up your church, do it over something important.

Baptist pastor to Anglican Bishop Michael Ingham¹

The startling resistance in North American Mainline Protestant churches to gay and lesbian ordination has perplexed many. Hardly sectarian fundamentalists, denominational churches have generally found their niche in modernity as communities of “open arms and open minds” in tune with changing social norms.² Nonetheless, apart from the Episcopal Church USA (ECUSA), large mainline denominational churches have resisted officially ordaining avowed homosexual clergy. Even for the ECUSA, ordination of the openly homosexual Gene Robinson as Bishop has threatened to divide not only the ECUSA, but also the Anglican Church worldwide.

Self-described “progressives” within these denominations generally characterize this resistance as “homophobia”, i.e., the irrational fear of homosexuality and homosexuals. They point out that the cultural taboos that once barred women from ordination are now adjudged uncouth by most denominations. In the same way, they argue, fear and ignorance will

¹ Michael Ingham is the bishop of New Westminster diocese that has recently faced severe criticism and division within his diocese over the approval of rites of blessing for homosexual couples.

² “Open arms and Open Minds” was on a bumper sticker recently fashioned by “progressive” Presbyterians.

eventually give way as education and familiarity with gays and lesbians wear down irrational resistance.

A more serious challenge to gay ordination has arisen from biblical scholars who argue that Scripture is unequivocal in its condemnation of homosexuality.³ The strength of these works is twofold. First, they present a comprehensive view of Scripture that goes far beyond mere proof-texting. More importantly, they exhaustively show the inconsistency and inadequacy of arguments that suggest what Scripture condemns is not homosexuality, as we know it today, but practices and understanding unique to biblical times.

Some, however, would argue that this does not end the matter. Even if we know what Scripture teaches, there remains the problem of the relative authority of Scripture in light of increasing knowledge as to the nature of homosexuality and the experience of gay and lesbian persons in the church. Accordingly, the challenge is to bridge the theological and ethical gap between the teaching of Scripture and the church's contemporary understanding and experience of homosexuality. This paper examines the work of George Hunsinger, the McCord Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Seminary, to forge a "progressive traditionalism," that would bring Scripture, tradition, experience, and modern insight into a fruitful conversation in order to overcome the current divide in the church.

George Hunsinger's Theological Critique of Paul's view of Homosexuality

Hunsinger wrote his "Thinking Outside the Box, Further Reflections on a Third Way for Our Church",⁴ in order to bridge the divide over gay ordination in the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA). In 1996, the PCUSA General Assembly by a vote of 313 to 236 to amend the Book of Order to read:

³ Richard Hays: *Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996). See also Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (New York: Abingdon Press, 2002).

⁴ George Hunsinger. "Thinking Outside the Box, Further Reflections on a Third Way for Our Church" *Presbyterian Outlook* Online edition. <http://www.pres-outlook.com/hun031302a.html>. Posted March 13, 2002.

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the Confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."⁵

Since then, three amendments have been forwarded by the General Assembly to remove or alter this language, but they have been unable to secure necessary approval by the Presbyteries. Continual struggle over the issue has left the church deeply divided and despondent. To overcome this divide, Hunsinger recognises the need to address biblical concerns in light of scientific insight, concern for equity, and in terms of the Reformed tradition.

Hunsinger agrees with biblical scholars that the Bible does condemn homosexuality. In Paul, this condemnation resulted from his understanding that (1) the “desire and the act were seen as contrary to nature”, (2) homosexual relationships were viewed as “promiscuous or exploitative”, and (3) that Paul viewed homosexual disposition and behavior as “volitional.” Nonetheless, though Hunsinger affirms Paul’s description of homosexual desire as contrary to nature, the existence of monogamous gay and lesbian relationships puts in doubt Paul’s second view that homosexual relationships are by nature “promiscuous or exploitative.” Moreover, recent studies on homosexuality point to its relatively fixed, involuntary, and generally unalterable nature which contradicts Paul’s view that (3) homosexual desire is volitional.

Simply to take Paul’s condemnation at face value without fully wrestling with the implications of its shaky epistemological foundations leads to a theologically shallow and arbitrary exclusion that fails to deal with the intricate moral and ethical questions at stake. Thus, for Hunsinger, here is where the theological and ethical quandary begins. Given that the homosexual disposition is innate and unalterable, to forever

⁵*Book of Order 1999-2000: Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), G.60106b.

bar homosexuals from the pleasure, intimacy, mutuality and companionship monogamous sexual relationships afford seems cruel indeed. Though the traditional response of the church to this frustration has been to proffer celibacy, Hunsinger argues that requiring celibacy cuts against the Reformed grain that celibacy is a gift, not a work. Demanding celibacy apart from the gift unfairly condemns any sexual expression or intimacy that conforms to homosexual desire even if part of a life-long monogamous relationship. Left with the bitter choice between sterile abstinence and immoral promiscuity, too many gays and lesbians opt for promiscuous and exploitative sexual encounters.

On the other hand, if recent scientific insight and concern for equity are allowed to mitigate Paul's concerns, then a third way begins to emerge; one that better balances Paul's concerns with our current situation. According to Hunsinger, given what we now know about homosexuality, discreet toleration and respect should be extended to gays and lesbians who wish to serve the church as long as they are committed to monogamous sexual relationships. Though not on par with marriage, such relationships would be recognized and indeed encouraged so that sanctifying aspects of lifelong monogamy might benefit homosexuals even as they do heterosexuals. Accordingly, this discretion would extend towards those pursuing ordination "that all may freely serve." Thus, what is called for is resonance with Paul with regards to homosexuality as a tragic disorder, but a policy of discreet toleration in deference to our expanding knowledge as to the involuntary nature of homosexual desire.

Paul, Sexual Desire & the Will

Hunsinger's account relies on his view that Paul viewed homosexual desire is voluntary. The concern for choice in these matters looms large in that ethics in modernity is so framed by the question of moral decision. Upon closer examination of Paul's thought, however, what becomes clear is that trying to force Paul's thought into modern ethical categories in fact distorts his position.

The complexity of Paul's theological anthropology must be understood in light of two key phrases: *en sarki* ("in the flesh") and *kata sarkea* ("according to the flesh"). *En sarki* is a neutral term implying that humans are all embodied creatures with the body's discrete senses and appetites.

kata sarka, however, refers to a disordered orientation fixed on the indulgence of bodily appetites to the detriment of a balanced physical and spiritual life lived *kata pneuma* (according to the Spirit).

At the time of Paul, sexual desire was regarded as part of the appetitive aspect of the soul. Reason was to order the appetites in order to direct them towards the greater good. Thus, when properly disciplined desire for physical pleasure, good food, excitement, etc. posed no threat to living the good life. Nonetheless, the danger of passion and appetite lay in their potential threat to overthrow reason and thus enslave it. To live *kata sarka* meant to be captive “to one’s involuntary dispositions.”⁶

This “tragic disorder” was understood as the root of concupiscence: a word that has nearly disappeared from modern parlance. Nonetheless, concupiscence was considered far more grave than mere illicit chasing after things of the flesh. It was a deep and pernicious disorder that ruined life individually and corporately as it directed human beings away from licit communion with God and neighbor. Indeed, it was precisely the involuntary nature of the passions and appetites and their ability to tragically disorder that disturbed the ancient soul.

Thus, unlike moderns, who generally view the sexual drive as a romantic pre-occupation, a source of physical pleasure, or an uncomplicated biological mechanism to proliferate the species, for Paul and his contemporaries, sexual desire had spiritual implications that were not necessarily benign. That homosexuality was contrary to nature and might lead to promiscuous or exploitative sexual behavior wasn’t their concern. Rather, for Paul the danger of sexual disorder was the spiritual bondage and perverse idolatry it represented.

Accordingly, the link between disordered sexuality and idolatry, shame, death and destruction (Roman 1:26ff) makes sense. For Paul, sexual perversion was not a failure of the will, but a crippling inversion that enslaved it and bent individuals in upon themselves and away from God. We see this in Philippians 3:18ff where Paul described “even with tears” those who had become “enemies of the cross”. They had become enemies because “their god is their *koilia* (lower appetitive organs) and their glory is in their shame.” As Richard Hays has argued:

⁶ James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 62-64.

Once in the fallen state, we are not free not to sin: we are ‘slaves to sin’ (Rom 6:17), which distorts our perceptions, overpowers our will, and renders us incapable of obedience (Rom.7). Redemption (a word that means ‘being emancipated from slavery’ is God’s act of liberation, setting us free from the power of sin and placing us within the sphere of God’s transforming power for righteousness (Rom 6:20-22, 8:1-11, cf. 12:1-2).⁷

Ordered to their passions and appetites, their vision, their identity, and their worship had been perverted.

This why Paul believed homosexual desire itself was “prima facie evidence of humanities tragic confusion and alienation from God”.⁸ It wasn’t because such acts were exploitative or promiscuous that Paul condemned them, rather the acts themselves embodied the tragic perversion and enslavement of human existence *kata sarka*.

Certainly, this unravels the latter two premises of Hunsinger’s critique of Paul. Homosexual desire was not unethical because it represented a bad moral choice, rather it represented an ingrained condition that manifested a sinful disorder. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that Paul’s primary concern was with sexual “exploitation,” whereby someone takes advantage of another, nor “promiscuity,” whereby someone casually has sexual relations without commitment. Indeed, what is immediately evident is that these are modern concerns read back into Paul in order that we might evaluate their ethical inadequacy. Accordingly, if homosexuality is a condition and not a choice, then condemnation of homosexuality is on the same order of racism or sexism. Moreover, if concern were limited to exploitation or promiscuity, monogamous gay and lesbian relationships would resolve the issue.

Paul, Justice and the Body of Christ

What remains of Hunsinger’s initial description Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality is that it constitutes a tragic disorder contrary to nature.

⁷ Hays p. 390.

⁸ *ibid.* p. 389.

Where they diverge is the ethical significance of that disorder particularly in terms of its relationship to the church. For Hunsinger, the tragic disorder of homosexuality calls for understanding, sympathy and discreet toleration. For Paul, however, the toleration of sexual immorality in the church at Corinth has placed it and its members in peril.

Paul's reasoning here is in line with his understanding of the body of Christ. As Dale Martin has pointed out, to understand what Paul meant by "the body" one must leave behind the modern tendency to impose too rigid a distinction between Body and Soul.⁹ As moderns, we tend to view the body as natural, material, and biomechanical and distinguish it from the soul or mind, which is non-material, transcendental and spiritual. Nonetheless, as Martin points out, this is quite different than how the soul and body were perceived in Paul's milieu. Though the soul was viewed as qualitatively different from the body, nonetheless it was not immaterial. Indeed it permeated the body. Thus, bodily actions affected the soul and dispositions of the soul affected the body. Accordingly, to unite with another in sexual immorality was to become "one body" with another. Thus, both soul and body were defiled.

Moreover, this helps explain the ethical ramifications of sexual immorality for the whole church. Identity was socially configured in Paul's day. It was assumed that the individual was but a microcosm of the social body.¹⁰ Thus, just as salvation and future resurrection was assured by being one "in Christ," so also was the believer to "honor God with (their) body."¹¹ Just as the body was defiled by sexual immorality as a "permeable entity" subject to spiritual forces, so also the communal body was subject to defilement when by its members engaged in sexual immorality. Accordingly, such acts were not isolated to individuals but threatened the peace and harmony of the whole church. For Paul and the early church, discreet tolerance wasn't an option. If righteousness and unity were to prevail, desire must be fitly ordered both individually and corporately.

For Paul, the suppression of disorder came by grace through faith in Christ, whereby the love of God overwhelmed the soul's narcissistic bent upon itself. Nonetheless, there is nothing in Paul to suggest that this reorientation didn't require struggle nor without a commitment to celibacy

⁹ Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 37.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 131.

where necessary. For Paul there was only one suitable ordered avenue for lawful sexuality and that was marriage. And even marriage, in Paul's view, was inferior to chastity in singleness.

Paul and Repression:

Some might ask, "doesn't Paul's view smack of all the Christian prudery and sexual repression that we have been trying to liberate ourselves from for over two millennia?" At least in terms of the autonomous self, the answer is indubitably yes. Hunsinger's view dovetails well with those who would leave behind Paul's archaic view of concupiscence and the permeable body as irrelevant to modern consciousness that takes individual autonomy and the need for sexual fulfillment as sacred. In turn, they would argue we should embrace gay, lesbian, heterosexual and bisexual pastors now free to join gay, lesbian, heterosexual and bisexual actors, teachers, lawyers, senators, laureates, and poets who have come out of their repressive sexual closets so as to discover their true selves.

Yet, precisely at this point Paul's words should tug at our conscience, for what he warned of has become the hallmark of modernity. As the philosopher Michel Foucault has shown, the modernist myth of sexual repression is just that: a myth. Rather than sexual repression, the last four centuries have seen an ever increasing "incitement to discourse" about sexuality.¹² That the repressive hypothesis was a myth didn't bother Foucault. He believed sexuality is no more than a social construct infinitely malleable to suit human need and desire. His profound insight was how the myth of repression in an age of rapid change and perplexity met the need of moderns to find identity and meaning in light of sexual disposition. This is why in modern usage terms like "gay" or "straight" are words that today signify essence. As Foucault argued, sexual activity in modernity is a matter of self-realization.¹³

Herein lies the modernist rub that gives rise to Hunsinger's concern for equity. To condemn and forbid homosexual acts is to deny the realization of a homosexual's essence, person and ultimate identity. Thus, the common refrain of practicing homosexuals who protest the demand of

¹² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), pp. 15ff

¹³ *ibid.* p. 43.

abstinence: “basically you are asking me to deny who I am”, rather than the more ancient line “discipleship is to repress illicit desire by faith, grace and godly discipline for your own sake and the sake of the body of Christ”.

In many ways, Foucault’s depiction resonates with that of Paul. The world he describes in many ways embodies the spiritual autism of life lived *kata sarka* over which Paul wept over two millennia ago. For Paul, homosexual desire was not limited to individuals but affected whole communities including the church. Sexual disorder needed to be condemned as a manifestation of the greater disorder of human alienation from God. Though we moderns pride ourselves as enlightened and self-aware beings at home with our sexuality, we are constantly reminded of sexual disorder’s dark side. The startling rise of STD’s, the vast expansion of the world-wide web of pornography, the brutal kidnapping and rape of women by criminal syndicates to provide for the growing trade in sex, the hideous specter of AIDS in Africa and Asia remind us that human sexual disorder haunts our world. The critical question that remains is how should the church respond to these crises.

Those of a modernist bent believe that it is through education, self-awareness, acceptance and embrace of our true selves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual. For Hunsinger, the equitable solution is to recognize the disorder but to contain it through discrete toleration and monogamy. For Paul’s such discreet tolerance would be folly, for to tolerate disorder threatens the body of Christ. Moreover, the fact that Paul’s admonishes the Corinthians against sexual immorality did not flow from a lack of compassion. Indeed, the ranks of the Corinthian church were made up of the formerly disordered.

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed,
you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the
Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor.
1:11)

Thus, the church is to respond with compassion to the tragically disordered. Nonetheless, to embrace the disorder itself as our fundamental identity perverts grace. As Paul recognized, though pernicious, our perversion is remedied through the transformation and the inner

re-ordering according to the body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this life, Augustine argued, Christians will continue to struggle with the vestiges of their former disorder. Nonetheless, that struggle is a sign of the Holy Spirit at work through the good offices of the church. Yet, it is for this very reason, that we should not contort the precious crucible of the Church so that it conforms to a “tragic disorder.” Rather, it is our duty to uphold the good and pure order of Jesus Christ as revealed in his Word.

Rev Dr Thomas Harvey is lecturer in Theology and Ethics in Trinity Theological College and works with the Singapore Presbyterian Church as a Partner in Mission sent from the Presbyterian Church (USA). He is a contributor to *A Christian Response to the Life Sciences*, NCCS, 2002 as well as numerous articles on Theology and Ethics.