

“Holding Hands Is Not For Sissies”
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Apologies for the lack of preparation – I look forward to your comeback on this essay so I can panel beat it back into shape.

Introduction

I believe that the DEWCOM document on homosexuality is a God revealed position for the MCSA. So I want to avoid repeating its position. I simply add my own voice and hopefully material that is not currently part of the document.

I base my affirmation of homosexuality on my Christian convictions and do not believe that it is at odds with a Christian interpretation of the Bible. Furthermore, I believe that gay and lesbian people have suffered because of often brutal prejudice theologically supported by a superficial reading of scripture.

I use an historical critical reading of scripture, which takes into consideration matters of cultural prejudice and circumstance when trying to discern the meaning behind a text. This leads me to believe that many texts in the Bible are no longer appropriate for deciding Christian norms either because Jesus has directly subverted them, or because they are not part of a balanced Methodist reading, which must also take into account reason, tradition and experience.

I acknowledge that this is my opinion and that others differ sincerely because of their own strongly held views of sexuality and the Bible. But regardless of our personal opinions, the call for justice is one no one can ignore.

This paper begins with a personal journey but touches briefly on matters of exegesis and theology. To me, the example of Jesus makes personal encounter the starting point of Gospel ethics. It is a shame that no one here, to my knowledge, is gay or lesbian and so we all are speaking about people who are not present.

Journey

I once told “moffie” jokes and poked fun at effeminate boys at school. Like most boys at school, I constantly guarded against the accusation that I might be a “moffie”. In primary school a “moffie” was someone who wore long pants and shoes after school.

In Std. 9 my mother left us. She left a note on the fridge telling Dad she had decided to leave him for a woman: a close family friend she had been comforting during a messy divorce.

My nascent homophobia exploded into a passionate hatred fuelled by my newly acquired Pentecostal faith. It was clear to me that Mom’s dysfunction was caused by her sexual permissiveness. The Bible said so.

At university I met a long lost friend, Mary, who I hadn’t seen since we were in high school. We had been close and it was good to reconnect. It was as if we began where we left off so many years before. Now we were enjoying together the heady atmosphere of academic adventure and personal freedom. Our friendship had never been anything more than platonic, but it was intimate; we shared deeply.

Then one day Mary asked to see me.

She said she had something important to tell me... that she was scared to tell me.

On the steps of the student union in the stark sunlight of autumn she confessed her homosexuality. She had known since she was very young and was in love with a mutual friend.

I distinctly remember the moment. It is vividly etched in my memory. The warm surrounding afternoon, the sense of the world slowing down, my mind whirling. Looking back, I think of it as a "Damascus Road" experience.

I had a split second to make a decision. I had to choose between my conviction and my loyalty to a friend. It was that clear. There was no theological discourse, no torturous exegesis or examination of evidence. Friend or faith?

I chose my friend. It was not a considered choice, for I was thrown into theological and emotional consternation. I experienced the classic dissonance between conscience and practice. But something had irrevocably changed in me.

I started meeting gays and lesbians all over the place! It was as if my eyes had been opened but in fact it was my heart.

So many of these friends had tried to change. Many of them had come to a grudging acceptance of their orientation; others were still trying to change. The lengths to which they would go to try and redeem themselves were extraordinary. One friend even signed up for two years of electro convulsive therapy – to no avail.

My "Damascus Road" choice was now played out a theological level. How could a God who I considered perfect create someone with a sinful condition they were unable to change no matter how sincere their desire or radical their reformative behaviour? My ethical dissonance and theological searching led me back to a more careful reading of scripture.

I was shocked to discover that Leviticus which was so clear about homosexuality was also clear about what to do with gays (it didn't mention lesbians): execution. But of course it was also clear about shellfish and long hair...

But St. Paul was a little harder to deal with. My Greek professor helped me to see some of the difficulties in 1 Corinthians 6. The best translation of *malakoi* "seemed to be "catamites" which roughly speaking would translate into today's parlance as "paedophilia". I couldn't reconcile this with the behaviour of my friends, none of whom are paedophiles.

As to *arsenokoi'tai* clarity was even harder to come by. The theory that I found most compelling was Robin Scrogg's suggestion that this was Paul's own word created from the Greek version of Lev 18:23 and 20:13: *arsen* = "male," and *koite* = "bed," which translate the Hebrew for "lying with a male". But Paul's use of Leviticus for this purpose did not make it easier for me to accept his teaching as normative given his selective use of Leviticus in this case. On what grounds was Paul ignoring all the food laws and circumcision laws when it came to Gentiles? And why does Paul only once refer to lesbians (Romans 1:26) and then only obliquely? If this issue was as serious then as it is today, surely more close attention would have been paid to it?

On the other hand, some have suggested that *arsenokoi'tai* should be translated as "sodomites" but this is even more confusing as there is little evidence to support the idea that the sin of Sodom was homosexuality. Further, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is shocking to modern ears not so much because of the apparent homosexuality but because Lot offers his daughters as substitutes. Using this story as source for ethics is highly problematic.

I wouldn't be surprised if Paul was homophobic, but he was also sexist, despite some of his radical ideas about women. I have come to see that Paul was human, not the mouthpiece of God. I am not convinced that Paul understood homosexuality beyond the narrow confines of temple prostitution, pedasty and paedophilia. Such practices are far removed from a faithful, life long, mutually loving, monogamous partnership.

In the meantime I made peace with Mom and I continued to meet wonderful people whose commitment to Jesus was more admirable than my own but who find themselves excluded from the church because of attitudes I once shared about their sexuality.

Two issues frame the debate about same-sex unions. The one is how we as Christians read the Bible and the other is how we understand justice.

The Bible

As you can see, I have read the Bible through my personal experience. When, for instance, I read Jesus' theology of marriage now, I come to a very different conclusion than I might have in high school.

I am struck by what Jesus leaves out of his theology on marriage. In Mark 10:2-9 Mark portrays him as quoting Genesis to support a hard line against divorce. But, while most theologies on marriage will quote Genesis 1:28 Jesus does not. For Jesus procreation is not the best reason to be married. He does quote vs. 27 affirming that the image of God is held in both male and female; a fitting rebuttal to the interrogators prejudiced view of women as domestic chattel. But, more importantly, it is not marriage that is the image of God, it is the people God has created, married or not. Marriage is not the cornerstone of society. A fully alive human person is – male or female.

Jesus then quotes Genesis 2:24 deliberately choosing the second creation story which focuses more on the companionship between Adam and Eve than their procreative imperative. Jesus chooses the idea of companionship as the foundational idea of marriage. He specifically rejects the idea of procreation as *the* basis for marriage. He also speaks against the notion that the man is the most important part of a marriage.

This undermines the traditional conception of marriage as the precursor to family life. For Jesus, it is lifelong companionship that is more important. This must have been a radical departure from his culture, steeped as it was in the preservation of national identity through the insurance of the next generation.

In Matthew's version (19:10-12) of Jesus' theology on marriage Jesus goes on to speak of eunuchs. This confusing exchange with his disciples has often been taken as a justification for a celibate priesthood but this exegesis completely ignores the fact that there is nothing in the text to suggest that "eunuch" should be read metaphorically. Neither does this exegesis take into account the remarkably widespread practice amongst earlier Christians of voluntary castration as a sign of religious commitment.

A "celibacy" exegesis also assumes that eunuchs were regarded as celibate and virtuous in Jesus' day, which is not the case. In fact they were more often viewed with suspicion and fear as their questionable gender gave them access to various political intrigues as well as a sexually ambivalent promiscuity. While this perception of eunuchs was in large part prejudiced, it is the perception that would have coloured people's response to Jesus statements.

That Jesus suggests the idea of voluntary castration as a religious rite is shocking in the extreme and suggests that, while a Christian version of eunuchism undoubtedly stood apart from the perception of

promiscuity of other eunuchs, it still undermined the traditional binary understanding of human sexuality.

Indeed, Jesus' apparent celibacy and Paul's negative marriage theology already undermines conventional understandings of the role of men and women as well as the scriptural imperative to procreate.

Justice

Conventional Christian theology has made the heart of the gospel Jesus' command to love God and love one's neighbour as oneself. Versions of this theology have focussed on a personal relationship with Jesus as an indication of one's meeting the requirements of the gospel.

This theology does not go far enough. Jesus' command to love one's enemy is a companion statement to the command to love God and neighbour. It is of equal importance particularly because of the centrality this command played in Jesus' own earthly adventure.

A personal friendship with Jesus is important but ignores the corporate nature of Jesus' theology and the obvious friendship involved with Jesus' friends. It is relatively easy to confess to a personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Saviour without the complication of examining one's relationship to the friends of Jesus.

Such concerns lead practically to concerns about justice, too often relegated to a chapter in a systematic treatment from creation to end times. Justice in fact is as core a principle as the love of God and neighbour.

In South Africa the call for same-sex union is a matter of justice. Same-sex couples run a gamut of problems that opposite-sex couples are protected from. For instance, the law guarantees the rights of kinship in a marriage but this is not the case for same-sex couples. So when a spouse in an opposite-sex couple dies, the surviving spouse is guaranteed inheritance and ownership of assets is clear. On the other hand, gay and lesbian people find themselves fighting for property with families who dispute the legitimacy of long standing relationships.

The recognition of same-sex relationships is also about the general legitimacy of gay and lesbian people who still suffer severe persecution because of their inability to be heterosexual. Rape is a common form of rehabilitation used in South Africa to cure lesbians. This is an untenable situation that must be addressed with urgency. The continued prejudice of the church adds fuel to such behaviour and must be seen as belonging to the same unjust continuum as rape.

The church is duty bound to speak out against such atrocities and to support the rights of minorities to enjoy all the freedoms of the majority without prejudice. Even if the church continues to regard homosexuality as a sin, it cannot deny justice to those who cry for it outside the church.

The OT prophets often called Israel to account for its mistreatment of "sojourners" – people from neighbouring nations. The place of the foreigner in God's heart as expressed by the prophets is an interesting one. These foreigners were undoubtedly of other faiths and may have come from nations that actively opposed Israel's nationhood and religion. Yet the call to care for sojourners makes no distinction between deserving or undeserving recipients of God's grace and neither does it carry any suggestion that such sojourners will or should become believers in Yahweh. The principle was rather one of unconditional hospitality as a way of demonstrating God's love of all people.

Jesus stands in the same tradition with his counter-cultural attitude to Samaritans and his acceptance of those beyond the pale of acceptable society. The story of Zaccheus is instructive in this regard, as Z is

drawn to Jesus before his act of restitution. His restitution is not a pre-requisite for but a joyous response to forgiveness.

Those who have a conservative view of homosexuality need to learn from this scriptural call to justice as a prior call to the call to reformation. Even if one sees homosexuality as a sin, one cannot ignore the hospitality of God offered before the requirement of faith.

Common Ground

Jesus command to love one's enemies rings loudly for me in this debate. Not all enemies wish death upon each other. Some enemies just refuse to hold hands.

I stand as one of a few in the MCSA who hold the opinion I have expressed above. My own congregations are not wholly supportive of this point of view either, despite 7 years of working with me. But I remain their pastor and I remain colleagues with those who disagree with me.

I would like to hold hands with those who disagree with me theologically. This will be difficult because I may end up holding hands with homosexuals on the one side and those I disagree with on the other side. This may be an impossible position. If I fail, it will be because I will not let go of the hands of my gay and lesbian friends.

I want to make the call for the separation of civil union and marriage. As Marriage Officers we perform a dual function as spiritual facilitators of a journey of discipleship called marriage and as civil servants of a civil-legal contract.

This confusion of roles has meant that the state now can redefine marriage when in actual fact it should be redefining civil unions. I am dismayed by the state of marriage in the church and our failure to train couples appropriately for the lifelong journey they undertake together. We lack any integrity when speaking to the failure of secular marriages because there is no difference between the church and secular society.

Conservatives and liberals alike can stand together in reclaiming the institution of marriage as a means to protect it from the myth of romance that has crept into Christian marriage.

If we succeed in separating marriage from civil unions we can offer justice for gays and lesbian in secular society and hopefully begin a discussion of the what Christian marriage is. Part of this discussion will have to be about whether the church can sanction same-sex marriages.

I want to appeal that the matter of homosexuality be seen as a matter of personal opinion, left to the individual conscience of a minister or even a congregation.

On the matter of Communion, we have an open table for all who are Baptized, which includes children, but we allow for the fact that some children, in discussion with their parents, choose not to take Communion until their confirmation. This is a matter of opinion, which impacts on something fundamental to our faith, the sacramental centrality of baptism and communion.

Yet on a matter, which has very little scriptural foundation, we are prepared to make a rule, which is far more stringent, and not allow freedom of conscience. This seems to betray prejudice rather than clearly thought through theology.

The church is already recognising a difference in pastoral response as well as theological conviction. ESTTeam has been endorsed by the Cape Synod. This is a group that specifically works for a change in the church's attitude toward gay and lesbian people. Furthermore, the church turns a blind eye to the

many same-sex couples sitting in the pews (I suspect because they pay well!). The church also does not discipline ministers who encourage homosexual expression.

For instance, I am aware of a few couples that are part of my congregations who are openly gay. I also know that they are having sex with each other, but I do not speak against it and in fact have defended their behaviour on occasion. I should, therefore, stand at Synod and confess that I do not observe our discipline.

But I confess to being confused about what our discipline is!

Conclusion

I believe it is possible for the church to hold hands while disagreeing on the issue of same-sex unions. I don't think that this will be easy but being friends with Jesus' friends always takes courage.

I believe some of Jesus' friends are gay and lesbian and want to get married. I believe Jesus is looking forward to being invited to the party. I hope we can have the party in the church.

In Matthew's story, Jesus deals with marriage and then has an encounter with the rich young man. I long for the day that the church can get beyond this last respectable prejudice and concentrate on its core business of transforming the profound economic injustice prevalent in our world.