

# HUMAN SEXUALITY AND ITS CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A paper delivered before the 137th Convention of the Diocese of Pittsburgh  
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I first wish to thank Bishop Duncan and Canon Hays for affording me this opportunity to share some reflections with you on the topic of human sexuality. I must say at the outset, however, that I have some serious reservations about this morning's event being billed as "The Great Debate." "Debate" conjures up for me a high school or college ritual, in which two individuals (or teams) are given a proposition, often fanciful or preposterous, such as "Resolved that the Federal income tax be abolished." The teams are then expected to proffer, respectively, arguments for and against the proposition (often irrespective of their personal beliefs) and the winner is that team or individual who crafts the more clever argument.

The question of human sexuality is far too weighty an issue at this juncture in the life of our church to award victory to the more clever presenter this morning. (This, in any case, would be a difficult call, indeed, given the consummate intelligence, polished erudition and exuberant charm all too evident in the personages of both the Dean of Trinity School for Ministry and the Rector of Calvary Parish.) Rather, I offer my comments in the spirit of ongoing dialogue, as encouraged by Resolution 1.10 of the 1998 Lambeth Conference. In it, the bishops assembled said "We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons"<sup>1</sup> (and, one would presume, to others not of homosexual orientation who wish to contribute to the dialogue). Further, the resolution mandates that "the Primates and the Anglican Consultative Council establish a means of monitoring the work done on the subject of human sexuality in the Communion and to share statements and resources with us." The wording of this resolution would lead us to believe, as the Archbishop of Canterbury stated in the fifteenth annual Baiz Lecture at Calvary this summer, that even the bishops responsible for promulgating the resolutions on human sexuality believe that what they have written may very likely not be the last word on the subject.

Moreover, although the publicity for this morning's event highlighted the "differing views" of the speakers, I would like to suggest that my learned colleague and I, as Christian pastors and theologians committed to upholding the faith as our branch of Christendom has received it, are both in search of the truth. We both pray with sincerity the words of Cranmer's great prayer for the Church: "Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where in anything it is remiss, reform it." I would hope that we would see the current controversy over human sexuality as a challenge, a challenge to our deeper understanding of scripture and moral theology, all the while asking the question: Where is the Holy Spirit leading the Church? Charles Hefling, in his collection of essays on human sexuality entitled *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*, says this:

The turmoil in Christian churches over issues that have to do with sex and sexuality is hardly a blessing, but it need not be a wholly bad thing either. There has seldom been a time when Christians were not embroiled in one noisy dispute or another, and unedifying though the quarrels were, their result in the long run has been to refine and clarify what Christianity is and what it is for. If, as the adage says, the church is always getting reformed, its reformation seems to go hand in hand with controversy.<sup>2</sup>

My remarks are predicated on the belief that homosexuality, i.e., the *state* of being attracted to members of one's own sex, is morally neutral. The Lambeth resolution [1.10] in my opinion supports such an hypothesis. That resolution admittedly "rejects homosexual *practice* as incompatible with Scripture," but makes it clear that it "recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual *orientation*" and "assure[s] them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, *regardless of sexual orientation*, are full members of the Body of Christ." [Emphasis added.] The phrase "experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation" speaks to the second of my premises,

namely, that homosexual orientation is not a choice. Most heterosexual individuals, if asked why they chose to be straight, would dismiss the question with a comment like “I didn’t choose it; that’s just the way I am.” Homosexual persons should be accorded the same privilege, not merely out of politeness, but because the preponderance of evidence now points to genetic predisposition as a determinant for sexuality, not environmental factors in other words, nature not nurture. Desmond Tutu, former Archbishop of Cape Town, put it this way: “We struggled against apartheid in South Africa because we were being blamed and made to suffer for something we could do nothing about. It is the same with homosexuality. The orientation is a given, not a matter of choice.”<sup>3</sup>

And while we are learning to disabuse ourselves of the phrase “sexual preference,” for reasons just outlined, let us also jettison the phrase “homosexual life style.” There is, of course, no such thing. To use the term is to engage in stereotyping, and to suggest that all homosexuals live, move, breathe, and have their being in exactly the same way. It is as preposterous a term as “straight life style” or “black life style.” The homosexual population, like its heterosexual counterpart, is made up of “all sorts and conditions” of men and women.

The Lambeth resolution, as we have pointed out, recognizes the existence of a homosexual orientation, and declares that persons with such an orientation are full members of the Church, using wording very similar to a 1976 General Convention resolution. It makes it clear, however, that sexual acts born of such an orientation are forbidden by scripture. Moreover, it cites Holy Scripture as the basis for its statement expressing the belief that neither same-sex unions nor the ordination of persons involved in such relationships should be countenanced. In light of these statements, it seems appropriate to focus my remaining remarks on three topics, *viz.*, homosexuality and the Bible, the ordination of homosexual persons, and the question of same-sex blessings, fully cognizant that in less than half an hour it is really impossible to address adequately any one of these.

### **Homosexuality and the Bible**

Those in the debate on homosexuality who have condemned its existence or its practice have done so largely based on their understanding of scripture. A press release from Lambeth, in the heat of the debate, reported that “the strongest support for the resolution came from African and Asian conservatives who insisted on a *strict biblical understanding of sexual morality.*” The Bishop of Ruwenzori, Uganda, asserted that *homosexual activity is condemned as immoral in both the Old and New Testaments.* The Bishop of Mityana, Uganda, asserted that Anglicans in his region were aware of what science and philosophy have to say on homosexuality, but declared that for them, *“the final truth resides in Scripture.”* Closer to home, a group of American bishops, members and supporters of the organization then known as the Episcopal Synod of America, wrote to the bishops in the Diocese of Pennsylvania, where an ordination of an openly gay person had taken place, and accused them of having “departed from *the clear Biblical teaching on homosexuality.*”

What does the Bible say on the subject? The short answer is very little. It is not mentioned in the Ten Commandments. There is no allusion to the topic in any of the books of the Prophets. Jesus himself is silent on the subject. Nor does it loom large (as do idolatry, contentiousness, and internecine strife, for example) as a matter of concern in any of the communities that Paul visited. Before we look at some of the passages often pointed to as evidence of Biblical condemnation of homosexuality, a word should be said about the alleged clarity of the Bible on the subject.

Many who suggest that the Bible is unequivocal on the subject are loath to make such absolute claims about other topics on which the Bible is in fact clearer. It can be alleged that the Bible, if we read the Pauline epistles, is clear on its position on slavery. Indeed, at the height of the debate on slavery during the Civil War, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, appealing to the writings of Paul, published two works in which he passionately defended the institution of slavery. Scripture is no less clear on the role of women in church. Paul maintains that they should remain covered (i.e., hatted) in church, lest their hair become a distraction (I Cor. 11:5-6). Moreover, he maintains that they should keep silence in church (I Cor. 14:34-5)

and that if they wish to know anything, should ask their husbands at home! Even more significantly, an argument could be made (as indeed it has, until recently) based on the sayings of Jesus himself, for the indissolubility of marriage, the theological impossibility of divorce, and the inherent sinfulness of remarriage. Most Christians today, using the tools made available to us through hermeneutics, would assert that as regard slavery and women, these sayings of Paul should be seen in the cultural context in which he wrote. Ushers in our parishes are not instructed to bar hatless women at the west door, or to provide veils for them. And very few persons, to my knowledge, have convincingly invoked the “silence” verse as an argument against the ordination of women. The relatively new Episcopal Church canons allowing for divorce and remarriage are based on a more pastoral and less juridical approach to marriage, and have taken into consideration such factors as emotional immaturity, irreconcilable differences, incompatibility, fraud, abuse, and other factors that have influenced the church’s decision not to feel bound by what for centuries was a clear Dominical standard.

Texts normally cited as indicative of the Bible’s disapproval or prohibition of homosexuality fall into four categories: the Creation accounts in Genesis; narrative passages that are said to illustrate the inherent wrongness of homosexuality; legal texts that forbid it; and mention of homosexuality in New Testament lists of inappropriate behaviors. The Creation story, in the first chapter of Genesis, for example, has often been pointed to as evidence that heterosexuality, and, concomitantly, marriage and procreation, is God’s wish for all of his creatures. Proponents of this view, half in jest, comment that the story is about Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve! But some commentators point out that Genesis, being a paradigm about the establishment of human society, appeals, of necessity, to the fact of human beings as biological creatures capable of reproduction. Genesis is silent on many aspects of the human condition, such as celibacy, of which Jesus himself was an exemplar, and which was extolled for much of Christian history as being more highly valued than marriage. The silence of scripture cannot be construed as disapproval or condemnation of aspects of life not specifically mentioned.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-9) is clearly the most famous instance in scripture in which homosexuality is seen to be condemned; indeed the narrative lives on in our vernacular in the word “sodomy.” But some Biblical scholars have questioned whether the sin for which Sodom was destroyed was in fact homosexuality, since the numerous Scriptural references to the sin of Sodom make no allusion to it. Indeed, there is an argument, based on Jesus’ own words (Matthew 10:14-15 and Luke 10:10-12) that Sodom’s sin was inhospitality. The (attempted) homosexual act in the story is rape, which, like any form of rape, is never to be condoned. But can this be construed to condemn all homosexual activity any more than David’s adulterous relationship with Bathsheba can be seen as condemnatory of all heterosexual activity?

While the prohibition against homosexual activity and the death penalty prescribed for it are unambiguous (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13) they are no less unambiguous than the other laws of the Holiness Code (e.g., the death penalty for children who slight their parents; the laws against such practices as crossbreeding animals; wearing clothing made of two kinds of fiber; trimming the end of one’s beard; and eating meat with blood on it, to name a few.) Virtually all of these prohibitions have been reconsidered in light of an understanding that they are culturally conditioned. Can the church justifiably hold up one or two verses of scripture among dozens, and contend that they should be more binding than other verses?

Cultural conditions, according to some Biblical scholars, were also factors at work in Paul’s writings on homosexuality. That Paul believed homosexual acts are wrong is probably not in dispute. But he believed they were wrong because they were examples to him of pagan morality. Moreover, to Paul, such acts were “unnatural.” But many things were unnatural to Paul, such as a man wearing long hair, and a woman cutting hers (I Cor. 11:14-15) or the idea that women could be superior to men in any way (since Adam was created before Eve). (I Tim. 2:11-14).

To argue that the Bible condemns or disapproves of homosexuality activity is a defensible position. The bishops at Lambeth were not groundless in their contention that homosexual practice is incompatible with scripture. But for such a position to have integrity, its proponents must eschew their propensity toward selectiveness. A Biblical scholar at Princeton put it this way:

It must be admitted that the standard Biblical texts—seven in all—that either mention or may allude to homosexual practice are uniformly negative about it ... Christian ethical decisions cannot, however, rest on those seven texts, for the application of each text is fraught with difficulties. If a decision is to be made about homosexuality as valid or invalid, it has to be on theological grounds.<sup>4</sup>

By this, the author means that proof-texting, involving, as it often does, the consideration of texts without reference to their context, cannot to be considered as *prima facie* evidence of the Bible's view on *any* subject. Holy Scripture has been used, for example to “prove” that drinking alcohol is a good thing (e.g., Ps. 104:15; I Tim. 5:23) as well as to “prove” its inherent evil (Lk. 21:34, Gal. 5:21). The failure to look at such factors as culture, the author's purpose and experience, as well as other factors, can color our perception.

### **The Ordination of Homosexual Persons**

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer is normally cited for its liturgical innovations, or more accurately, liturgical restorations. The catholic wing of the Episcopal Church has pointed to certain additions to the Prayer Book, such as the provision for rites for Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday, and the inclusion of a rite for the Reconciliation of a Penitent—and especially the Prayer Book's statement about the centrality of the Eucharist—as a vindication for its long-held practices and beliefs. But the 1979 Prayer Book has also made major contributions to the church's theology. In a church like ours which lays claim to neither a *magisterium*, as is evident in Rome, nor a charismatic leader such as Luther or Calvin, as is the case among our Protestant brothers and sisters, the Prayer Book, for good or ill, has become the chief repository of our theological positions. *Lex orandi lex credendi*.

I maintain that history will show that the most significant theological declaration contained in the 1979 Prayer Book is the answer to the question in the Catechism: “Who are the ministers of the Church?” That answer is: “The ministers of the church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons.” Through that statement which recognizes the integral role of the laity, the *hagioi*, the “real” saints of the church whom we commemorate today, the Feast of All Saints, the church returns to a more Biblical understanding of ministry in which laity share in the governance of the church. This theology has led, in turn, to such newly-minted phrases as “shared ministry,” “total ministry” and “mutual ministry,” which have tended to minimize differences among ministries, and to place all ministries on a par. Virtually gone from the church's thinking is anything akin to a “double standard.” No ministry is superior to any other; it is just different from others. I put to you that as regards the ordination of homosexual persons, the church has in many ways already ruled on the matter through this question-and-answer in the Catechism. Having placed all ministries on a par, and having declared in a resolution at the 1976 General Convention that “homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love and acceptance and pastoral concern on the Church,” it has now become theologically and canonically inconsistent to withhold ordination from persons for the sole reason that they possess a homosexual orientation. We can no longer say to the homosexual that he or she may sing in the choir, work on the altar guild, or swing a thurible, but tell that person that another ministry, namely the ordained ministry, is not open to him or her.

As a devotee of such courtroom TV series as “The Practice” and “Law and Order,” I do not want my remarks to be construed to suggest that homosexuals should be granted ordination because of a legal technicality. Let me make it clear that no individual has a right to be ordained. The church has a responsibility, in fact, to suggest other ministries to those, for example, whose motives are questionable, or whose psychological makeup unfits them for ordination. But I opine that the church cannot withhold ordination solely on the basis of sexual orientation, race, or, as we shall discuss later in this Convention, gender. The question is: Can the ordinand and his or her sponsors answer truthfully the questions posed to them in the Ordinal?

### **Same-sex Blessings**

One of the admittedly unscientific but nonetheless convincing arguments used to prove that homosexuality is not a choice is that, given the discrimination, abuse, scorn, ridicule and unfair treatment that gays and

lesbians have historically received, no one in his or her right mind would *choose* to be gay. One of the ways in which such discrimination is experienced is with respect to committed relationships. For the heterosexual, marriage is the socially accepted and church-sanctioned means of entering and remaining in a faithful and monogamous relationship. If, as I think many Christians now believe, the sexual orientation of the homosexual is one not of his or her choosing, is it fair to demand that the only option for such a person is a life of celibacy? Desmond Tutu, in his inimitable style, puts it this way:

Our Anglican Church says that orientation is okay, but gay sex activity is wrong. That is crazy. We say the expression of love in a monogamous, heterosexual relationship is more than just the physical but includes touching, embracing, kissing, maybe the genital act. The totality of this makes each of us grow to become more giving, increasingly godlike and compassionate. If it is so for the heterosexual, what earthly reason have we to say that it is not the case with the homosexual, provided the relationship is exclusive, not promiscuous. I hope that one day we will have the courage of our theology.<sup>5</sup>

Many persons object to the idea of same-sex blessings for a variety of reasons. One is a belief that its proponents somehow denigrate the sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Even Archbishop Carey commented that “the church should resist any diminishing of the fundamental *sacramentum* of marriage.”<sup>6</sup> Such a contention is, in my opinion, unfounded. People desirous of entering into a same-sex union or those willing to preside at a rite recognizing them have no contempt for marriage. Even *The New York Times*, which has recently changed its editorial policy to include reporting of same-sex celebrations on its coveted wedding page (known affectionately as “Mergers and Acquisitions”) explained that in so doing no disparagement of traditional weddings was intended or implied. People who wish to participate in a same-sex union simply wish to be recognized and accepted because they wish to make a lifelong commitment, and believe that it is appropriate for the church in which they are spiritually and sacramentally nurtured, and which has indicated that their sexual orientation should no longer to be a source of shame, to ask God’s blessing on their relationship. It has been suggested, half in jest, that a church which has no compunction about blessing the hounds in a fox hunt or a fleet of yachts before a regatta, should not balk at blessing two persons who love each other!

I think that the reaction to the idea of same-sex blessings (and maybe to homosexuality in general, for that matter) is more visceral than theological. To imagine two persons of the same sex standing at the altar is a paradigm shift, to say the least; it’s not on our radar screen; it may offend our sensibilities. I would point out that similar arguments were put forward by those opposed to women’s ordination. A chasuble and high heels was a fashion statement to which we were unaccustomed; polished nails holding a chalice seemed strange. I remember a conversation in the early 1970s between Barbara Harris, then a layperson, and a rather obese priest of blessed memory. The priest, in cataloguing reasons for his discomfort at the idea of women being ordained, remarked, “My goodness! What would a pregnant priest look like?” to which Barbara quipped, “About like you!”

Our discomfort with a particular situation does not give us the right to forbid it on those grounds. Laws mandating the integration of public facilities were enacted even though some people did not want to share them with racial minorities. A judge threw out the defense of a GI who said that his murder of a gay colleague grew out of the defendant’s discomfort at the presence of a homosexual man in the barracks.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I am a Neanderthal. I was present at the Houston General Convention in 1970 when the church approved the ordination of women to the diaconate (the same year that women were allowed to be seated in the House of Deputies.) My seminary class of some 30 people had only one woman, and only two persons over the age of 30 (who were in seminary under the so-called “old man’s canon!”) My ordination in 1971 predates the ordination of women, the new Prayer Book, and, blessedly, the canonical creation of the entity known as the Commission on Ministry. I have lived through several upheavals and struggles in the life of the Episcopal Church. As a young seminarian, I was a card-carrying member of the now defunct ESCRU (the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity) as we attempted to help the church come to grips with the sin of racism in its midst. As a newly ordained parish priest, my church’s pews were littered with the Green Book,

the Zebra Book, and other soft-covered and loose-leaf liturgical manuals as we made the painful transition from the 1928 to the 1979 Prayer Book. I lived through the General Convention's rejection of women's ordination to the priesthood in 1973, the illegal ordination of women in Philadelphia the following year, and the final approval in 1976.

All of these changes were painful and costly—painful because as an institution, the church's default position is to be resistant to change, costly because as we have engaged in navel-gazing, and have turned our attention toward internal matters, we have robbed the church of the energy that would otherwise have been expended on her missionary enterprise. We have weathered these storms for the most part and would be on a relatively even keel, headed toward safe haven, I think, were it not for the existence of a reef in the middle of the channel called homosexuality. Peter Gomes, in his bestseller, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*, suggests that

more than any other social or theological issue of our day, this one engages us at our most fundamental level of existence and raises disturbing questions about our own sense of identity, of morality, and of the nature of settled truth.... Unlike the topics of other moral debates, homosexuality is seen ... as an issue so central to right conduct and belief, that compromise or sweet reasonableness is thought to be capitulation to error, and therefore unacceptable.<sup>7</sup>

But we ignore the issue at our peril. Unfortunately, it has become a litmus test, so that one's position on the issue is seen, often erroneously, as an indication of one's position on many other matters, and indeed it is not infrequently used to determine people's orthodoxy, morality, and creedal or Biblical faith. In approaching this challenging situation, I would like to make a few suggestions, which I borrow from comments in my book, *Christian Social Witness*, a volume in the Church's New Teaching Series.<sup>8</sup>

I would like to suggest that in seeking to discover a moral and theological framework within which the church might explore the question of human sexuality, we should turn to Richard Hooker, the sixteenth-century theologian widely regarded as Anglicanism's chief apologist. It is Hooker to whom we are indebted for the "three-legged stool" of scripture, tradition and reason, on which the ethos and identity of Anglicanism is often said to rest. Hooker's genius was his ability to maintain continuity with traditions received from the past while accommodating the changes that new situations demand. Hooker's theological method requires, therefore, that the Bible does not stand alone.<sup>9</sup>

As we try to discern the mind of the church on the question of human sexuality, we must not fall into the trap of wresting legs from Hooker's stool, and using them as weapons against those who differ from us. We must first avoid the temptation of shaking the scripture leg, pointing to the purported inerrancy of the Bible as the only possible Christian standard. Likewise, we must eschew a tendency to regard revelation as a finite rather than a gradually evolving phenomenon, a stance which causes us to brandish the tradition leg, citing what the church "has always believed." An appeal to scripture and tradition can well lead us to embrace a view of human sexuality that allows no room for the validity, integrity and morality, much less the sanctity, of homosexual relationships.

In a church, however, that values the role of the human intellect, it is time to allow reason to function as Hooker intended it—namely, as a means through which we may look at scripture and tradition in a new light, informed, in part, by insights derived from the sciences. It is also time to approach homosexual persons not as statistics or as "cases," but as fellow children of God, people, often in committed relationships, who serve on our vestries and altar guilds, and who preach in our pulpits. Indeed, our renewed understanding of theological ethics, which has enabled Episcopalians to listen to the voices of racial minorities, women, and other groups once denied a place at the table, should allow us to listen to the experiences of sexual minorities as well. And our pastoral heart, which has enabled us to feel the pain of divorced persons and to rethink traditional moral strictures, should be no less in evidence in the church's ministry to its gay and lesbian members. As the words of the baptismal covenant remind us, Christians are called to seek and serve Christ in *all* people, respecting their dignity and striving always for justice on their behalf.

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- (1) Resolution 1.10 on Human Sexuality, the 1998 Lambeth Conference, cited in James E. Solheim, *Diversity or Disunity? Reflections on Lambeth 1998*. New York: The Church Publishing Co., 199, 251. All subsequent references to the resolution are from this source.
  - (2) Charles Hefling, *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*. Cowley, 1996, Introduction.
  - (3) Solheim, 33.
  - (4) “Choon Leong-Seow, Symposium on Human Sexuality, General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA, 1993.
  - (5) Cited in Solheim, 33.
  - (6) Archbishop George Carey, before the General Synod of the Church of England, cited in Solheim, 35.
  - (7) Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. New York: Win. Morrow, 144-5.
  - (8) Harold T. Lewis, *Christian Social Witness*. Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 2001. See esp. Chapter Seven, “Human Sexuality,” 127ff
  - (9) See James E. Griffith’s discussion of this point in *The Anglican Vision*, Cowley, 1999, 26-27.