

IS GAY GOOD?

by Rev. David C. Roper (Idaho Mountain Ministries)

Like to the apples on the Dead Sea's shore,
All ashes to the taste
—Lord Byron

The closet doors are wide open these days; homosexuals are stepping out, asking for acceptance. I understand their desire for approval. The heart of the homosexual condition is the human condition—a deep loneliness, a search for identity and a normal and natural longing for relationship and unconditional affection. As homosexual writer Frank O'Hara said, "I am the least difficult of men: All I want is boundless love."

We owe all men and women love. However, love is not incompatible with moral standards. Gay is not good and we do gays no good when we say that it is. Homosexuality inveighs against biblical and traditional notions of human sexuality and marriage—the fundamental social concept of one man and one woman together for life—and it can only result in final tragedy.

Homosexuality is no more wrong than any other sin. When it comes down to it, there's no fundamental difference between any of us. Only the incident of temptation is different. Given the proper incentive we will all fall. Bad habits develop, gather strength and enslave us. If God were to unilaterally and comprehensively judge sin, who could stand?

But still, having said that, I am convinced that homosexuality is wrong and despite the media blitz and the tide of public opinion we must say that it is. A friend indeed is one who says quietly, but firmly to anyone we love, "What you're doing, my friend is wrong. It is harmful to you and to others. It is destructive to God's dream for you." As followers of Jesus we have no other alternative.

The current debate

One problem with the current homosexual debate is that it's impossible to engage in reasonable debate. Those who express the slightest uneasiness about homosexual practices are dismissed as bigots or homophobes. On one NBC special, Maria Shriver explained all opposition away by concluding, "It all comes down to fear."

Opposition to gays and gay rights, however mild, is equated with racism and bigotry. Hugh Downs, the host of ABC's 20/20, recently used his commentary to compare those who express anti-gay sentiments to the Ku Klux Klan. Scott Simon, the host of NBC's Today Show compared those involved in Oregon's anti-gay rights initiative with Hitler's Nazis, describing the wording of the initiative as "language that some leaders of Oregon's Jewish community recognize and revile."

Gay advocates take the higher ground. They're the kinder, gentler, tolerant folks. They portray homosexuals as a legitimate minority compared to blacks and Jews. The issue is civil rights, a cause much like the struggle for equal rights by ethnic minorities. Those who express discomfort with that

idea, who sincerely believe that homosexuality has to do with behavior, are characterized as hate-mongers: intolerant, repressed, racist bigots who get their kicks from bashing gays.

I find that most Christians are confused on this matter. Our minds have been muddled by the media. We, of all people, ought to be known by our love. What can we say to those who charge us with hate, bigotry and prejudice when we say gay is not good? Where do we stand when gay Christian activists and biblical scholars tell us that gay is okay, claiming that Paul, Jonathan and other biblical paragons were homosexual. Some even suggest that Jesus' single state and all-male apostolic companions imply that he was gay. So we ask: What are we to believe?

The place to begin is with the scriptures, our final court of appeal.

The hard scrabble streets of Sodom

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning." "No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square." But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate.

Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof." "Get out of our way," they replied. And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them."

They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door. But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door.

The two men said to Lot, "Do you have anyone else here—sons-in-law, sons or daughters, or anyone else in the city who belongs to you? Get them out of here, because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it."

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, "Hurry and get out of this place, because the LORD is about to destroy the city!" But his sons-in-law thought he was joking. With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot, saying, "Hurry! Take

your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.”

When he hesitated, the men grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them. As soon as they had brought them out, one of them said, “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!” (Genesis 19:1-17).

Moses describes Sodom as exceedingly wicked, “sinners before the Lord” (Genesis 13:13). The Hebrew idiom is literally, “sinners in the LORD’s face,” suggesting a defiant, “in your face” disposition. One aspect of their resistance to God’s will is singled out: wide-spread homosexual practices.

The men of Sodom have been historically linked with homosexuality, so much so that the term sodomy is equivalent to homosexuality. However in recent years there has been a studied effort to deny that the Sodomites were characterized by sodomy.

Some years ago, author Sherwin Bailey, in a book entitled *Homosexuality and Western Christian Tradition*, sought to overturn the traditional interpretation of this passage by insisting that the demand to “know” the strangers was merely a desire to get better acquainted with them. He suggested that Lot, a comparative new-comer to Sodom, had breached their etiquette by housing the two strangers without being fully aware of their credentials. Bailey argued that the word “know” in this context merely means “to know” and has no sexual connotation. He points out that of 943 occurrences of “know” in the Old Testament in only fourteen passages does it refer to sexual intercourse.

This is a remarkable bit of exegesis, ignoring as it does a fundamental rule of interpretation, namely that context determines meaning. The Hebrew word “to know” occurs only 14 times in the book of Genesis and in 10 of those occurrences it clearly refers to sexual intercourse.

In the near context, the word is used with respect to Lot’s presumably more attractive offer to swap his daughters for the strangers. He argues that they are virgins—they have not “known” a man (Genesis 19:18). Clearly here some sort of sexual encounter is envisioned.

Gay advocates also allude to a passage in Ezekiel that refers to the Sodomites as being merely inhospitable (Ezekiel 16:48). Their sin, they say, was that they treated strangers with grave disrespect, a serious sin in a Semitic society.

But the text is not that simple: while it is true that Ezekiel indicts the Sodomites for their lack of hospitality he also insists that they committed “abominations” before God, using a Hebrew word that means “shameful”—the same word that is applied to homosexual practices elsewhere in the Old Testament (Cf. Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). It is for that reason God “removed” Sodom (Ezekiel 16:50).

The final word is Jude’s: “Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them...indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh...” (Jude 7).

Two men in bed

Do not lie with a man (Heb: zakar—male) as one lies with a woman; that is detestable (Heb: to'ebah—something shameful) (Leviticus 18:22).

The Hebrew of this text is very precise: It envisions two males engaging in a sex act and defines the practice as shameful.

The background of this verse is the Lord's instruction to Moses: "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the Lord your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees'" (Leviticus 18:1-5).

This was preparation for life in Canaan where every conceivable form of sexual expression was permissible. This portion of the law occurs in the so-called Holiness Code and delineates the ways in which Israel was to be different from the nations. It prohibits incest (18:6–18); sexual aggression (18:19), adultery (18:20), child prostitution (18:21) homosexuality (18:22) and bestiality (18:23), because these practices would defile God's people.

Some have sought to evade the implications of this verse by saying that the Law no longer binds us. This is true. We're not bound by the Old Covenant, but by the New. However, the New Testament provides the inspired interpretation and explication of the Old. It leads us to set some portions of the Old Testament aside (The civil and ceremonial laws, for example); others are brought over intact and restated in the New Testament. In this case, as we shall see, the New Testament reiterates the Old Testament teaching that homosexuality is sin.

Others have thought to work around this text by insisting that Moses is only condemning rape, cult prostitution or, in another variation, illicit homosexual affairs. They argue that Moses is silent about homosexual "marriages" and long-term, loving commitment.

But that won't wash unless we're prepared to say that incest, sexual brutality, adultery and pederasty are equally acceptable as long as they're practiced in a context of love and commitment. I don't know of anyone who would go that far.

The wrath of God

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion (Romans 1:26,27).

The argument of this passage in Romans begins in verse 18 where Paul asserts that God's wrath is revealed against ungodliness by permitting men and women to do what they please. One aspect of that terrible freedom is same-sex unions.

Paul labels such activity “unnatural,” which does not mean that homosexual orientations necessarily feels unnatural. (Some gays would say that their sexual preference seems quite natural.) No, by “unnatural” Paul means that homosexual behaviors are against the nature of God’s created order and are an indication of the lengths to which men and women will go when they let go of God.

Homosexuality is not the worst sin. It’s important to understand that. It is, however, the most degrading thing that one can do to his or her body.

The way we were

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 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 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Here’s an ugly list of sins in which all of us can find ourselves. This passage clearly teaches that those who continue in a settled course of sin, without repentance, cannot call themselves Christian.

Some have argued that taking this list disqualifies all of us, but this overlooks the biblical distinction between those that struggle against sin and those that pursue a course of willful rebellion. It’s the latter Paul has in mind here: “The sin (one) dwells in, those pervading his thoughts and ruling his conduct. His present live sins. The sins he keeps doing and will not give up. Those he is called to abandon but cleaves to” (George MacDonald).

Two words in this list are significant: “male prostitutes” and “homosexual offenders.” Some argue that the words translated “male prostitutes” (*malakos*) and “homosexual offenders” (*arsenokites*) only refer to cult prostitution or illicit, casual, sexual unions, but the terms simply don’t have that limiting force.

The primary meaning of *malakoi* in Greek literature is “soft to the touch,” and lexicographers see this as a reference to the passive partner in a homosexual relationship (like Nero’s boy, Sporus, whom he married as his wife).

The other term, *arsenokoitis*, literally means “men in bed” and was the general word used throughout the ancient world for a homosexual. Lexicologists Arndt and Gingrich translate, “a male homosexual, pederast, sodomite.” It’s the word used in the Septuagint, a very early Greek translation of the Old Testament, in the text above—Leviticus 18:22; 20:13. (Cf. 1 Timothy 1:9–11 for a similar list of sins in which *arsenokoitis* occurs.)

The context of sex

Most exegetes, who are not themselves homosexuals or gay advocates, conclude that homosexual acts are sinful by their very nature. “Only towering cynicism can pretend that there is any doubt about what the Scriptures say about homosexuality... The Scriptures throughout, in a variety of cultural and

historical contexts spanning some 1500 years, teach uniformly that homosexuality is contrary to the divine will” (Michael Ukleja).

Throughout scripture homosexuality is assumed to be unnatural, a rejection of God’s created intention for men and women.” It denies and defies God’s fundamental order.

For myself, however, there is more conclusive argument: It has to do with the fundamental issue of human sexuality and the purpose for which God created the sexes. For this we must go back to the beginning, to the first two chapters of Genesis.

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame (Genesis 2:24).

God’s word brought the universe into being as a habitat for the human race. Then he created Adam, the first man, and put him in the place that he had prepared for him. But he noted that Adam was lonely. “It is not good that man should be alone,” he mused to himself.

Having established Adam’s need for a partner, the search for a suitable one began. God brought all the animals by and Adam proceeded to name them “with reference to him,” as the Hebrew idiom puts it, symbolizing the unique relationship each would have to him. But, for Adam, no suitable partner was found and so a special creation was necessary: He made a woman for him. And so the sexes were differentiated. In summary, “Male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27).

Why male and female? The answer follows in Chapter 2: “For this reason (because of this unique creation) a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2:24).

“They became one flesh.” The sexes were made for love and love-making and that enjoyment of one another is envisioned in the context of a heterosexual, monogamous love relationship: one man and one woman clinging to one, loving one another for life, bearing children and raising them in the fear of the Lord. That’s the original match.

John Stott describes it this way:

A fact needs explanation, namely the extremely powerful drive of the sexes to each other. Whence comes this love “strong as death” (Song of Songs 8:6) and stronger than the tie to one’s parents, whence this inner clinging to one another, this drive toward each other which does not rest until it again becomes one flesh in the child? It comes from the fact that God took woman from man, that they actually were one flesh. Therefore, they must come together again and thus by destiny they belong to each other. Scripture defines marriage in terms of heterosexual monogamy. It is the union of one man with one woman, which must be publicly acknowledged

(the leaving of parents), permanently sealed (he will “cleave to his wife”) and physically consummated (“one flesh”). And Scripture envisions no other kind of marriage or sexual intercourse for God has provided no alternative (John Stott, *Homosexual Partnerships? Why Same-Sex Relationships Are Not a Christian Option*, InterVarsity Press, p. 16,17).

In summary, the only “one flesh” (sexual) experience that the Bible recognizes is the sexual union of a man and his wife. In that exclusive relationship no shadow of shame or embarrassment will ever be cast. Every sexual relationship or act that deviates from that norm, then, is ipso facto wrong. This includes pornography, fornication, adultery, polygamy, polyandry, bestiality and homosexuality.

What does Jesus have to say?

Gay Christian activists are quick to point out that Jesus had nothing to say about homosexuality. That’s true, if they are thinking of a specific reference. However, Jesus accepted the full authority of the Old Testament and unconditionally accepted the teaching of Genesis 1 and 2 that the only sexual expression sanctioned by God is between a man and a woman in a permanently sealed marriage union.

He agreed with it and commented upon it: “‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matthew 19:4–6).

Jesus proscribed homosexuality by prescribing exclusive heterosexual marriage. For Him, there were only two options: heterosexual monogamy or celibacy.

What then shall we do?

We must first be willing to repent of our own sin. The litany of sins in 1 Corinthians 6 should end harsh, simplistic condemnation of homosexual men and women. Sin is sin. Homosexual sins are not in a special category meriting hatred and disgust. We must regard as sin all that God regards as sin.

We must pray for our homosexual friends. Abraham interceded all day long for the men of Sodom. The sodomites there were not “queers” to him; they were flesh and blood people, many of them he knew and loved. He could not write them off. He had to pray for their deliverance.

We must continue the classic Christian response to sin: we must love the sinner even as we hate the sin. We must never despise any human being. We must not heap scorn and hatred on those who, in some cases, already hate and scorn themselves. ‘Tis a cruelty,” Shakespeare said, “to load a fallen man.”

Jesus never condoned sin, but he was the ever and always the friend of sinners (Luke 7:34). We must offer compassion for the AIDs victim even as we speak to the behavior that is responsible for his disease. We must speak the truth in love.

We must speak the truth in love, but we must speak the truth. In the midst of our culture's addled and confused notion of tolerance—a tolerance that demands that we accept homosexuality as a legitimate life-style—we must draw the line. As Chesterton pointed out: “Morality is like art: it consists of drawing a straight line”

We must speak the truth despite the sympathetic argument that homosexuality is not chosen or learned but inborn—the result of genetic or biological factors beyond one's control. Even if the evidence that some homosexuality is genetically determined becomes conclusive (at present it is not, despite what we're being made to believe) it must not deter us from standing against it. There are other inborn tendencies and pre-dispositions which society restrains for the common good. What about the alcoholic who is destroying his life? The “I-can't-help-myself” argument doesn't hold up there.

It's a simple fact that the life span of homosexual males is now less than half of the normal life expectancy projected for heterosexual males. In Massachusetts, AIDs is the number one killer of men. And it can only get worse. According to recent surveys most homosexuals still engage in extremely risky behavior, even in the face of AIDs, Hepatitis B and other sexually transmitted diseases.

But far more significant is what homosexuality and every violation of God's order does to one's soul: gays have much higher rates of depression, suicide attempts and substance abuse than the general population.

And what can we say about gays as they age? Other folks can grow old gracefully with spouses, children and grandchildren at their sides and they have their dignity. But how awful is the prospect for the old homosexual living in his own gray world, unattended and all alone.

Change is possible—not easy but possible. In the context of God's grace no one is hopeless. It is God's plan to make us whole and “no plan of (his) can be thwarted” (Job 42:1,2).

Remember Paul's words to gay men and women of Corinth: “And that (homosexual) 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 Corinthians 6:13).

Anyone can change; anyone can be made pure.