

**Sex and the City of God: Part II****by Dr. David D. Swanson, First Presbyterian Church of Orlando, Florida**

In the summer of my middle year in seminary I began what would become a nine-month rotation as a student chaplain at a local Catholic hospital. I was 27 years old, fresh from my recent coursework in contemporary theology and its relationship to human suffering. In my mind, I was ready to take on whatever the hospital could throw at me. The hospital chaplain assigned each of the students to a particular floor, and my assignment was to minister to the patients on the floor dedicated to cancer or infectious diseases. My first few days and initial visits went fairly well. In the beginning, most of the people I saw were cancer patients, but on my third day, I made a visit to a person who had AIDS. I walked into the room and there before me was a frail, thin 52 year old man with AIDS who was holding hands with his 27 year old homosexual partner. Across the room sat the patient's mother and sister, and before I could get the picture entirely into focus, they each began introducing themselves to me. I don't think I heard one word they said that day because my mind was spinning with questions about what I should do and how I should respond. From my earliest days in the church – from the formative stages of my faith - I had been taught that homosexuality was sin in the eyes of God. Even so, here was a man lying before me that was clearly suffering - clearly dying - his family members clearly suffering - and a partner who seemed to deeply care for him. I was supposed to be the agent of God's truth and love in this hospital. I was supposed to bring to this family some measure of support and care, yet I had no idea how to do that. My immature mind spun with the possibilities. What would God have me do? Would God have me cut right to the point – dispense with the relational pleasantries – and share what I believed to be the truth of the gospel? Was I to tell these people, in the midst of their suffering, that they were sinners and needed to repent? Or was it something else? Would God have me love them and accept them as they were, not mentioning the sin-related things in the Scriptures, but only telling them what was easy and comforting to hear – passages about love or heaven? Or was I somehow supposed to mix those two things together? It seemed to be an enormous question without a clear answer.

As I have reflected on my experience in those days, I think it mirrors in many ways what our culture, and the church, is struggling with today. We are regularly confronted with individuals and organizations who label themselves as gay or lesbian and who actively campaign for social acceptance of their lifestyle. They want to be recognized as normal, acceptable parts of culture, including everything from same-sex marriages to ordination into the ministry. These groups are pushing for a kind of sexual equality, an affirmation that their lifestyle is an acceptable alternative and not out of line with the God we worship. In the wake of such influence, it does appear that, indeed, our culture is softening in their approach. It does seem that in many circles homosexuality is now viewed as normal. We are told that to view it otherwise is to be harshly judgmental and unfeeling. In our inclusive, tolerant world, we'd better not have an opinion on a controversial topic. We're just supposed to accept it. We now have companies that provide insurance coverage for partners, clubs on college campuses, even a nation to the north that approves gay marriage. On my son's second day of high school, he was asked by two openly lesbian girls sitting behind him if he was "gay or bi-sexual?" I could have sworn there was a third option in there somewhere. It is, in fact, becoming more widely accepted.

While many of us balk at such change, there is another side to what we observe if we'll just take the time to look more closely. In each instance, we are not dealing with "homosexuality". We are dealing with a person - a human being tempted by homosexual sin - a person wrestling and struggling with their own sense of identity and belonging in this world. This is the side we have lost and the one we must never forget. Statistics and terminology do not represent numbers, but real people with real hearts and real souls. Those numbers represent people in need of real love. And so, as Christians, what are we to do with this paradox? How are we to approach homosexuality in the church? How do we minister to people who struggle with homosexual sin in a loving, gracious manner that communicates to them the love of God and our love for them while at the same time not compromising the truth of the gospel and God's design for human sexuality? That is the tension which we must hold and the tension which Paul brings into clear focus in the scriptures this morning.

Whenever homosexuality is debated in Christian circles, more often than not Romans 1:26-27 is used as a clear admonition against homosexual behavior. While I agree with that idea, there is so much more to these verses that apply beyond just homosexuality, but to all of us. They speak to our understanding of homosexual sin and to our understanding of the entire human condition. Paul begins with a statement of hope, a clear celebration of the magnitude of God's salvation for all. In verse 16, he writes, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes... for in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last...." Paul announces that the gospel of Jesus Christ is power, and it is the power of God to save ALL people. Note that he shares this at the very beginning of his letter. This is his theme - his thrust. However, quite abruptly in verse 18, he gives a clear, unrelenting view of the state of the human heart as it lives in darkness and sin, including God's coming wrath against that sin. Why? In short, people will never understand the wonder of their salvation and the power of God to save until they realize what it is they are being saved from. They will not grasp the wonder of God's love until they grasp they need a Savior. If you have no understanding of sin, then you will have no appreciation for your salvation nor the means by which you have received it.

And what does Paul say? He says in verse 21, "although they knew God...they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator....." So what, according to Paul, is the problem with us as human beings? We are inclined towards idolatry. We are naturally inclined, because of sin, towards EXCHANGING things of God for things of our own creation. In so doing, we distort the perfect will of God for our lives and for His world. What could be a better example of that human condition - that human tendency - than homosexuality? He says in verse 26, "Even their women and men exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones..." He speaks of it as an extreme, but graphic example, as if to say "Look here - as a result of this tendency to exchange the ways of God for the ways of the world - this tendency towards idolatry - they even did this - they even engaged in homosexual behavior!" For Paul's purpose, what could be a better illustration of the rejection of God's design in favor of our own than men and women relating to each other in unnatural ways. Homosexuality is an outward and visible sign of an inward reality of sin, and Paul uses

this one symptom as the cornerstone of his argument. "This is what we are inclined towards - and look - here is a clear example!"

Paul does not stop there, however. He goes on to discuss all kinds of others sins, from greed to murder to gossip. Homosexuality is just one sin among many that Paul describes as a means of saying to the Romans, and to us, "this is the state you are in - and this is what the power of God has come to rescue you from!" This is why verses 16-17 are so important, because with this kind of sin, we NEED salvation. And where do we find it? We find it in the grace and power of God!

So, in light of Paul's teaching, what do we learn? First, is homosexuality wrong? Is homosexuality clearly and unequivocally sin according to the Scriptures? Absolutely. Yes. There is no question. As such, the church of Jesus Christ needs to affirm and stand firmly on the truth that is reiterated over and over again in God's Word: homosexuality is not part of God's design for us and is a sinful practice in His eyes. There is no debate - no need to discuss - it is as undeniably clear as anything I can find in Scripture. Further, all the reasons and rationalizations for turning homosexuality into something acceptable, from claiming genetic predisposition to improper social development to saying there is mutual consent and a loving relationship, these have no place in the argument. Why? All of those same arguments apply to other areas of sin in life as well. We are all dealt genetic flaws. Creation is not perfect. Each of us has been dealt "imperfections" the way we were made. We all have baggage from our social development. Even so, those things do not then give us license to live in ways that are contrary to God's word. Homosexual behavior is simply not acceptable - for any reason - in the eyes of God and I want to be perfectly and completely clear on that idea. That is point one.

HOWEVER, I'm not through. You need to hear the next part as well. Don't sit there feeling all smug because of what I just said. Often, as Christians, our tendency is to hear the statement I just made and say rather pompously, "Yes, that's true - look at how dirty and bad those who struggle with homosexual sin are - they are such sinners." However, Paul's whole argument is not just about homosexuality. It is about the state of all of us - homosexual and heterosexual alike. Homosexuality is just an example which Paul uses to demonstrate that we all sin. We ALL exchange the things of God for the things of our own creation. Homosexuality in our culture is merely a symptom of the sin problem, and it is one of many sins which Paul goes on to discuss.

So the second thing we learn is that we are in the same boat as the homosexual and we suffer from the same disease that they do - it is the disease called sin. In the same way that the person who engages in homosexual practice sins before God, so does the gossip sin - the greedy - the malicious - the envious - and the disobedient. We don't like to hear that because it seems to us that homosexual sin is so much worse. Sexual sin always strikes us at a point that makes us uncomfortable because it is such an intimate part of ourselves, and we can make ourselves feel so much better about our own lot by casting the sexual sinner in a darker shadow. But that is not the case. We have all been disobedient - and we all stand fundamentally as fallen - sinful before God - and that is what Paul is trying to communicate - that we ALL need the power of God to save.

What we learn as a church from Paul is that we need to quit looking down our noses at those who struggle with this lifestyle – or any other sin - and realize that we are standing in the same boat with them. We are no better and no worse in the eyes of God. I believe when we realize that truth, it will allow us to stop seeing homosexuality as an issue, and more as a personal struggle for thousands of people in this world, struggles similar to the very ones which we wage in our own lives. It just has a different name. It is that kind of understanding which will eventually allow the church to begin to minister to those who struggle with homosexuality, in the same way the church tries to encourage people about speaking truth - about showing kindness - about fleeing the love of money. It is about building up the Body of Christ so that all of us might more and more reflect the image of God to the world - and any sin - homosexual or otherwise - will distort that image.

Once again, there is that paradox: understanding that clearly it is wrong and needing to stand without compromise on that truth, but then finding that we identify and walk on the same path as those very people and to reject them is, in essence, to reject ourselves. So how, then, do we walk in faith? How do we deal with homosexuality as Christians? First, we live and breathe and thank our God that He is the power for salvation for EVERYONE who believes. There is no one - no sinner - that is outside of the bounds of receiving the grace and love of God. "Where sin abounds" the scripture says, "grace abounds even more." There is an answer to the problem of sin - for all of us - and it is found in the power of God to save through Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are not defeated. We need not live in despair over our state of sin because God has rescued us from that when we receive Him by faith. In the same way He has rescued us, He desires to rescue others, regardless of their sin - or your opinion of it. Our task is to take that message of the power of God to save to ALL people.

Secondly, we must learn to walk the fine line of this paradox: standing firm on the Scriptures, yet also demonstrating the compassion and love that Christ calls us to share. Richard Hansen wrote in a recent PFR publication, "We need something we do not yet have: a way of speaking about homosexual sin that does not falsify the biblical call to compassion for sinners; a way of speaking about compassion for homosexuals that does not distort the biblical call to holiness. Only by living out this paradox can we be truly biblical." That is the way we must live - in that tension - because to let go of one side is to become homophobic, arrogant, and one who angrily yells "pervert" in the face of another as I saw a pastor do recently on television. To let go of the other is to become cultural conformists. To let go of the other is to let go of the Word of God and compromise the truth that we hold dear and the standard by which we are called by God to live our lives. To walk one way is to be the Pharisee who cannot see their own sin for their arrogance - to walk the other is to be as the money changers in the temple - allowing the influence of culture to overwhelm even the truth of God.

Where do we find one who can live in such a way? Who has ever done this? Jesus. We find it in the person of Jesus - the Messiah who said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." We find it in the person of Jesus who ate with the sinners and tax collectors - who walked with lepers and prostitutes - who associated with the rabble of the earth because they were the ones who needed His love. It was Jesus "who while we were yet sinners, died for us." While we were still mired in our sin, when we could do nothing for ourselves, Christ died. So, we go to those who may not be able to know the love of God for themselves, whether it is the homosexual or the liar, the thief or the gossip, and we

bring the love of Jesus. We remember to bring the gospel, as Peter wrote, "with gentleness and respect", for only as we love people will they be able to hear and understand our words.

We also see the model of Jesus as one who boldly spoke truth to those who denied him. It was Jesus who turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple courts, saying, "My house will be a house of prayer." It was Jesus who turned to the Pharisees as they tried to trap him in the law and said, "You hypocrites. Give to God what belongs to God." And it was Jesus who said to the defiant Sadducees, "You do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." We must never fear to speak the truth boldly when confronted with anyone who would deny Christ - again whether that is the homosexual or the liar - the thief or the gossip. We speak the truth - but we speak it in love.

Remember, however, as sinners saved by grace, our sharing is not done in condemnation or judgment, but with the sincere and earnest desire to see the hearts of sinners changed, just as our hearts have been changed by the love of Jesus Christ.

That patient I visited that first day in the hospital was named Tom Devor. Tom died some nine months later, but I believe God honored an initial decision I made to love first and share Christ in the midst of that love. Through those months he professed a deep faith in God and I believe today that he walks with angels and saints in glory. However, I do not believe he ever would have heard the message of salvation or understood God's love had I reacted with judgment, condemnation, or hostility, and he never would have heard it if I had chosen not to go in the room. Homosexuality is indeed one of the most difficult and challenging issues that we face in the church today, but my prayer is that we would begin to pray and seek God, to ask for the living presence and direction of Jesus to be born within us, and that that would allow us to have the compassion of Jesus as he walked with lepers, the caring manner in which he spoke the truth in love. Amen.