

A Letter to Louise

**Biblical Affirmation
for
God's Homosexual Children**

INTRODUCTION

Louise has been a dear friend for fifty years. The last time my wife, Anna Marie, and I visited her she shocked us with a statement, repeated in the first sentence of this Letter, about her brother's being gay. At that time I knew almost nothing about gay people or homosexuality. I did have some suppositions—quite negative—and had never thought I needed to study the subject. But her words made me want to know as much as I could learn about it.

When I began reading I soon realized things about myself I now deplore: I was ignorant of the many facts about homosexuality (and harbored some myths about it) although the matter had been very important to mainline denominations for several decades. Without facts I had pre-judged it; I was prejudiced. Carelessly, I had read into the Bible what I presumed it ought to say instead of reading out of it what it does say. My idea of not needing to study the subject was pure anti-intellectualism. I am now most grateful that God led me to study.

I have read over sixty books by eminent psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, ethicists and theologians on both sides of this issue. This (actual) letter to my dear friend Louise reflects what I now have come to believe is the truth about homosexuality, what the Bible says and what God wants us to think and do about it.

Now I want others to study seriously this matter of such importance to many lives and many churches and denominations. I asked for and received Louise's permission to share the Letter. I pray it may be helpful to those who have not yet studied.

Bruce Lowe

2002

I am grateful to my good friend, David Chapman, for giving this Letter a website, godmademegay.com, and grateful to God to learn from hundreds who have found the site and written me that the Letter has been helpful. Many have said they were passing it on to others; I am grateful for this, too. You would cry with me over the suffering and anguish so many have endured because of their gay orientation. And then weep over the loss to our churches and Christ's kingdom of thousands who shun the church because it condemns them. This subject so needs serious study by so many of our church leaders.

BL

2006

To: Louise, dear friend, beloved of God

From: Bruce, by the immeasurable grace of God, a brother in Christ

Anna Marie and I will never forget your heavy-hearted words to us the last time we saw you: "My brother hates God because God made him gay, and he knows he is going to hell, and I do, too, for that is what the Bible says." I was without words, realizing suddenly that what I knew about gays and what the Bible says about them was very superficial. Anna Marie's immediate response to you was, "No one will go to hell who puts his faith in Jesus Christ." How gloriously true! Whatever else the Bible says or doesn't say, gay people are not necessarily going to hell.

Since we saw you I have given serious study to homosexuality and what the Bible says about it. Thank God! There was so much to learn about gay men and lesbian women—and the Bible—that I am so glad to have come to know. I found facts about homosexuals that are of immeasurable importance for anyone who wants to understand homosexuality and the Bible's teaching. I hope my letter will make these things clear to you. And how I wish our pastors and churches, also, could see them clearly!

The letter is long; forgive me. Yet I have done little more than try to summarize the basic points of the subjects I want to cover. There are ten of them. This overview may help you see what I want to talk about:

The Homosexual's Nature

1) Unchangeable; (2) Normal; (3) God-created; (4) Gifted

The Homosexual's Suffering

(5) A homophobic society; (6) A condemning church

The Homosexual's Morality

(7) The silence of the Bible; (8) The criteria for morality

The Homosexual's Place

(9) In society; (10) In the church

Supplemental Notes

One: Some Principles of Bible Interpretation

Two: Bible Passages on Same-Gender Sex

Three: The Analogy of the Gentiles

Four: The Three Sins

God's Words—the Bible and Jesus Christ—are our authority, and this writing tries to see homosexuality through that authority. Those who are preaching homophobia (literally, "fear of homosexual persons," now used to mean "unacceptance of homosexual persons") are grossly misinterpreting the Bible. So I think my discussion needed the supplemental notes One and Two on Bible interpretation. Nevertheless, I know some people will never believe the way I have come to, and there are some things I wish I could say to them. I think you will agree with that message; it is the final Note.

Also forgive the somewhat academic structure of the letter; I felt the writing rather required it. I pray that this will give you some of the welcome insights my study has given me.

One. Homosexual Nature Is Unchangeable: Sexual orientation is part of everyone's nature. It cannot be changed. It is not a choice.

Louise, by "nature" I mean that which is intrinsic and unchangeable about the way each of us has been created. By nature I am male, white-skinned, right-handed and heterosexual. Advances in the behavioral sciences the past century have shown that by nature some people are homosexual. Psychologists and psychiatrists I have read accept this as a fact; one's sexual orientation, gay or straight, is intrinsic to a person's nature, and it cannot be changed. The homosexual person has no choice in the matter.

The concept of a homosexual nature first appeared in print in Europe in 1869 and in the United States in 1889. Freud, in the early twentieth century accepted homosexuality as natural and considered it

unchangeable.ⁱ Helmut Thielicke, a theologian conservatives respect highly and quote often, recognized in his work, *The Ethics of Sex*, written over forty years ago, that at least some gay men and lesbian women have "constitutional homosexuality," and, therefore, we must "accept" the fact that it is "incurable," and "our attitude toward [it] *changes*." [his italics]ⁱⁱ

But general acceptance of the concept has been delayed by heterosexual society's revulsion to same-gender sex, by many churches' misinterpretation of the Bible, and by its taking a full century for the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association to recognize the validity of the concept. The former Association (APA) officially recognized that it was natural, instead of a previously believed mental illness, in 1973. The American Psychological Association followed with similar action two years later.

In 1998 the APA adopted a position opposing any therapy designed to change a person's sexual orientation. The APA President stated, "There is no scientific evidence that reparative or conversion therapy is effective in changing a person's sexual orientation. There is, however, evidence that this type of therapy can be destructive."ⁱⁱⁱ

The National Cancer Institute reports on a study finding that "Being gay is not simply a choice or purely a decision. People have no control over the genes they inherit and there is no way to change them."^{iv}

Biological evidence should put to rest all questions about homosexuality being innate. Scientists have found a physical difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals. They have discovered that while the hypothalamus, a regulator in the brain of sexuality, in the heterosexual male is approximately twice the size as that of the heterosexual female, the hypothalamus of the male homosexual is approximately the same size as that of the heterosexual female.^v Homosexuals are physically different from heterosexuals..

Other evidence that homosexuality is unchangeable includes: (a) ten thousand suicides each year of homosexual youth, unable to change and unwilling to face life with that orientation (i.e., face the ostracism of society and the condemnation of the church; (b) the large numbers of homosexuals who go to psychotherapists desperately wanting to change their orientation, and then (c) the disappointing failure of the psychotherapy to help after hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars have been spent; (d) the millions of homosexual people who live "in the closet," not wanting anyone to learn of their orientation because of a homophobic society and church. One lesbian, accused of choosing her orientation, said, "I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy." A gay man said, "No homosexual ever lived who didn't wish he could change." How can anyone believe that gays and lesbians choose their orientation?

Some fundamentalist religious groups have programs they claim produce "ex-gays." No long-term studies of their claims have been made, there is much evidence that any "change" is not lasting, the claims of one group cannot be duplicated by another, and scientists discount any claim of changes being made. (See statement of APA President above.) One author tells of his desperate attempt to change in one of the programs. They told him if he just had faith and "believed" that God had answered his prayers and changed him, he would find that he was changed. So he believed. He really did, he said. He graduated from the program certain he was no longer gay. But before long he realized that nothing had changed. He was inescapably homosexual.^{vi}

Some say it may be unchangeable, but it is not a nature, only a predisposition like a predisposition to alcoholism; a person is not to blame for having it, but since acting on it can be so destructive, the person is responsible for not acting on it and, if he becomes an alcoholic, for taking steps to recover. New Testament professor Jeffrey Siker considers this analogy "not only useless but dangerous." First, he says, the damaging effects of active alcoholism are readily apparent, but the APA ceased characterizing homosexuality as a disease "because there was no clinical evidence that homosexual activity resulted in any more destructive behaviors than was the case for persons engaging in heterosexual activity." Further, we recognize that alcoholics need to "recover," but the homosexual finds nothing in his or her nature that can be changed or needs to be recovered from. Finally, alcoholism is a disease triggered by the act of drinking; the focus is on the act of either drinking or abstaining from drinking. Homosexuality is not an act; it is a nature.^{vii}

Some anti-gay writers admit that homosexuality is not chosen. Mike Haley, representing "Focus on the Family" which is strongly anti-gay, in his *101 Frequently Asked Questions about Homosexuality* answers his question "Do homosexuals choose to be gay?" with: "Let me answer this one directly, No! And in case you didn't hear me, let me speak up: NO! This continues to be one of the myths of homosexuality that uninformed people perpetuate."^{viii}

One argument against homosexuality is that it is "unnatural". Dr. Joan Roughgarden, a biologist at Stanford University, has found more than 450 species of animals "with same-sex courtship."^{ix} With human beings at the top of the animal order, it is interesting that she writes, "The more complex and sophisticated a [species'] social system is, the more likely it is to have homosexuality intermixed with heterosexuality."

The evidence surely is conclusive that homosexual people are homosexual by nature, that the orientation is never a choice for them.

Two. Homosexual Nature Is Normal: The nature of the gay man or lesbian woman is just as normal as the nature of a heterosexual person and should not be thought of in sexual terms.

It is unfortunate that heterosexual people often focus on sex when they think about homosexuals, but "to do so is to miss the point of the larger context of the relationship. It is to dehumanize and depersonalize gays and lesbians, caricaturing them only in terms of their sexual activities rather than seeing them as whole persons with lives that include more than sex."^x

Louise, people will never think rightly about homosexuals until they think of them as being normal people, just as they think of left-handed people as being normal. Sadly, "homosexuality" to too many people means "sex perversion." For example, "homosexual act," and "practicing homosexual" and "homosexual lifestyle" are rather common expressions; all mean "sex" to the one using the expression. What a perversion in that very common thinking! A homosexual act is a gay man shaving or a lesbian fixing her breakfast or any of a thousand other acts they perform each day. "Practicing"? Probably the piano or violin, considering how artistically talented so many of them are. "Lifestyle"? Doesn't that refer to a person's interests and activity in society? A homosexual's interests and activities do not differ from those of others. Gay men and lesbian women are *normal* people. The fact that millions of them walk among us without our knowing their orientation would seem to be conclusive on this point.

UCLA psychologist Evelyn Hooker conducted the "... very first investigation into whether or not homosexuality was an illness that examined a population of 'normal' gay men—men who were not residents of mental hospitals, prisoners, or distressed patients in

therapy [common subjects of study at that time], but ordinary people living ordinary, if closeted, lives. ... In 1956 Hooker presented her findings to the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association: that no psychological differences existed between homosexual and heterosexual men."^{xi}

A gay man can fall in love only with another male; a lesbian woman can fall in love only with another female. What made me, a heterosexual man, fall in love with a woman? I can't say; it is some intrinsic characteristic of mine. In homosexual people this characteristic works differently for some yet unknown reason, and the falling-in-love process is directed toward the same gender. But it is a true falling in love. (I discuss this more in Eight below.) A partnership isn't a sexual thing for a homosexual couple any more than a marriage is for a heterosexual couple.

Dr. Terry Norman expresses this: "I had always assumed that orientation was about sexual behavior ... only to discover eventually that orientation was not about sex at all. Rather ... about my innate need to love and be loved by another man in a committed, ongoing relationship."^{xii}

While some homosexual persons are sexually lustful and promiscuous, the percentage is surely not greater than that of heterosexual people who are such. The pornographic industry, estimated at up to one hundred billion dollars a year in America, is funded by heterosexual lust. That industry *annually* puts two thousand teenage girls into prostitution in the city of Dallas alone^{xiii} and imports up to 200,000 into the U.S.^{xiv} Every fifteen minutes in America a heterosexual man rapes a woman; homosexual men don't rape women or kidnap young girls. If we think of a heterosexual man or woman and do not

immediately think of sex, then when we think of a homosexual man or woman, we should not immediately think of sex. They are people like us with the same needs and concerns, problems and failures and successes and sorrows and joys that we have (plus lots of problems that we do not have—Five and Six below).

Siker says a good analogy for our thinking about lesbians and gays is in the way the first Jewish Christians related to the Gentiles. Jews considered Gentiles as unclean, polluted, idolatrous, and sinful—the same revulsion many church people feel for homosexual people. Before Gentiles could be accepted as Christians, many Christian Jews thought they must first repent of being Gentiles, become Jews and obey Jewish laws such as Sabbath-keeping and kosher food; then they could become Christians. Today, unfortunately, the gay and the lesbian are often asked to repent of being homosexual before being accepted. Like the Gentiles, they do not need to repent of their God-created nature; they just need to be accepted the same way everyone else is.^{xv}

Perhaps the best analogy is the left-handed person, created that way, and so, different from others. Different? Well, yes, but so what? If only we thought of a gay or lesbian person the same way. Gay - ? So what?

The root of homophobia is in the common false thinking of equating homosexuality with perverted sex. Gay and lesbian people don't want to have to live in "closets," driven there by society's homophobia; they so want to be seen as normal human beings. For them not to be is a great cruelty to them; it is also a great loss to our society.

Three. Homosexual Nature Is God-created: All people are created in the image of God. The homosexuality of gays and lesbians, created by God, is good and not evil.

If all are created in the image of God, as the Bible tells us (Gen. 1:27), that includes all homosexual persons. We may not fathom the ramifications of being created in the image of God, but we do know that anything created by God is good, and if some people are created by God with a homosexual nature, they can know that that nature is good. We have to believe that in God's sight, homosexuality is just as good as is heterosexuality.

Theologian Thieliicke says that homosexuality is "a divine dispensation" and "a talent that is to be invested (Luke 19:13f.)."^{xvi}

I believe God has a purpose for every life. If so, the lives of homosexuals have a God-given purpose. Then would not refusing to accept and affirm them in the same way we affirm others be trying to thwart the purposes of God? Can we draw any other conclusion?

One gay man said, "God finally showed me, that there was no need to answer that prayer I had prayed so many times to 'make me not gay any more.' God showed me he can't fix something that doesn't need to be fixed."

Four. Homosexuals are often highly gifted: Lesbian women and gay men in general have a potential for outstanding characteristics and accomplishments—greater than that of many heterosexual people.

It is well known that while certain characteristics are dominant in men and others dominant in women, all people have some of the opposite gender's characteristics. Psychologists have found that the gay man has an exceptional supply of feminine characteristics, and the lesbian woman has an exceptional supply of male characteristics, and that these special combinations of characteristics often result in exceptional potential in homosexual persons.

Sigmund Freud found homosexual persons to be "of high intellectual and ethical development" and "as characterized by special development of their social instinctual impulses and by their devotion to the interests of the community."^{xvii}

Psychologist Mark Friedman found that the gay and lesbian subjects he tested were superior to their heterosexual counterparts in such psychological qualities as autonomy, spontaneity, orientation toward

the present, and increased sensitivity to the value of the person.^{xviii} Thielicke finds that the homosexual "is frequently gifted with a remarkable heightened sense of empathy."^{xix}

The eminent psychologist Jung gives five very positive aspects of the homosexual male:

- This [homosexuality] gives him a great capacity for friendship, which often creates ties of astonishing tenderness between men, and may even rescue friendship between the sexes from its limbo of the impossible.
- He may have good taste and an aesthetic sense which are fostered by the presence of a feminine streak.
- Then, he may be supremely gifted as a teacher because of his almost feminine insight and tact.
- He is likely to have a feeling for history, and to be conservative in the best sense and cherish the values of the past.
- Often he is endowed with a wealth of religious feelings, which help him to bring the *ecclesia spiritualis* [the church as a spiritual body - BL] into reality, and a spiritual receptivity which makes him responsive to revelation.^{xx}

A special hope for homosexual influence on society is expressed by psychotherapist John McNeill:

There is no doubt that the homosexual man is freer to develop aesthetic values than is his male counterpart in the heterosexual world, and thus he has an important role to play in guiding humanity to a deeper appreciation of aesthetic values. ... There is the hopeful possibility that the homosexual community could serve the human community as a whole by making the male free to do works of service in the human community without feeling guilty about betraying the standards of his male identity.^{xxi}

Many writers tell of the contributions gay men and lesbian women have made to our world and give dozens of examples, some of the world's most famous statesmen, artists, writers, musicians, etc., present and past. While those who are gay and lesbian make up probably 4%-6% of the population, a study of the biographies of 1004 eminent people found 11% of them to be homosexual or bisexual, with certain categories higher: 24% of poets, 21% of fiction writers, and 15% of artists and musicians.^{xxii}

Louise, it seems as though we ought to look on the gay man or lesbian woman as potentially a very special person, made that way by God, one we could find joy in associating with, and especially a benefit and blessing to our churches.

Five. Homosexual Suffering in a Homophobic Society: The burden imposed on the homosexual by society is a great evil. We should stand in revulsion against and do all we can to oppose the prejudice, the hatreds, and the ostracism that make homosexual life so difficult.

The lynching of Blacks may have passed but not the lynching of homosexual people; some one hundred such hate-crime murders are recorded in the U.S. each year. Most receive little press. An exception was Matt Shepard—beaten and tied to a fence to die in Wyoming because he was gay. Shortly afterwards, gay men and lesbian women all over America received faxes, emails and phone calls saying, "Matt Shepard is dead; you may be next." I know of books written about two such murders. A man walking in a wilderness area in Pennsylvania observed from a distance two women camped there, and they were holding hands. He walked back to his truck for his rifle. One of the women died from his fire. When the other recovered, she wrote the book, *Eight Bullets*.^{xxiii} (The other book is cited in Six below.)

Gay men in a major city complained to the police that it was not safe for them to walk in their neighborhood. The police didn't believe them but finally had plain-clothes officers walk there as decoys. The officers, mistaken for gays, were attacked by men with baseball bats. Twelve men were finally arrested for homophobic attacks in that one neighborhood. A recent article in our paper told of a man asking where the nearest gay bar was; he said he wanted to "shoot some queers." A few minutes later he did. Such things are happening everywhere in America, and gays and lesbians live in constant anxiety about these kinds of hate crimes.

Homosexual people do not have the natural protection of the law that others have. There are federal

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laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race and national origin; there is no federal law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Only 16 states (as of end of 2005) have laws prohibiting discrimination against homosexual people. A Dallas judge gave a light sentence to a murderer explaining that the two victims were only queers. *Long Road to Freedom* chronicles almost countless hate crimes against gays over the past few decades. There were 127 (recorded) incidents in the month of August 1991 alone, including three murders.^{xxiv}

The hatred gay and lesbian people encounter, added to the psychological problems most face in accepting their homosexuality, make many of them live in an ever-present milieu that borders on trauma.

McNeill outlines some of the psychological problems:

Many problems ... make a positive adjustment to a [homosexual] life extremely difficult. Among these difficulties can be enumerated

- the agonies of remorse and self-torture over what typical homosexuals feel to be their immoral desires, whether these arise from conscious identity with the condemnations of Church and society or from neurotic conflicts within themselves;
- their openness to blackmail and other forms of intimidation;
- their status of being outside the normal protection of the law;
- their necessity continually to conceal what they frequently believe to be their true identity from public view, with the added threat that accidental revelation could result in loss of their job, expulsion from school, dishonorable discharge from military service, loss of future security and job opportunities, loss of friends and the respect of family and dependents.
- Still other problems involve their propensity to sexual promiscuity [because they are] divorced from a complete and healthy interpersonal relationship; and the resulting tendency for sexual desires indulged in, but never fully satisfied, to occupy a disproportionate place in their life.
- Above all else, there is the very real threat of ultimate loneliness to one to whom all the normal structures of society—marriage, children, dependents, etc.—are closed.

It should be noted, however, that all these negative aspects of homosexuality are not due to homosexuality as such, but are the results of both society's and the Church's attitude to the homosexual. All these rather common aspects of homosexual life can effectively paralyze all initiative, result in a feeling of inferiority, and lead to an emotional breakdown which could make social adjustment impossible.^{xxv}

A mother in our church told me that her lesbian daughter, because of ostracism by society and condemnation by the church, has no sense of self-worth. How many others (millions - ?), likewise, have had their feelings of self-worth, self-respect crushed for their lifetime? And what McNeill said is true: *All this has nothing to do with a person's being homosexual. It has everything to do with the milieu of ostracism and condemnation in which he or she must live.*

Six. Homosexual Suffering from a Condemning Church: Homosexual men and women are being sinned against by our churches. Like our society, our churches need to change.

"Kill a Queer for Christ"

I added the italics, foolishly; what italics are needed for such a statement. In your small town you probably have not seen that cleverly alliterative bumper sticker. For you and me it is unbelievable, unreal. Sadly, it is very real.

The thinking shown in the bumper sticker and the position of so many churches and their pastors abets the crimes against gay men and lesbian women. Peter Gomes, Professor of Christian Morals at Harvard, says, "The combination of ignorance and prejudice under the guise of morality makes the religious community, and its abuse of scripture in this regard, itself morally culpable."^{xxvi} He relates this:

In preparing for her novel *The Drowning of Stephen Jones*, based upon the true story of a young gay man tossed from a bridge to his death by a group of young gay-bashers, author Bette Greene interviewed more than four hundred young men in jail for various forms of gay-bashing. Few of the

men, she noted, showed any remorse for their crimes. Few saw anything morally wrong with their crimes, and more than a few of them told her that they were justified in their opinions and in their actions by the religious traditions from which they came. Homosexuality was wrong and against the Bible. One of those interviewed told her that the pastor of his church had said that homosexuals represented Satan and the Devil. The implication of his logic was clear: Who could possibly do wrong in destroying Satan and all of his works? The legitimization of violence against homosexuals and Jews and women and blacks, as we have seen, comes from the view that the Bible stigmatizes these people, thereby making them fair game. If the Bible expresses such a prejudice, then it certainly cannot be wrong to act on that prejudice. This is the argument every anti-Semite and racist has used with demonstrably devastating consequences, as our social history all too vividly shows.^{xxvii}

When the funeral of Matt Shepard (above) was held, a Baptist preacher from Kansas and his followers from several states were there marching in front of the funeral site with placards reading, "God Hates Fags" and "Fag Matt in Hell." It is some consolation to know that the people of the town put themselves between the marchers and the family, and when the marchers began to cry out their messages, the people sang loudly "Amazing Grace." ("Fag," short for "faggot," originated several centuries ago in Europe when people suspected of engaging in same-gender sex were burned at the stake.)

In the summer of 1998 fundamentalist Christian organizations, fearful of the consideration by some states of recognizing same-gender marriage, spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on ads in major newspapers telling the nation that gay and lesbian people are "sick" and "sinful," that they can and should be "cured," and that *their rights and protections should be denied*.^{xxviii}

Louise, one of the first things I realized when I started to think about this subject was that the millions of gay men and lesbian women in this nation will never, with few exceptions, darken the doors of our churches because they know our attitude toward them is one of hatred and condemnation. Is "hatred" too strong a word? A few years ago a Baptist church in Austin ordained a gay man, and the leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas asked the church to disassociate itself from the Convention. The next day *The Dallas Morning News* ran this two-column headline: "Baptist Convention Reasserts Its Hatred of Gays, Lesbians."^{xxix} We may piously say that we don't hate the sinner, only the sin, but the newspaper believed it just the way it was printed, and gays and lesbians do, too.

A writer says, "Those of us who have published opinion pieces in favor of gay equality can testify that most of the hate mail we get cites religious justifications for the hate."^{xxx}

A gay and a straight man worked together and became close friends. Then the straight man became a Christian. When his friend learned about it, he was concerned and asked, "Now that you are a Christian, will you still love me?" This woeful question is one the church has earned. Jesus' love included; our lack of love excludes. I have read that Carl Sandburg was once asked what he thought was the ugliest word in the English language. He thought for a minute and replied, "Exclusion."

Theologian John Cobb tells of Ignacio Castuera, Latin American Liberation Theology leader, saying "that if he [Castuera] were to be true to liberation theology, he must be especially concerned for those who are *most* oppressed in our society. He had come to the conclusion that these are gay people." Then Cobb comments: "Some may question whether gays and lesbians are the most oppressed in our society. There is serious competition for that spot. But it is clear that whereas in most other oppressions the church has given at least some support to the oppressed, in this case the church has been the leader in the oppression."^{xxxi}

What the church is doing to its own lesbian and gay young people is almost unforgivable. They grow up loving God and their church while hearing that homosexuality is a sin, that God hates fags, and that gays and lesbians are going to hell. Then they discover their gay orientation. Then they wear calluses on their knees begging God to change them and when he doesn't . . . One young man spoke for thousands: "It terrified me to think that God made me just to hate me and send me to hell." [*Dear God! How long? How long?*]

Our churches need to change, for the churches ought to be havens for gays and lesbians from the

insufferable burdens they bear constantly. But when the world believes that churches despise and condemn homosexuals, those who hate them find encouragement.

Fundamentalists promote the problems seemingly with a vengeance, declaring homosexuality itself a sin.^{xxxii} This subject so needs to be examined and discussed at length in our churches, without passion and with open minds. I believe what I am stating in this letter will be the truth the churches will someday discover. Sagacious Will Campbell observed that we Baptists have apologized to Blacks for our treatment of them in history. Then he said, "some day we'll apologize for what we are doing to gay and lesbian Christians and non-Christians. But not yet, for we ride the waves of culture." *Christians and Christian churches ride the waves of culture!* Surely angels weep!

Dr. John Pierce, in an editorial in *Baptists Today*, laments, ". . . the church often lags far behind secular institutions. . . . I want to keep praying for a day when the church will be the engine rather than the caboose when it comes to changing society . . ." ^{xxxiii} Bishop Gray Temple grieves the fact that "The evidence points to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit currently finds the world of more service than the church in nudging society toward the kingdom." ^{xxxiv}

When the story of the Holocaust became more fully known, there was recognition that the sin of the Nazis was not the only sin involved—there was the silence on the part of the churches and of other nations as they learned about it during the war. When we know of the hate and the hate-crimes against lesbian and gay people, we should not be silent; we have a responsibility to do anything we can to overcome such. Our silence encourages it and makes us guilty.

Pastor Paul Duke is preaching about the oppression of lesbians and gays:

Whose fault is this? It's the fault of us all. It's the fault of any of us who make jokes about gay people, who insult them with the use of demeaning names. It's the fault of us who are silent when others do these things or when they publish lies about what homosexuality is. And it's the fault of us who don't provide a safe place and a caring response to those of homosexual orientation. Who knows how many hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost—to violence, to suicide, to drugs, to promiscuity, to AIDS, to shattered self-esteem, to life forever outside the doors of the church—because we have participated in or by silence colluded with the demeaning and the ostracizing of homosexual people. In this respect there is blood on the hands of the church. And that's what has driven me more than anything else to talk with you as I am doing. I have had a vision of Christ at the judgment asking, "Why were you silent?" Why has the church abandoned these children of God to despair and to death? When people are lost and dying by the millions you don't pontificate about sexual morality, you reach out to them, you give them a safe place, you listen, you talk, you love with the love of Christ.^{xxxv}

Louise, all this that our churches are guilty of is especially sad to you and me for we both have our hearts in the church. Our churches are so terribly wrong about homosexuality, just as they were in the sixties about segregation and 150 years ago about slavery and before that . . . All the wonderful things our churches are doing and the immeasurable importance they are to our society can't cover up our woeful failures in this matter. I think of the homespun philosopher Josh Billings' saying, "The longer I live the more I find it necessary to reexamine those things about which I was once most certain." The church can't begin its reexamination too soon.

Seven. The Bible's Silence about Homosexual Sex

The pastors and churches that condemn homosexuals do so because a common interpretation of the Bible is that the Bible condemns them. The truth that this is not so can be found, I believe, in laying aside all interpretation (often divisive) and examining facts that can be accepted by anyone as truth.

The *meaning* of any scripture is the meaning in the mind of the writer when he wrote it. Bible interpretation is trying to ascertain what the Bible writer was thinking that he (there may have been one woman author) was trying to get across to his readers. Why did my seminary theology professor tell his students, "The Bible doesn't mean what it says, it means what it means."? - something true of everything ever written or spoken. Have we interrupted a conversation with, "What do you mean?" We heard the words, but the meaning for us was not there. A writer must *try* to put what he is thinking into

words, then those words must be translated to our language, then the reader must *try* to interpret the translation - that's three steps from the true meaning. The difficulty of this is seen in all the different denominations and Bible sects, each representing a different interpretation of the *words* of the Bible, i.e., what the Bible *says*.

We can, however, be certain of one thing: if there is something the writer could not have known, we can eliminate that as a possible meaning. If I suggested that a Bible writer talked about electricity, you would say "preposterous" (or something worse). Electricity existed but it would not be discovered for many centuries after the Bible writers lived. No writer could have said anything about it.

Homosexuality was unknown for centuries after the Bible writers lived. The writers knew only of people who could fall in love with someone of the opposite sex; we would call them heterosexual. They said same-gender sex between two such people (heterosexuals") was evil. We would agree that it undoubtedly would be lustful. The Bible speaks of same-gender sex in terms of gang-rape, lust and pederasty, all, as the writers said, condemnable.

Until the 19th century, when the word "homosexual" was used for the first time, everyone understood that everyone was erotically attracted to people of the opposite sex. Until then, those were the only kind of people the Bible writer—or anyone else—could talk about. The writer knew of men practicing sex with other men, and some of these could have been homosexual, but *in the writer's mind* they were all heterosexual with some choosing to practice sex with other men.

So when a Bible author writes of sex between two men or two women, it can refer only to these people, people who were heterosexual. Sex between two heterosexuals of the same sex undoubtedly would be lustful. We would expect the Bible writer to condemn it.

If the Bible writers could talk only about the only kind of people they knew, there is nothing in the Bible about homosexual people or homosexuality.

Many scholars refer to this fact. Theology professor Elizabeth Stuart writes, " ... it is misleading to give the impression that the biblical authors talked about homosexuality at all, since the concept and reality of homosexuality ... is barely a century old."^{xxxvi}

Conclusion

Bible references condemning sex between two men or two women were referring to the only kind of people the Bible writer knew - we would call them heterosexual. There cannot be anything in the Bible about homosexuality, gays or lesbians, or anything they do.

ii

The Bible speaks in several places of the heterosexual same-sex practices discussed above. We know from historians that in Old Testament times and Greco-Roman times such sex was widely practiced by people who unquestionably were heterosexual (and possibly by some who were homosexual.^{xxxvii})

Much of this practice of sex by heterosexuals in Old Testament times had little to do with sexual lust. It originated in the low and often despised place of women in the culture.^{xxxviii} It was common for a man who had a grudge against another, if he could subdue the begrudged, to rape him, thus reducing him to the place of a woman.^{xxxix} When an army conquered another army or besieged a walled town until it capitulated, the conquering army (at least 90-96% heterosexual) degraded all their captives or the men of the town by raping them. "Gang rape [was] an extreme means to disgrace one's enemies . . . to disgrace one's manly honor, to reduce one to a woman's role . . . the ultimate means of subjugation and domination."^{xl} Sex was incidental; heterosexual men, certainly, and possibly homosexual men, were raping other men.

In the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament married men with families commonly kept male lovers. "The Greeks regarded it impossible for a man to have a deep, all-encompassing relationship with a woman. This was possible only between two men".^{xli} There were debates "about which sex was preferable as erotic focus"^{xlii} and "Roman authors published a great deal of homosexual poetry."^{xliii}

12

Pederasty was common. A man of the middle or upper class would purchase a boy from lower-class parents to keep for sex. Any grief on the part of the parents or boy was assuaged not only by the fee but also by the knowledge that the boy would never be hungry again, would have good clothes, and would be educated.

Bible writers condemned these forms of same-gender heterosexual sex.

Conclusion

The same-gender sex condemned by Bible writers was commonly practiced by people who obviously were what we would call heterosexual.

iii

A serious mistake made by some who do not affirm homosexuals is, I believe, in their grounding their convictions about gays and lesbians in their personal revulsion to the same-gender sex act. Surely we recognize that personal feelings should never be a basis for moral convictions and criteria.

Ethicists remind us that only human beings have morality, only people are moral or immoral, not *acts* apart from the people performing them. "The Lord looks on the heart" (I Samuel 16:7) of a person; it is always the person behind the act that God judges, not the act. I point a gun and pull the trigger. Is that *act* moral or immoral? Neither. *My* morality is judged according to the intention of my heart - murder? putting a suffering animal to sleep? target practice? Each is the same act, an act in itself without morality. The same act may be rape or loving conjugal sex. God's interest is not in the act itself but in the hearts of the people involved. In other words, God is not interested in the same-gender sex *act* itself. God's judgment is on the hearts of those involved.

All actions, including all sex acts, heterosexual or homosexual, in themselves, are simply acts, actions without morality; it is the people involved in the acts who are either moral or immoral. God judges people. When the Bible talks about "good" or "evil" acts, it is talking about the people behind the acts.

Conclusion

If no act (action), in itself, heterosexual or homosexual, has morality for which it might be judged or condemned, we cannot say the Bible condemns the act, in itself, of sex between two men or two women.

iv

We now know that we cannot say the Bible condemns homosexuals or the sex act in itself between two men or two women. The Bible does not discuss what moral sex is, but does the Bible leave open the door to the possibility of moral sex between two men or two women?

The Bible condemns in some places sex between a man and a woman and in some places sex between two men or two women. We know that not all sex between a man and a woman is condemned.

Conclusion

If the Bible's condemnation in some places of sex between a man and a woman does not mean all such sex is condemned, we cannot say that the Bible's condemnation in some places of sex between two men or two women means all such sex is condemned.

The Bible leaves open the door to the possibility of the morality of some sex between two men or two women.

Eight. The Criteria for the Morality of Homosexual Sex. Whatever the criteria are for moral sex expression, they are as accessible to the homosexual as they are to the heterosexual.

Since the Bible has no reference to homosexual sex nor condemnation of all homosexual sex (see Section Seven above) we must find our understanding of the morality of homosexual sex from the principles the Bible teaches us. What principles give us the criteria to be met for sex expression to be moral? Professor Kathy Rudy says, "Christian ethicists, moral theologians, and religious leaders throughout the ages have spent an enormous amount of time and energy thinking about when sex can

be considered moral and when it cannot."^{xliv}

One reason theologians and Christian ethicists have difficulty finding a sex ethic in the Bible is that the Bible's condemnation of sexual acts is always associated with hate and domination or immoral, selfish lust, while Scripture says nothing that specifically defines a moral sex life.

But in any area of life, I believe, we can turn to the Bible to find principles to give us guidance. Let us examine some that pertain to the morality of homosexual sex.

To be moral, must sex be between male and female?

We know that just because a sex act is between male and female, that does not make it (or literally, make the people) moral. The final criteria for morality will be found elsewhere.

We know, also, that while the procreative sex act must be between male and female, sex involves many other acts, some of which sometimes become more important than that act. God made both men and women with desire for and potential joy in all those other sex expressions. There is nothing in the Bible that declares that for sex to be moral, it must be between a man and a woman.

To be moral, must sex be in marriage?

We are certain that not all sex in marriage is moral; when one partner considers the other as merely a sex object, there is exploitation, even rape. Whatever the final criteria are for moral sex, they will be found somewhere outside of, beyond, legal marriage, for morality is in people, not in a legal status. But so many think sex outside of marriage is sin; sex in marriage is not. They consider it as simple and black and white as that. But nothing as complex as the human heart and sex, which plumb both the heights of beauty and the depths of ugliness, can be simple, and no black and white rule can define it.

McNeill speaks to this:

The average person has associated and confused the question of the morality of sexual conduct with the question of its objective *legal* status. The reason for this confusion is, in part, that one finds a very easily applied objective norm: sex before marriage is wrong; sex after marriage is right. ... There is something more to the moral quality of sexual behavior than the purely objective legal question of marriage. ... Something else ought to be present; that something else is love. ... The human conforms to the divine image revealed in Christ not by acting in an impersonal, rational way, but by acting from a motive of love.^{xlv}

For gays and lesbians to be moral, must they be celibate?

Some say that if homosexuality is unchangeable and if homosexuals cannot love a person of the opposite sex, then they must remain celibate. The Bible gives its blessing to celibacy under certain conditions (Matthew 19:12), but gives no guidance about its adoption. Paul seems to recognize that not all people can remain celibate (I Cor. 7:9).

Psychotherapist/theologian McNeill expresses what I have found in my reading to be supported by many psychologists with regard to celibacy: (a) it is wrong to consign a person to such isolation and loneliness, one who is thus cut off from close relationships with either sex, not temporarily but until death; (b) it is unrealistic to expect this for it is virtually impossible for it to be done; (c) many of those who attempt to do this do so for pathological reasons; (d) the "almost inevitable results [of attempting celibacy] will be tragic in terms of suffering, guilt, and mental disorder;" and (e) growth and maturity require deep and committed relationships in one's life.^{xlvi}

Pathology in attempts at celibacy? McNeill's explanation:

In my experience as a psychotherapist, I have found that the vast majority of people living out a life of abstinence do so for pathological reasons. Many have interiorized the homophobia of the surrounding culture and the Church and as a consequence hate and fear their sexual feelings.... Others live out a life of abstinence because of serious trauma to their capacity for intimacy with another human... Those who have repressed or denied their homosexual feelings for pathological reasons are the ones in greatest danger of acting out those needs compulsively, imprudently, and unconsciously, seeking punishment for what they see as their crime. . . . I would heartily advise all gay people to develop the most intimate and committed relationship possible for them.^{xlvii}

Other highly respected theologians, also, have concluded that gays and lesbians need to develop intimate and committed relationships. Thielicke: "It is true that the homosexual relationship is . . . very certainly a search for the totality of the other human being. He who says otherwise has not yet observed the possible human depth of a homoerotic-colored friendship."^{xlvi} William Barclay, whose commentaries on the books of the New Testament have sold over a million copies, has this comment on celibacy: "Sex is a part of life and the deliberate annihilation of it is not a virtue; it is a criticism of life as God made it and meant it to be."^{xlix} McNeill believes, "Only a sadistic God would create millions of humans as gay with no choice in the matter and no hope of changing and then deny them the right to express their gayness in a loving relationship for the rest of their lives under threat of eternal damnation."^l

Louise, I think we must conclude that requiring celibacy of gay men and lesbian women cannot be supported by the Bible, is unjustifiable from an ethical standpoint, and can be damaging psychologically. Sex, created by God in every person, has the potential of being beautiful and blessed by God in *any* person.

If the morality of sex is not defined by a specific sex act, by being married, or by being celibate, how is it defined?

McNeill believes: "A general consideration of scriptural data concerning sexual behavior leads to only one certain conclusion: those sexual relations can be justified morally which are a true expression of human love. The call of the Gospel is not one of conforming passively to biological givens; rather, that call is to transform and humanize the natural order through the power to love."^{li}

Theologian James B. Nelson's concept: "I believe that our best biblical scholarship reaches Walter Wink's conclusion: 'There is no biblical sex ethic. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period.'^{lii}

Wink, Nelson and McNeill and others say love is the criterion. But the way we use the word, it means many different things to different people. We love pie and babies and the sweet old lady next door. So not just any kind of love will do. It certainly is not anywhere where there is selfishness and lust and not in the immature love of youth and their "crushes" (however "sweet" they may be.)

Theologians have tried to define the kind of love required by moral sex. Nelson's concept is that sexual acts ought above all to be "shaped by love, justice, equality, fidelity, mutual respect, compassion, and grateful joy."^{liii} Ethicist Michael Keeling believes that covenant is the essential factor for moral sex that we find in the Bible, that sex between two people who have made a covenant with each other is moral.^{liv} Norman Pittinger believes the same criteria hold for either heterosexual love or homosexual love: "the centrality and primacy of love—love which is mutuality, sharing, giving-and-receiving, life together in the most radical sense of the phrase."^{lv} Christopher Levan expects moral sex to "embody the divine intention for self-giving love. . . . Thus, sexuality is not a question of right technique, it is a question of right relationship."^{lvi}

These adjectives defining uniting love are, I believe, summed up in Ephesians 5:25 where we read about the kind of love that should bind a married couple: *the same kind of love Christ had for his church when he gave his life for her*. We realize that such love surely can be approached only by two people—they could be straight or gay—who are so utterly devoted and dedicated to each other that they have formed a union that they want never to be broken. Surely this is Godly love. In such love—heterosexual or homosexual—sexual expression fulfills its God-given purpose.

Historical theology professor Rosemary Reuther writes:

Once sex is no longer confined to procreative genital acts, and masculinity and femininity are exposed as social ideologies, then it is no longer possible to argue that sex/love between two persons of the same sex cannot be a valid embrace of bodily selves expressing love. If sex/love is centered primarily on communion between two persons rather than on biological concepts of procreative complementarity, then the love of two persons of the same sex need be no less than that of two persons of the opposite sex. Nor need their experience of ecstatic bodily communion be less valuable.^{lvii}

One of the earliest affirmations of this that I found is a statement made by Quakers back in 1963: "... the Quaker committee, after a long study of homosexuality, drew the conclusion: 'Surely it is the nature and quality of a relation that matters; one must not judge it by its outer appearance but its inner worth. Homosexual affection can be as selfless as heterosexual affection, and, therefore, we cannot see that it is in some way morally worse.'^{lviii}

In 1975 a symposium on homosexuality at the annual meeting of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (note *Christian Association*) reported that behavioral science research and the realities of their clinical practice had forced them to propose that while promiscuity, fornication, and adultery should be regarded as sinful for both homosexual and heterosexual persons, a loving, committed, permanent relationship between two persons of the same sex was in an entirely different category and was not condemned in Scripture, and that Christians burdened with an involuntary homosexual orientation could choose a committed homosexual relationship as within God's will rather than an unwanted celibacy.^{lix}

Louise, if I can believe, as I do, that gay and lesbian people can in their hearts and minds meet the criteria set forth above in their relationships just as fully as heterosexual people can, then I can believe, as I have come to, that their sexual expressions of love are moral in God's sight and are within the moral principles that God expects us to live by. Love by these criteria, heterosexual or homosexual, is Godlike, for God is love.

Unfortunately, loving, committed homosexual couples represent only a small percentage of all homosexuals (10% in one large-scale study of gays^{lx}). Many believe that number would increase greatly if society accepted homosexuality and encouraged committed homosexual relationships just as it does heterosexual relationships.

Nine. The Homosexual's Rightful Place in Society: Full acceptance by society, including the blessings and legality of marriage, should be extended to gay men and lesbian women in the same way it is extended to others.

Louise, if what I have said above is true, if it is moral as well as psychologically needful—a God-created need—for homosexual men and women to have committed relationships, as many theologians and psychologists have said it is, then those homosexual couples who are in such committed relationships should have the societal rights and privileges that others have in marriage. Following are some statements in this regard.

A graduate school history professor writes,

"Family" need not mean the traditional heterosexual family to the exclusion of all others.... Gays and lesbians want the right to marry for the same reasons other Americans do: to gain the moral, legal, social and spiritual benefits conferred on the marrying couple and especially on their family unit. The material benefits of marriage are considerable, but it is the moral benefit that is especially attractive to many couples, including gay and lesbian ones. Marriage is, or can be, a moral commitment that two people make to one another. The marriage vow enshrines love, honor, respect, and mutual support and gives people access to resources and community acknowledgment that serve to strengthen their bond.^{lxi}

Nava and Dawidoff say:

Marriage is not conditioned on the intention or the capacity to have children. Nothing in marriage, except custom, mandates partners of different genders. For example, [Yale historian] John Boswell notes that in ancient Rome "marriages between males and between females were legal and familiar among the upper classes." The institution of marriage in our society appears to be one that encourages monogamy as the basis for stable personal lives and as one aspect of the family. If we think about what marriage is for, it becomes clear that it is for people to find ways to live ordered, shared lives; it is intended to be the stablest possible unit of family life and a stable structure of intimacy.^{lxii}

Noting Paul's advice that it was better to marry than to burn, theology professor Daniel Maguire points out that as long as homosexual couples are denied marriage, "there is no alternative to burning."^{lxiii}

Some commentators suggest that I Timothy 4:1-4, in speaking of marriage being good and not to be denied, because “everything created by God is good,” would include homosexual marriage because God created homosexuality.

Was it not God who said, “It is not good for a human being to be alone.” (Gen. 2:18)? James Nelson, Professor of Christian Ethics, believes that “same-sex relationships are fully capable of expressing God’s humanizing intentions,” and views the “homosexual problem” as “more truly a heterosexual problem” (of homophobia), just as the “woman problem” is a problem of “male sexism.”^{lxiv}

As I have discussed above, the Bible cannot be used to argue against this for the Bible has nothing to say about homosexual people. Here is a religious editor’s word:

Nor can the Bible be confidently cited in this debate. Certainly, the concept of same-sex marriage is not found in the Bible. But the concept of government by democracy is also not found in the Bible, only that of monarchy. On strictly biblical grounds, the doctrine of the divine right of kings has a firmer base than government by the people. Human experience, however, has led us to believe that democracy is not an illegitimate, unbiblical form of government. Since the biblical models of marriage range from polygamy at one end to celibacy on the other, we shall have to find our own way and not claim that the Bible permits only one model of marriage.^{lxv}

Lesbian and gay writers have some enlightening thoughts about same-gender relationships:

The fact that we are in a same-sex relationship means that the predetermination of roles by gender, sometimes so destructive a force in heterosexual relationships, is not relevant to our lives. Each member of a same-sex couple is free to act from individual interests, predilections, and skills, rather than having to choose between conforming to or rebelling against the cultural norm. We are able to see the mainstream culture from a greater distance and a healthier perspective. This means that we know that many of the oppressive messages of the culture are inapplicable to us, and that others are simply false or distorted. Thus, we are able to circumvent much of what is jokingly referred to as “The Battle of the Sexes”—really, no joking matter at all. Ironically, it is the same-sex couple that can most clearly see itself as being composed of two human beings, whereas the heterosexual couple is constantly having to deal with the coercive personae of Man and Woman.^{lxvi}

A lesbian author writes:

In many ways, we have an easier time of creating a truly egalitarian, mutual and mature relationship. In fact, some researchers are now beginning to look at the same-sex couple as a model for helping heterosexuals to create more human relationships. In contrast with heterosexuals, who often feel alienated from their mates, we need only look inside ourselves to know much about our lovers. We are able to relax with each other in a much more trusting way than can most straight couples. The inequities in our relationships are individually made ones, for the most part, and not a function of historically sanctioned power imbalances that have created the fear and hatred in which many women and men coexist today. In a lesbian couple, both women can freely develop strength and competence. In addition, having been socialized as women, we have been trained to be interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, gentle and compassionate. In a heterosexual relationship, these qualities are used primarily to serve the man and to oppress the woman, who often must bear full responsibility for the emotional quality of the relationship. These same attributes, however, can create a miraculously high-quality relationship when shared by two women who are matched in their capacities to share and to love.^{lxvii}

A gay philosophy professor at MIT observes:

Once we understand what marriage is, we can see what marriage would mean for us, and why it is worth fighting for. Same-sex marriage would not force anyone to honor or approve of gay or lesbian relationships against their will. But it would enable those of us who are involved in gay or lesbian relationships to get the rest of society to understand that we take these relationships just as seriously as heterosexual married couples take theirs. And without marriage, we remain second-class citizens—excluded, for no good reason, from participating in one of the basic institutions of society.^{lxviii}

Here is an interesting note from church history:

John Boswell ... has discovered that, whereas the church did not declare heterosexual marriage to be a sacrament until 1215 CE, one of the Vatican Library's earliest Greek liturgical documents is a marriage ceremony for two persons of the same sex. The document dates to the fourth century, if not earlier. In other words, nine centuries before heterosexual marriage was declared a sacrament, the church liturgically celebrated same-sex covenants.^{lxix}

Louise, it is time for society to recognize that when two gay men or two lesbian women have committed themselves to each other as fully as any heterosexual couple has, it is gross discrimination for society to deny them the same rights and privileges given to a heterosexual couple in marriage.

Ten. The Homosexual's Rightful Place in the Church: As in society, gay men and lesbian women should be accepted and affirmed in our churches just as others are and given any opportunity for service that others have, including ordination and pastorates.

For the past several decades most Protestant denominations have been debating whether to affirm, and especially whether to ordain, homosexual persons. Many committees have been appointed to study the matter and make recommendations to their general denominational bodies or their churches. In case after case, the recommendations of the committees have been just about what I have said in this discussion, but when considered by the general assemblies/conventions or churches, those recommendations have been voted down.

I am impressed that those who have made a serious study of homosexuality—the members of the committees—have concluded that we should affirm fully gay and lesbian persons who want to join us in our churches, while those who believe we should not affirm them are the ones who have not studied the matter. If they vote down affirmation because they have not studied it, then they are voting on the basis of pre-judging, that is, prejudice. Prejudging, prejudice, is evil.

Some churches give membership to gay and lesbian persons but deny them any place of leadership. (Can we believe that Christ would have two classes of members in his church?) These churches believe homosexual partners are living in sin and cannot be accepted as others are. But I have shown above that the partnerships of homosexuals can be just as loving and moral as any heterosexual marriage. The homosexual members should be accepted, affirmed, appreciated, and used in service under the same conditions as heterosexual church members are.

Dr. Tex S. Sample has this concept about the ordination of a lesbian or gay living in a partnership:

[There are three questions about such an ordination:] the first is whether one's union basically frustrates one's commitment to the kingdom of God.... The second issue for ordination is whether one's union, like marriage or celibacy, frees one for obedience to God and propels one to fulfill God's aims. ... Finally, and perhaps most important, does the union itself bear witness to the covenantal reality of the kingdom of God? ... When homosexual unions are faithful to God's rule, manifest its power, serve its aims and bespeak its hopes and joys, the basic question of readiness for ordained ministry has been met.^{lxx}

In 1973 the United Church of Christ's Executive Council urged the full acceptance of homosexual persons symbolized by ordination: "In the instance of considering a stated homosexual's candidacy for ordination the issue should not be his/her homosexuality as such, but rather the candidate's total view of human sexuality and his/her understanding of the morality of its use."^{lxxi} (In 1985, the UCC's General Synod declared itself to be "open and affirming" and called upon UCC churches to do likewise. In July 2005 the UCC Synod voted to affirm "equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender.")

Conservative theologian Stanley Grenz observes that homosexuality in itself should not be considered in selecting a candidate for ordination, because, "The texts that set down guidelines for the selection of officers focus on three basic prerequisites—giftedness for leadership, spirituality and character, and public reputation (e.g., I Tim. 3:1-13). ... These criteria give central emphasis to the importance of one's present life of faith."^{lxxii}

And Richard Hays, although believing homosexuality to be sinful, notes that other sins are in the same

list with homosexuality and concludes, "It is arbitrary to single out homosexuality as a special sin that precludes ordination. (Certainly the New Testament does not do this.) The church has no analogous special rules to exclude from ordination the greedy or the self-righteous. Such matters are left to the discernment of the bodies charged with examining candidates for ordination; these bodies must determine whether the individual candidate has the gifts and graces requisite for ministry."^{lxiii}

Surely any gay or lesbian person who comes to our churches professing that Jesus Christ is Lord should be accepted and affirmed and given every privilege of service in the church that anyone else has, including ordination as a deacon or a minister.

Summary

Louise, I have to believe deeply that what I have written above is the truth about homosexuality, and lesbian and gay people. The convictions have come from my seriously studying this subject, and, thankfully, I now can feel enlightened about it. Now I know that homosexual people do not choose their orientation, that they are created by God in his image with an unchangeable nature which is good and with a God-given purpose. I know the love between gay couples and between lesbian couples can be no less than that of others. I am convinced the Bible supports their loving, committed relationships, that there is not necessarily moral evil in such, and that society and our churches should affirm them fully.

And gay men and lesbian women have those characteristics that give them some extraordinary potential in very desirable areas! If we would only accept them, appreciate them, affirm them and bring them out of their closets, they could give beauty and strength to society and our churches.

As I finish writing these things that seem to me so clearly the truth, I feel a great despair about our churches and pastors. So many are where I was until I made a serious study. They have never been conscious of a need to study. Nevertheless, they, as I did, assume homosexuality to be just perverted sex, so it has to be evil. Pre-judging. Prejudice. But they don't recognize that and are unconscious of the terrible evil they are doing to millions of gays and lesbians. I fear they are sending many to hell who will not come to hear the gospel because they know the church has already condemned them. A matter so important to churches and denominations and the millions of homosexuals demands more serious consideration, especially from our pastors.

So these pastors, unlearned about homosexuality, continue to point to the Bible and say homosexuals are going to hell. I think I should discuss the Bible passages they cite. They are guilty of gross misinterpretation of scripture because they have ignored simple principles of interpretation. What a tragedy for the Word of God to be twisted to suit someone's prejudices! I shall set forth a few of the more pertinent principles of interpretation. You will find that they are obvious to any serious reader of the Bible and will wonder how anyone can fail to observe them. These discussions are in the first and second Supplemental Notes below. In the third Note I show the obvious analogy between much of the thinking about homosexuals and the thinking about Gentiles by the earliest Christians. In the last Note I shall speak to those who remain homophobic.

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE ONE: ON THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

Louise, I don't need to tell you that the Bible is the most important book in the world for us. It reveals the God who created us and tells us how God wants us to live. It is a book reflecting the love of God telling us how to have the greatest joys life can know and the deepest fulfillment of life, and how to achieve the great potential that God has put in us. We Baptists believe that each person must interpret the Bible for himself or herself. That is scary, but letting someone else tell us what to believe is scarier. How important it is, then, that we have principles of interpretation, guides for understanding God's Word.

As I have said above, the meaning in a verse or passage often is not on the surface in the words we are reading, for usually there is a great deal behind the words of the passage that we need to understand. Words are vehicles for expressing thought; it is the thought we want to capture. My great theology professor, W. T. Connor, expressed it simply: "The Bible doesn't mean what it says, it means what it means." Upon reflection, we realize that is true of everything ever written or spoken.

Here are a few principles of interpretation that help us know what the Bible writers *meant* for us to understand.

(1) *Understand the writer's purpose for writing.*

Our understanding *what* the writer wanted his readers to know comes best from understanding *why* he wanted them to know it. Discerning that purpose may be the most important thing about our understanding the meaning.

Application: Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 say, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." The writer says "Don't" because it is an "abomination." In the Old Testament "abomination" describes practices that interfere with a pure worship of God, particularly idolatrous practices such as the same-gender sex that the pagans practiced in their temples. The writer's purpose was to address the need for undivided devotion in worship; his focus was not on moral values.

(2) *Understand what the writer wanted his readers to understand.*

The words of the Bible are not directed to *us*. Do we read and with great earnestness ask What is Paul saying to me? The answer: Nothing. He was not writing to us. We need to know what Paul was saying to his readers, what he wanted them to understand. *From that we can learn what principles God wants us to understand and live by in our culture.*

New Testament scholar H. E. Dana, in *Searching the Scriptures*, says, "The ultimate object which we seek in interpretation is the thought in the mind of the New Testament writer which sought expression in the written text. We should seek to discover the one meaning which the writer had in mind, and then apply that meaning to our moral and religious experience."^{lxxiv} This is a basic fact about the whole Bible, and it involves several things:

(a) The writer's meaning comes out of *his* background. The "inspiration" of the Bible does not mean God dictated the words. He let the authors of the books write out of their own consciousness and experience, using their own words (for example, the Greek of some NT writers was atrocious. Isn't it wonderful how unimportant that was for God's using them!). The Biblical author can write only out of his own culture, understandings and presuppositions.

Application: In the century when the Leviticus rules were given, the writer knew nothing of gays or lesbians, unknown until the 19th century. He was writing about the only kind of people his culture knew about – we would call them heterosexual.

(b) The writer's meaning is determined by the background and situation of *those to whom he wrote*. Paul's letter to Philemon is an obvious illustration of this. Everything written to people who lived thousands of years ago had in mind their culture, circumstances and needs.

Application: When Leviticus 18 and 20 were written the Children of Israel were preparing to go into the Promised Land where the heathen practiced same-gender sex in their religious rituals. God wanted his people to be free of anything that adulterated their worship of him, and the selfish lust of (heterosexuals) practicing same-gender sex in their worship was antithetical to devotion to God (See Lev. 18:24,25). God wanted the Children of Israel to be very conscious of this.

(c) Our understanding of the writer's meaning is colored by *our own* culture, experiences, understandings, presuppositions, etc. If you and I read the same thing, not just the Bible, our interpretations will often be different just because of our different backgrounds and experiences. So many times I have stood in the vestibule after a service to speak to people as they left the church and had someone comment on something I had said in the sermon, only to think to myself, Where in the world did they get that? I didn't say anything like that! We must try to keep our own background and culture out of our interpretations and to be objective.

Application: Sexual immorality (lust) in the Bible is in lists along with greed, envy, lying and gossip and is apparently neither better nor worse than those sins. For many, it is our culture's influence, not the Bible, that makes same-gender sex far the worst of those sins. (Now, does the list mean that lust is not very bad or that greed, envy, lying and gossip are just as evil in God's sight as lust?)

That is a serious question: How does God judge sin? The way we do? My fourth Note below attempts to say a word about this.)

- (3) *Understand the context. Nothing should ever be taken out of its whole context.*

Dr. Dana says, "No single sentence or verse should ever be interpreted independent of its logical connections. Interpretation should deal with whole sections, each section being considered from two angles: its connection with . . . and its contribution to the general progress of thought."^{1xv}

Application: The verses in Leviticus are in a section of the book called the "Holiness Code"; it is rules for the Children of Israel to follow to be uniquely God's people, in contrast to their idolatrous neighbors. The verses are to be understood as a part of this Holiness Code. (A discussion is in Supplemental Note Two.)

- (4) *Understand a verse or passage in the light of the Bible as a whole.*

A careless reading of the words of scripture frequently seems to show contradictory statements. Often there are special depths of truth in such scriptures to be found in serious study. Particularly do we need to weigh the inferences we decide a scripture has against the entire teaching of the Bible.

Application: Some say that God's command to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28) means God's plan is for every man and woman to marry and have children. Paul appears to reinforce this by saying, "Each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (I Cor. 7:2). But a few verses later Paul tells the unmarried to remain single. What really does God want? The entire Bible points to beauty in both marriage and singleness.

- (5) *Distinguish between Bible principles and rules.*

Our Christian religion is not about following external rules in order to be judged righteous; it is about building an inner life in the likeness of God's greatest revelation, Jesus Christ. The Bible is not a rulebook. The Bible is primarily a history of the Children of Israel, of the life of Jesus and of the New Testament church. In that history the writers frequently set out rules to help the Children of Israel and the New Testament Christians in their thoughts and actions, but those rules obviously related to *the culture in which they were living*. Those hundreds of rules in both Testaments are seldom applicable to the 21st century because our culture is entirely different. When we go to church, we don't "greet one another with a holy kiss" as Paul told first century churches to do (e.g., Rom. 16:16). And doesn't the Bible tell Christian women to have long hair? No, the Bible told first century Christian women to have long hair because of first century culture.

The rules for God's people to live by spoke to the culture of the particular period of the Bible history. But behind every rule was a principle that applies to us today. We find those principles and live by them. Commentators speak of temporary cultural rules and eternal transcultural principles. The never-changing principles are our guides. Rules that helped one culture to follow those principles need to be replaced for another culture. In our day we express our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ (the principle) by a hearty handshake or a gentle hug rather than by a holy kiss. We want to understand and follow the principle behind the rule.

I must point out that those who insist that every verse of the Bible is to be followed literally, which includes many obsolete rules, always ignore scores of Bible rules they don't want to follow. If the Bible is a rulebook, it is a sin for a woman to wear gold or pearls (I Tim. 2:9), and we should stone to death anyone who eats a cheeseburger! (See below.)

- (6) *How do we move from the first-century Bible to today?*

To begin with, we remember that we have the Holy Spirit promised to us for this task (John 14:26, 16:13); we must always ponder the text and/or the subject in prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance. In our culture we will always encounter many things the Bible does not speak of, and it is the Holy Spirit's desire to impart God's truth to us in any age. Any individual's spiritual growth through learning more truth about God means the Holy Spirit has given a new revelation to that person.

Bible commentators still follow John Wesley's pattern for seeking God's new revelation for the

current time: consider (a) scripture, (b) tradition—how Christian churches have interpreted and applied scripture through history, (c) reason—Wesley thought religion and reason went together, that any irrational religion was false religion, and (d) experience—what produces Christlikeness in individual lives.

All of that is looked at through an all-encompassing test: Christ is the perfect revelation of God, and Christ is the final and supreme criterion by which our concepts are to be judged and shaped. The principles he taught and exemplified as unchanging and eternal have to become our conclusions about the Bible's message for our lives. Commentators agree, "We must constantly hold the interpretations ... up against the person of Christ, who is the final criterion for valid understanding."^{lxvii} With great insight, Martin Luther told us to let the whole Bible lead us to Jesus Christ and then let Jesus Christ lead us back to the whole Bible.

We see the *relative* importance of the Bible to the life of Christ when we realize that those Christians who were said to have turned the world upside down for Christ in the first century (Acts 17:6) did not have a New Testament. They had *only* (!) a life-transforming experience with Jesus Christ and were living like him to the best of their understanding of him. (Do you suppose if we didn't have a New Testament to wrangle over and had only such an experience with Jesus Christ and were trying to become "little Christs" that we would do better at turning our world upside down for him?) Surely we can see that the important thing is to weigh every understanding of revelation—scripture, tradition, reason or experience—in the scales of Jesus Christ.

All of us have many areas in our thinking and practices that need more understanding of the way of Christ. We must pray to achieve and then strive to achieve more likeness to him so the Holy Spirit can continue to give us new revelation. And serious study of the Bible—I think particularly of the life of Christ in the four Gospels—must be a priority.

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE TWO: BIBLE PASSAGES ON SAME-GENDER SEX

As stated above, until 1869 there was no written idea of homosexuality as being an intrinsic part of one's nature. Until that time it was believed that all people were what we would call heterosexual, but that some chose to engage in same-gender sex. When the Bible writers talked on this subject, within their culture and understanding, that is what they were talking about—that kind of *heterosexuality*. So if there is nothing in the Bible about homosexuality, why this section?

There are Bible passages used by some people today to condemn homosexual men and women. But careful interpretation of those passages shows why, even if they were talking about homosexuality, they would have no application to our consideration of homosexuality today. I am indebted to many authors who have written on this subject.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Creation Story, Genesis 1-3

Some turn to the Creation Story for their evidence of the sin of homosexuality and/or homosexual unions. They say that since God created a union of a man and a woman in the Garden of Eden, that is the only kind of union that is acceptable to him. But the Creation Story is telling of God's plan for beginning the population of the earth; nothing more is there. No one can draw any conclusions from it about homosexuality or homosexual relationships. If a passage says nothing, it says nothing, despite what some people want it to say. Those depending on this passage may say it implies that any other marriage is sin. Implications represent what the reader wants it to say that it doesn't say. Sometimes other scripture confirms an implication. But there is nothing anywhere in the Bible that supports this interpretation of the Creation Story.

Dr. Gomes has this comment:

[As] Jeffrey S. Siker has pointed out in the July 1994 issue of *Theology Today*, to argue that the creation story privileges a heterosexual view of the relations between humankind is to make one of the weakest arguments possible, the argument from silence. ... It does not mention friendship, for example, and yet we do not assume that friendship is condemned or abnormal. It does not mention the single state, and yet we know that singleness is not condemned, and that in certain religious

circumstances it is held in very high esteem. The creation story is not, after all, a paradigm about marriage, but rather about the establishment of human society.^{lxxvii}

One can read anything one wants to into the creation story but cannot read anything about homosexuality out of it.

Genesis 18:20 to 19:29—The story of Sodom

These verses tell us that God decided to destroy the city of Sodom because of its sins, but they do not say what the sins were. God-fearing Lot had settled in Sodom, and the evening before the planned destruction, two angels, disguised as men, came to the city to save Lot by leading him and his family out the next day. Hospitable Lot took them to his home. That evening a mob gathered at his house demanding that Lot bring out the two men so they (the mob) could "know" (KJV and RSV) them. NIV translators rendered it, "have sex with them." Lot refused to expose his visitors to the mob, and when the mob was about to break down his door, the angels struck all in the mob blind and the mob dispersed. The next day Lot and his family were led out of the city, which was then destroyed by fire and brimstone from heaven

Homophobics (including some Bible translators) maintain that the mob lusted for homosexual sex with the strangers and that such sex was the reason that God destroyed the city, evidence, they say, that God condemns homosexual sex. (We might note that God did not destroy Sodom for what the mob wanted to do that night; he had already decided to destroy it.) If this story were about sex, the most obvious thing would be that the intention of the mob was criminal, gang rape, utterly condemnable. The same condemnation would apply to heterosexual gang rape, but we would make no application of it to loving heterosexual sex. If this story were about homosexual gang rape, it could not be compared with the love between gay and lesbian partners.

Many scholars believe "know" did not mean sex. The Hebrew word here, *yadha*, "to know," is used 943 times in the OT; in only ten uses does it clearly mean "to have sex," always clearly to mean heterosexual sex. The Hebrew *shakhabh* means "to have same-gender sex"; the writer surely would have used it if that had been what he meant. The people of Sodom had reason for wanting to know, i.e., to find out, who these men were and what they wanted. Each walled city was suspicious of every other. Lot was an outsider and now he is entertaining two other outsiders. Who are they and what do they want? Evidence points to *yadha's* meaning "know," not "have sex."

Further evidence for this is in the fact that outside of Genesis Sodom is mentioned 28 times in the Bible as an example of great sin; not once is same-gender sex suggested. Ezekiel 16:49 does describe the sins of Sodom, the only verse in the Bible that does; and sex is not listed as one of them. Jesus speaks of Sodom's evil in the context of inhospitality. (In Old Testament times inhospitality could result in death for a traveler otherwise left to the mercy of wild animals.)

Some scholars believe that in that time in history, if the "know" meant sex, it would not have been the sex of lust. As noted above, same-gender sex was ritualistically practiced in heathen worship. It was also widely practiced by men who wanted to degrade or humiliate another man by making him take the place of a (virtually worthless) woman. It was practiced by conquering armies on their captives. Scholars say it so degraded a man that it was almost like murder. The Bible says "all the men of Sodom to the last man" came to Lot's door. Since we can believe some 90-96% of all the men of Sodom were heterosexual, if current percentages prevailed then, if it was sex the mob wanted, it was this kind of sex: dominance, degradation, humiliation.

Conservative theologian Richard Hays says, "The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic."^{lxxviii}

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Revised Standard Version:

22 You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination. 13 if a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination, they shall be put to death.

The King James and New International versions say virtually the same thing.

23

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are the only direct references to same-gender sex in the Old Testament. They are both part of the Old Testament Holiness Code, a religious, *not a moral code*; it later became the Jewish Purity Laws. The word "abomination" is used throughout the Old Testament to designate sins that involve contamination of worship, especially idolatry. The word relates to the failure to worship God in purity or to worshipping a false god. Professor Soards tells us, "Old Testament experts view the regulations of Leviticus as standards of holiness, directives for the formation of community life, aimed at establishing and maintaining a people's identity in relation to God."^{lxxix} This is because God was so determined that His people who were being formed into a new nation would not adopt the practices of the Baal worshipers in Canaan, and same-gender sex was part of Baal worship.

God required purity in worship. Anything pure was unadulterated, unmixed with anything else. These Purity Laws prohibited mixing different threads in one garment, sowing a field with two kinds of seed, crossbreeding animals. A few years ago in Israel when an orthodox government came into power, McDonalds had to stop selling cheeseburgers. Hamburgers, OK. Cheese sandwiches, OK. But mixing milk and meat in one sandwich violated the Purity Laws—it had nothing to do with morality. Even if we consider that morality was a factor in this rule, it is part of the Code, and when the Code became obsolete, as it is under Christ, that rule, as part of the Code, became obsolete. These verses in Leviticus have nothing to say to us today beyond the eternal principle of the need for purity in the worship of God. If the immorality expressed in them happens to be a principle for all time, then it will be found elsewhere in the Bible. (For heterosexuals it is found in Roman 1 (see below) which clearly condemns same-gender sex by heterosexuals. There is nothing in the Bible to support any finding about homosexuals.)

Another reason the rules of this Code are not pertinent to our discussion is that these rules were temporary; they were for the particular time and circumstances existing when they were given. E.g., if you planted a fruit tree, you could not eat its fruit until its fifth year, and all fruit the fourth year must be offered to the Lord. A worker must be paid his wage on the day of his labor. You must not harvest a field to its edge. We readily dismiss these as not applicable to our day and culture, and if we dismiss some of them for any reason, we have to dismiss all of them for that same reason; we cannot choose which ones we want to dismiss and which ones we want to keep. No church/denomination considers the Holiness Code to be in effect today.

Some commentators believe the verses apply to the common practice of one person's degrading another by making him take the place of a (more or less worthless) woman. The sin then is not lust but the degradation of another. It was commonly accepted when the victim was an inferior or one conquered in battle. It virtually destroyed the victim. Temple describes it: "Same-sex coupling with a peer or a superior robbed the victim of his prerogatives as a 'man,' rendering him unfit for further life, and it marked the perpetrator as a murderer, hence a danger to social order. . . . For a man to permit himself to be penetrated was a form of social suicide. These murders, thefts, and suicides defiled the purity of the land by blurring categories. The ignoring of class boundaries constituted a category confusion and was the abominable element - not the sex of the two parties."^{lxxx}

Helmut Thielicke remarks on these passages: "It would never occur to anyone to wrench these laws of cultic purification from their concrete situation and give them the kind of normative authority that the Decalogue, for example, has."^{lxxxii}

When we add the fact that these laws were talking about heterosexuals, it makes three reasons, any one of which would be sufficient, why they have no bearing on questions about homosexuals or homosexuality or on the morality of same-gender sex by homosexuals today.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament has three passages to be considered, but only the reference in Romans actually speaks of same-gender sex.

Romans 1:21, 26, 27

Revised Standard Version

21 for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him . . . 26 For this

reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, 27 and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men . . .

The King James and New International versions say virtually the same thing.

Romans 1:26 and 27 clearly speak of same-gender sex by both men and women, the only Bible passage that does so. Rom. 1:18-32 speaks of Gentiles who could and should have known and served and given thanks to God but would not, so God gave them up and let them do whatever they wanted to do, and that resulted in their being “consumed with passion” and in such lust practicing same-gender sex. All of us recognize that those who forsake God and give themselves over to lustful living , homosexual or heterosexual, stand condemned by the Bible. This passage is talking about people who chose to forsake God. Gays and lesbians coming to our churches professing Christ as Savior and Lord and wanting to work and worship with us do not fall in this category; Romans 1 is not talking about them.

In this passage both men and women are said to have given up “natural relations” (sex) with the opposite gender and instead to have same-gender sex. Clearly, Paul understands these people to be what we would call heterosexual. There is nothing in this passage that relates to homosexual people.

Conservative theologian Richard Hays says, “No direct appeal to Romans 1 as a source of rules about sexual conduct is possible.”^{lxxxii}

I Corinthians 6:9

King James Version:

9 . . . Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate [Greek: *malakoi*], nor abusers of themselves with mankind [Greek: *arsenokoitai*], 10 Nor thieves . . . shall inherit the kingdom of God.

New International Version:

9 . . . Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes [*malakoi*] nor homosexual offenders [*arsenokoitai*] 10 nor thieves...will inherit the kingdom of God.

Revised Standard Version—1952 edition:

9...Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homo-sexuals [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*], 10 nor thieves . . . will inherit the kingdom of God.

Revised Standard Version—1971 edition:

9 . . . Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*], 10 nor thieves . . . will inherit the kingdom of God.

A comparison of how the two Greek words are translated in the different versions shows that translations often, unfortunately, become the interpretations of the translators instead of translations (as in the NIV in the Sodom story above). In I Cor. 6:9 Paul lists the types of persons who will be excluded from the kingdom of God and for some he uses the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. The KJV translates the first “effeminate,” a word that has no necessary connection with homosexuals. The NIV translates the first “male prostitutes” and the second, “homosexual offenders.” The RSV in its first edition of 1952 translated both words by the single term, “homosexuals.” In the revised RSV of 1971, the translation “homosexuals” is discarded and the two Greek words are translated as “sexual perverts”; obviously the translators had concluded that the earlier translation could not be justified.

Malakoi literally means “soft” and is translated that way by both KJ and RSV in Matt. 11:8 and Luke 7:25. When it is used in moral contexts in Greek writings it has the meaning of morally weak; a related word, *malakia*, when used in moral contexts, means dissolute and occasionally refers to sexual activity but never to homosexual acts. There are at least five Greek words that specifically mean people who practice same-gender sex. Unquestionably, if Paul had meant such people, he would not have used a word that is never used to mean that in Greek writings when he had other words that were clear in that meaning. He must have meant what the word commonly means in moral contexts, “morally weak.”

There is no justification, most scholars agree, for translating it "homosexuals." Yale historian John Boswell says, "The word is never used in Greek to designate gay people."^{lxxxiii}

Arsenokoitai, is not found in any extant Greek writings until the second century when it apparently means "pederast," a man using boys for sex, and the sixth century when it is used for husbands practicing anal intercourse with their wives. Again, if Paul meant people practicing same-gender sex, why didn't he use one of the common words? Some scholars think probably the second century use might come closest to Paul's intention. If so, there is no justification for translating the word as "homosexuals." Other scholars see a connection with Greek words used to refer to same-gender sex in Leviticus. My discussion above shows why the Leviticus references have no relevance to homosexuality today.

One commentator has another reason for rejecting the NIV and original RSV translations, "homosexuals." Today it could mean that a person who is homosexual in orientation even though "of irreproachable morals, is automatically branded as unrighteous and excluded from the kingdom of God, just as if he were the most depraved of sexual perverts."^{lxxxiv}

The conservative scholar Richard Hays tells us, "I Corinthians 6:9-11 states no rule to govern the conduct of Christians."^{lxxxv}

I Timothy 1:10

King James Version:

9 . . . the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, . . . 10 . . . for them that defile themselves with mankind (*arsenokoita*) . . .

Revised Standard Version - both 1952 and 1971 editions:

9 . . . the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for . . . 10 . . . immoral persons, sodomites (*arsenokoita*), . .

New International Version:

9 . . . the law is not made for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful . . . 10 . . . for adulterers and perverts (*arsenokoita*)

Here only the RSV specifically refers to same-gender sex, using the term "sodomites," which is the translation given in both the Old Testament and New Testament to Hebrew and Greek words for male temple prostitutes. The KJV probably has the same thought. The NIV does not necessarily refer to same-gender sex. Again Paul has used the Greek word *arsenokoitai*, the word in I Cor. 6:9. As discussed above, this word would have no reference to homosexuality or homosexual sex.

So like the other two New Testament passages, I Tim. 1:10 says nothing about homosexuality or homosexuals and nothing about same-gender sex unless that of temple prostitutes or possibly the keeping of young boys for sex by heterosexuals.

Some general comments on the Bible and homosexuality

Dr. Robin Scroggs states, "The basic model in today's Christian homosexual community is so different from the model attacked by the New Testament that the criterion of reasonable similarity of context is not met. The conclusion I have to draw seems inevitable: *Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate.*"^{lxxxvi} [Italics hers]

Similarly, Walter Wink points out that every reference to same-gender sex in the Bible is "heavy with lust"; it would have no ethical teaching for other conduct.^{lxxxvii}

Dr. Gomes concludes his discussion of homosexuality and the Bible with these words:

The Biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous, and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness, and exploitation. These vices, as we know, are not unknown among heterosexuals, and to define

contemporary homosexuals only in these terms is a cultural slander of the highest order, reflecting not so much prejudice, which it surely does, but what the Roman Catholic Church calls "invincible ignorance," which all of the Christian piety and charity in the world can do little to conceal. The "problem," of course, is not the Bible, it is the Christians who read it.^{lxxxviii}

Summary

Louise, in view of the facts set forth above, we realize there is no moral teaching in the Bible about homosexuality. The Bible cannot be used to condemn as immoral all same-gender sex. It clearly condemns lust, and that would be whether heterosexual or homosexual. There is certainly nothing in the Bible about anyone's going to hell because he or she is homosexual. All who go to hell will go for the same, one reason: failure to commit their lives in faith to Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

In this second Supplemental Note I have shown that *nothing in the Bible condemns* loving, committed relationships between gay men and between lesbian women. And in "Eight" above I have shown how scholars believe that *the principles of the Bible affirm* such relationships. I have to believe that gay men and lesbian women in such relationships are not living in sin but are living in love, and that their lives can glorify God in that loving relationship just as any other lives can. *And that they should be affirmed and loved in our churches.*

Homophobics are making a mistake of devastating consequences to the millions of gays and lesbians, including, as I said above, sending many to hell because of the church's condemnation, and to the church and society that are robbed of the potential contributions of these people who are often so greatly gifted.

Louise, as I have said, most of the above is contrary to my earlier ideas about homosexuality, but that was when I really knew nothing about it. I have prayed for an open mind that puts truth first in my thinking. I see truth in all of the above. This is what I have to believe now. Josh Billings, I am so glad I re-examined this subject.

I often come back in my mind to two quotations (sources lost): "If I have to try to explain to God why I made a mistake about gay and lesbian people, I would rather try to explain why I made the mistake by including them than why I made the mistake by excluding them." Similarly: "I would rather err on the side of helping hurting people than on the side of hurting helpless people."

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE THREE: THE ANALOGY OF THE GENTILES

When, after God had shown Peter the vision of animals (unclean in Peter's thinking) (Acts 10) and told Peter not to call unclean what God had cleansed, and then Peter had led the Gentile Cornelius and the many with him to salvation and had seen the Holy Spirit come upon them all, Peter realized that God was telling him that Gentiles were not necessarily the unclean, despised people he had always considered them to be, and that the door to salvation was open to Gentiles as well as to Jews. As Gentiles began to be accepted into churches, many Jewish Christians were horrified. All of their lives they had known that Gentiles were trash, dogs, unclean; even the shadow of a Gentile must not fall on them. To them, Christ was the Messiah to the Jews. Perhaps a Gentile could become a Christian if he first became a Jew. He would need to repent of all the evil of being a Gentile and embrace all the things that would make him a Jew - circumcision, food rituals, etc.

When Peter went to Jerusalem, these Jews called him to task for accepting Gentiles without their first converting to become Jews (Acts 11). Peter then told them all the details of the conversion of Cornelius and those with him, testifying that the Holy Spirit had clearly come upon them when they believed in Jesus while he had preached to them. Then Peter said, "So if God gave them the same gift [of the Holy Spirit] as he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" Then the Christian Jews "praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'"

The parallels between this story and our consideration of homosexuals today seem clear. Those who do not affirm homosexuals consider their practices to be unclean, evil. If homosexuals want acceptance, they must repent of their homosexuality and become heterosexual (or remain celibate).

I want to testify that I have seen the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of gay and lesbian fellow church members just as fully as I have found in any others. Our church has a dozen or so gays and lesbians - including as number of partnerships - who are open about their orientation. Any member who knows a few of them will join me in saying they are some of the most dedicated Christians, conscientious and effective workers, that we have, some having been elevated by the membership to high positions of responsibility, including ordination.

I have a lesbian friend who is pastor of a church and deeply committed to bringing its members into strong relationships with and greater service to the Lord. Several times I have visited the largest gay/lesbian church in the world, and I have been moved by the depth and intensity of their worship and commitment to God. Many of us know of churches with devoted gay and lesbian leaders, and many of us know of gay and lesbian pastors. There has been much publicity about one whose dedication and service to his denomination have led him to a position as Bishop of New Hampshire.

I cannot understand how anyone can believe that the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of these people is any less than it is in his or her life. And if God's Holy Spirit has accepted these people who have professed Christ as Savior and Lord, how can we fail to do the same? Should we not also praise God and say, "So then God has granted even the homosexuals we have despised repentance unto life.

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE FOUR: THE THREE SINS

I know many homophobic people will never change. It is said that you cannot reason a person out of a position he or she did not get into by reason in the first place. So very many have no reason, only prejudice, for their homophobia, for they have never studied homosexuality with open minds. These people will not read this letter, but I want to include here what I wish I could say to them.

When someone says to homosexual persons, "We love the sinner but hate the sin; you must change before you can be a part of our church," what they hear is, "*You* are sinners and *we* are not." And they hear, "*we* are qualified to sit in judgment of *you* in this matter of your relation with God." Or they hear, as one gay man put it, "You're defective. You're sinning. You are evil."^{lxxxix} Isn't it easy to see why gays and lesbians hate this statement?

The message most churches have for a gay or lesbian who wants to unite with the church, particularly one living with a partner, is, "You may think your homosexuality is not a sin and that your living with a partner is not a sin, but we know it is, so you cannot join our church." Can we be sure that that church's understanding of sin is exactly the same as God's?

As I related above, some people take the story of Sodom as evidence of the sin of homosexuality. Sodom, destroyed for its sinfulness with fire and brimstone from heaven (Gen. 19:24), is mentioned 28 times in the Bible outside of Genesis as an example of sin at its worst, but the only time we are told any detail of Sodom's sins is in Ezekiel 16:49, and this verse seems to sum up clearly the Bible's categories of sin. So Ezekiel's statement should be most instructive to us about what God views as sin. In KJV it reads

Now this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy, and they were haughty and committed abominations before me.

Ezekiel names three types of sin attributable to the people of Sodom. The sin first-named is pride and its companion, haughtiness. We didn't expect that; this isn't one of the unspeakable things we attribute to "evil" people. No, these are *sins of the spirit*. Now we recall that the sins of the spirit were the sins for which Jesus so condemned the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the "back to the Bible" people of Jesus' day, organized originally for just that purpose. They went regularly to worship services, they knew their Bible thoroughly and they tithed faithfully. (Do we wish our churches were full of people like that? Yes. Does that say anything about the way we judge?) But Jesus knew their pride and hypocrisy, their legalism without love, and said their sins were so great they could not get into his kingdom. It was their sins of the spirit that condemned these people who otherwise were so exemplary.

The problem for us about sins of the spirit is probably that most of the time we are not conscious of

them. We go to church and read the Bible and give to the church; we must be pretty good people. But if, like the Pharisees, we are not conscious of our sins of the spirit, then maybe we are like the Pharisees. Religious editor Marv Knox recently wrote that “insidious enemies—such as greed, apathy, self-interest and hate . . . threaten us all”^{xc}—all sins of the spirit. And the list could go on. We all know that we are not free of the sins of the spirit. They must be great sins for Jesus to condemn them so—*our* great sins.

Ezekiel then says that the people of Sodom had been blessed with abundance, but they did not help the poor and needy. These are *sins of omission*. Are we guilty? Maybe we are not sure because, as with our sins of the spirit, we are not really conscious of our sins of omission. But surely we must realize how much we have failed to be what God has expected of us, and how much we have left undone in God’s kingdom work that we could have done, and how indifferent we have been to the needs of those less fortunate than we are when the Lord expected us to help them.

I ponder this one sin of omission that Ezekiel speaks of here—not helping the poor—and have a feeling of great guilt. Both the Old and New Testaments have so very much to say about helping the poor that someone has said no one will ever get to heaven without a recommendation from the poor. But my hands have never been dirtied by working with or for the poor, nor has my bank account suffered. Should most of our church members feel the same guilt? But partly it’s not their fault; we preachers have not preached and taught about this responsibility God expects us to take. So the sin of us preachers is multiplied in this, our sin of omission. And this is only one sin of omission. When we add all the others . . . I often think that surely my sins of omission must be my greatest sins. Or do I think that because I am so unconscious of my sins of the spirit? I don’t know, but I am certain that *our sins of omission* are very great.

Finally Ezekiel says of the people of Sodom that they did abominable things before God. These are *the sins of commission*. These we are more conscious of, but we probably still think that we are such good people we don’t commit many of them. I read of a woman who said she had not sinned for 43 days. Incredible, almost, that someone could have that concept of sin. But is that rather close to the concept of many church members? Why did our Lord give us a model prayer that could be prayed every day and that included “Forgive us for our sins”?

If anyone considers the sex expression of a Christian gay or lesbian couple to be sin, regardless of their love, they would consider it the sin of commission, the third sin Ezekiel mentioned and, since we would expect Ezekiel to name the worst first, it might not be considered as great as the sins of the spirit and of omission. But there may not be degrees of sin. We have to remember it is not the act itself, it is the heart behind the act that God judges, so our sins of commission have their source in our sins of the spirit. Surely we must realize we all are such great sinners in God’s sight that we cannot possibly point a finger at anyone else and say “Sinner.” Is this why Jesus said, “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1) and why Paul said, “You have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself” (Rom. 2:1)? Many gay and lesbian couples, dedicated to each other and dedicated to Jesus Christ and confident they are living in love and not in sin, are performing good and meaningful works in many churches. Dare we judge their unions to be sinful?

Those who believe all gays and lesbians are sinners will tell us that affirming any in our church fellowship is going soft on sin. Just the opposite. It is recognizing that we all are such great sinners in God’s sight—sins of the spirit, sins of omission, sins of commission—that we can never judge any other’s sins as worse than our sins. If we, sinners as we are, can be part of the fellowship of the church, then homosexual men and women, if they are considered sinners, can also be part of the fellowship. The criteria for their being welcomed is in their love for the Lord, their desire to worship and serve him and to have fellowship with us, the same criteria we have for everyone else.

Philip Yancy in his splendid little book, *What’s So Amazing about Grace?*, tells of the prostitute who was so sick of her life that she went to a counselor for help. In the course of their session the counselor asked her if she had thought about going to church. She was appalled at the thought. “Of course not,” she said. “I feel bad enough about myself now; how would I feel among those people?” Then Yancy notes that when Jesus was on earth, prostitutes and such sinners were attracted to him. The Pharisees

criticized him harshly for that very thing. And Yancy wonders why church people today, Christians who are supposed to be like Christ, repel instead of attract these people. Perhaps our churches are wont to say that we must project an image of what is moral and right in this world. Oh, so we must mean that if Jesus attracted these people, he did not project such an image. We are without defense. Until we become more Christlike, the prostitutes—and lesbians and gays—will never want to come to us. Yet, do we not realize that *we cannot be less sinful than they*, as well as realizing that only God can judge sin? Then why do we judge them as we do?

Even the conservative Richard Hays insists that gays and lesbians must be taken in and affirmed by our churches, saying, "Unless we think the church is a community of sinless perfection, we will have to acknowledge that [gay men and lesbian women] are welcome along with other sinners in the company of those who trust in the God who justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). If they are not welcome, I will have to walk out the door along with them, leaving in the sanctuary only those entitled to cast the first stone."^{xci}

Louise, how can we sinners, we great sinners, say anything to the gays and lesbians who come to our churches except, "You say you love the Lord and want to serve him. We do, too. Come be a part of our fellowship of worship and study and work. We all are such sinners in God's sight we need one another, and we can help and support one another.

We are not here to judge one another's sins; we are here to love and minister to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ as we make our Christian pilgrimage."

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