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# Homosexuality: Current Thinking and Biblical Guidelines

by Edward T. Welch

Homosexuality<sup>1</sup> is the hot issue of the 1990s. Only the very naive can avoid this volatile social issue and personal concern. Even more than abortion, it will confront the church throughout this generation. Political sanctions will be imposed on institutions that refuse to hire homosexuals; homosexuals will probably have their "place at the table" with civil recognition of same-sex marriages;<sup>2</sup> under the heading of "pluralism," all forms of sexual expression will be considered equally valid; those who contract AIDS through homosexual contact will still be role models; church leaders will continue to be "outed"; more denominations will revise their exegesis of biblical passages to allow for homosexual relationships;<sup>3</sup> and people who otherwise take the Bible seriously will leave churches that call homosexuality "sin." Certainly, throughout its history the Church has faced persecution and criticism from the world, but at no time has the Church so frequently been denounced as "evil" for upholding what appear to be biblical principles.

So get ready. Don't rely on your biblical study on homosexuality from a decade ago. Don't assume that being familiar with some of the criticisms of recent biological research on homosexuality means that you are prepared. Today new interpretations of Scripture and sophisticated medical studies are challenging us to think more clearly. People smarter than ourselves are becoming persuaded that committed homosexual rela-

tionships are biblically permissible. In response either we must repent and say that we have misinterpreted Scripture or we must offer a position that is compassionate, biblically sound, and able to account for the observations of current research. Also, if we maintain that homosexuality is sin, then we must not only *defend* that position, but we must develop a strategy where we *pursue* homosexuals to urge them to repentance.

Defense can be accomplished through careful, prayerful study of the issues. Pursuit, however, is not easy. The difficulty in approaching the homosexual community is that most conversations are over long before a Bible is opened. Therefore, the church must give attention not only to *what* is said but also to *how* it is said.

## The How of Biblical Dialogue

The *how* of biblical dialogue begins with personal repentance. Before confronting sin in others, we begin by seeing the sin resident in our own lives. Following the guidelines in Matthew 7:1-5, the biblical exhortation is to allow the Spirit to expose our own hearts until we see that our sin is on a grander scale than that of the homosexual. Proper application of this biblical principle can be quite disarming to someone looking for a fight, since it is difficult to argue with someone who is spiritually humble. Yet, sadly, although the theory is clear, the practice is difficult and uncommon.

Many Christians can acknowledge that they are sinners, but they don't see their sin in quite the same category as homosexuality. Homosexuality, being a sin "against nature," is perceived to be abnormal even among sins. Heterosexuals are often mystified by same-sex attractions. Christians can see in their hearts the seed of most other sins, but many cannot even imagine being tempted by homosexuality. Yet Scripture never singles out homosexuality for special disapproval. It comes from the same heart that generates greed, envy, strife, disobedience to parents, and gossip (Romans 1:29-32).

With repentant and humble spirits, we pursue those who practice homosexuality, and we do it without a hint of self-righteousness. Scripture condemns such a spirit of judgment, and homosexuals will be quick to detect it.

This personal repentance, however, is only the beginning of preparation for dialogue. Because of our solidarity with those who call themselves Christians, there are corporate sins in which we share. Has the church been, at times, self-righteous in its attitude toward homosexuals? Is there "homophobia" in some of our congregations, fear, or even hatred? Do we tend to

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<sup>1</sup>Homosexuality can be defined as thoughts or actions, in adult life, motivated by a definite erotic (sexual-genital-orgiastic) attraction to members of the same sex, usually but not necessarily leading to sexual relations with them. Even though there are differences between male and female homosexuality, I will use the term "homosexual" to refer to male or female, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Poseidon, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>The statements on homosexuality of more than 45 different denominations can be found in J. Gordon Melton, *The Church Speaks Out on: Homosexuality* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991).

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think of homosexuality as worse than the gossip and private idolatries that are rampant in the church? Has the church been unwelcoming to unbelieving but spiritually searching homosexuals? The answer to these questions is certainly "Yes." More specifically, the answer is, "Yes, *we* have sinned."<sup>4</sup>

But what if you personally have not sinned against a homosexual? Perhaps you have never even met someone involved in a homosexual lifestyle. Is corporate repentance appropriate even then? According to Daniel

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*Biblical dialogue begins with  
personal repentance.*

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and Nehemiah, although we may not be personally guilty for some sins, there is a unity we have with others in the church. Because of that unity we share in the sins of other Christians, and it is appropriate to confess them.

O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with all who love Him and obey His commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets (Daniel 9:4-6).

This is one starting point in speaking with homosexuals: allow others to point out your institutional sins. You ask how *the church* has sinned against homosexuals. Then, if you find even a kernel of truth in what is said, you ask forgiveness, and you invite homosexuals in the name of Jesus to talk with you further.

With discussion perhaps possible, get ready to embark on a most challenging dialogue. You will be going to a place where assumptions give different meaning to words, and strategies for biblical interpretation seem completely foreign. In fact, it might be helpful to understand homosexuals as a unique "people group," to use missions parlance. Homosexuals have their own identity, culture, socialization process, and epistemology. What might seem biblically straightforward to many Christians might be understood very differently by a homosexual. Conversations are not a matter of simply opening the Bible and reading passages on homosexuality. Fundamental words such as "sin" may mean one thing to you but something else to homosexuals. For you it means disobedience before the Lord; for the homosexual it may mean not harming other people. You

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<sup>4</sup>Of course, this does not mean that we apologize for what Scripture says.

appeal to the Bible as the adjudicator in all discussion; the homosexual may appeal to feelings and certain assumed personal and political rights. Such presuppositional differences are bound to lead to misunderstanding unless we are prepared and attentive.

At the outset of any discussion, the church must be clear that, although it can err in its interpretation of the Bible and is happy to be corrected, it stands under the Word of God. It cannot give away any ground on the authority of Scripture. Admittedly, God's Word is not always easy to apply; but with the Holy Spirit as the interpreter, we should expect unity among those who truly want to know what God says about this important subject. The goal is discovering "Thus says the Lord."<sup>5</sup> Our presuppositions are not rooted in emotivism; rather, they are found in the teaching of Scripture.

### **The Biblical Data**

Even with the different grids through which we see, it is fairly easy to agree with homosexuals on one point: the Bible is unambiguous and consistent in its prohibitions against homosexuality. At every mention it is condemned as sin.

Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman (Leviticus 18:22).

If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own head (Leviticus 20:13).

While they were enjoying themselves, some of the wicked men of the city surrounded the house....The owner of the house went outside and said to them, "No, my friends, don't be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don't do this disgraceful thing" (Judges 19:22,23).

Because of this [idolatry] God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another (Romans 1:26,27).

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders (*arsenokoitai*) ...will inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9,10).

Law is made not for the righteous but for law-

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<sup>5</sup> Oxford University professor Allistair McGrath indicates rightly that we live in a time when "openness and relevance are more important than truth. This, however, is intellectual shallowness and moral irresponsibility." Michael Foucault has stated that "truth" in a post-modern world is nothing more than a compliment.

breakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful,...for adulterers and perverts (*arsenokoitai*)...(1 Timothy 1:9).

Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire (Jude 7).

Some students of Scripture prefer to hear the prohibition against homosexuality from Jesus's own words as a way to make the case more conclusive. Jesus did not speak against homosexuality specifically, but there are many sexual behaviors that Jesus did not address specifically, such as incest, bestiality, and rape. That doesn't mean they were permissible. Jesus upheld the Old Testament law. Furthermore, he indicated that the only alternative to heterosexual marriage was celibacy (Matthew 19:10).

Yet the response of most homosexuals to these passages tends to be, "What does this have to do with me?" It is as if you are speaking to a group of twentieth century pastors about how to distinguish between clean and unclean animals. The passages are considered irrelevant. This is because the homosexual hermeneutic suggests that these verses speak only to those who participate in "unnatural," noncommitted sexual relationships. The prohibitions allegedly do not apply to committed, loving relationships.

The reasoning goes like this: The Bible does not speak about "natural" homosexuality. It addresses only "unnatural" cultic male prostitution or "unnatural" homosexuality that was practiced by heterosexually-oriented people.<sup>6</sup> The Bible does not speak specifically to people who are oriented toward homosexuality. Therefore, in order to develop a biblical theology of homosexuality, other, more relevant Scripture must be examined. These relevant texts can be found in teaching about heterosexual relationships. The biblical principle is that sexual behavior is the privilege of committed, loving relationships. For heterosexuals, sexual relationships occur only in the context of marriage. For homosexuals, lacking the legal sanction of marriage, sexual relationships should occur only when there is some kind of love for or loyalty to the same-sex partner. Casual homosexual or heterosexual relationships are wrong, but sex within marriage or a marriage-like relationship is good.

There are variations on this logic. For example, some suggest that homosexuality is prohibited in the Old and New Testament cultures; but the guidelines are no longer in force today because they were applicable

mainly to a culture where procreation was essential. Whatever the variation, the homosexual hermeneutic is consistent on two points: (1) There is a "natural" homosexual orientation that is not addressed in the Scripture and (2) the biblical prohibitions against homosexuality are not applicable to modern homosexual "marriages."

This hermeneutic may seem absurd to many Christians. It sounds like the logic of a drinker who says that all the biblical passages that address drunkenness are not relevant to him because he is an alcoholic. But the logic cannot be discarded too quickly. Doesn't it seem that many homosexuals don't choose homosexuality? Instead, they have the orientation from birth? And isn't it true that there are differences between biblical times and now? Don't we consider some biblical passages to be time-limited cultural applications of truth rather than eternal moral verities? For example, many churches do not require women to wear a covering or be silent. Why? Because the Corinthian church was part of a culture that had distinct ways of expressing submission. The principle is submission, not coverings. But if we can do this with coverings, why not homosexuality?

#### ***Was biblical homosexuality "unnatural," and is present homosexuality "natural"?***

The current arguments tend to rely heavily on the idea that modern homosexuality is "natural." It is an orientation that is God-given, not unlike left-handedness. Homosexuality is not something that moderns *do*, it is who they *are*. The "shameful lusts" mentioned in Romans 1:26 refer to reckless homosexuality or homosexual behavior by someone who is oriented heterosexually. This argument is essential to the homosexual position: homosexuality is an identity. Nobody chose it. It just is. Homosexuality is as natural to homosexuals as heterosexuality is to heterosexuals. And how can we as Christians expect people to change their identity? How can *God* expect those *He* has oriented toward homosexuality to go against their nature?

Although most Christians don't condone homosexual activity, they have been affected by the homosexual agenda enough so that they do believe there is some sort of homosexual orientation. The Ramsey Colloquium, a group of Jewish and Christian scholars, certainly agree.

Although we are equal before God, we are not born equal in terms of our strengths and weaknesses, our tendencies and dispositions, our nature and nurture. We cannot utterly change the hand we have been dealt by inheritance and family circumstances, but we are responsible for how we play that hand.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For example, J. Nelson, "Homosexuality and the Church: Towards a Sexual Ethics of Love," *Christianity and Crisis*, 37 (1977), pages 63-69.

<sup>7</sup> "Morality and homosexuality," *The Wall Street Journal*, Febru-

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Even well-known evangelicals like Tony Campolo have been sympathetic to this idea.<sup>8</sup> But we must be very careful at this point because the consequences are profound. For example, permit a sinless homosexual orientation, and you will encourage the church to constantly look for loopholes in the biblical data. After all, how can God hold people responsible who never choose to be homosexuals? Isn't homosexuality God's decision? The church cannot live with the idea of a natural homosexual orientation without, at some point, reinterpreting Scripture so that it seems more in line with our sense of the character of God. The very least that will happen is that the church will back away from the severe warnings of Scripture, such as "homosexuals cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:10). This certainly sounds too harsh for people who are broken and need healing (in contrast with sinners who need repentance).

A second result of accepting a homosexual orientation (although still frowning on homosexual behavior) is that the best counsel we can give those with a homosexual orientation is "look but don't touch." "You will always think it and want it, but don't actually *do* homosexual behavior." The victims of such counsel will never have the privilege of fighting against and rooting out sin at the level of the imagination. And eventually they will feel justified in being angry at God for giving them an orientation but refusing to let them act on it.

The church must educate itself on this critical issue, and it is here where the church must be able to engage the homosexual community in biblical discussion. The problem, however, is that the idea of homosexual orientation does not rest on any foundation that can be discussed. It neither relies on biblical data nor medical research. Instead, it is a political position intended to gain homosexual rights, and it is rooted in personal experience. Therefore, neither biblical data nor refutation of the medical literature will be persuasive. Ultimately, most homosexuals simply appeal to both their own feelings and the experience of their homosexual brothers and sisters. "Homosexuality feels right to us, so it is natural. It is part of our created constitution." Yet this potential unresponsiveness to Scripture should not keep us from examining the arguments biblically.

From a biblical perspective it is possible that some Old Testament passages on homosexuality were intended, in part, to distance the Israelites from the practices of the Canaanites. One of those practices may have

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Campolo, "A Christian Sociologist Looks at Homosexuality," *The Wittenburg Door*, Oct.-Nov. 1977, pages 16-17. Also, T. Evans, "Homosexuality: Christian Ethics and Psychological Research," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 3 (1975), pages 94-98.

been male prostitution that was part of Canaanite religion (Deuteronomy 23:17,18). This "unnatural" homosexuality was condemned. But is this the *only* kind of homosexual activity that is condemned?

If the Old Testament prohibitions were focused exclusively on cultic prostitution, then why would the New Testament continue with the prohibitions? The New Testament church was not focused on distancing itself from Canaanite religions. The church did, how-

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ever, want to demonstrate God's holiness in its sexual behavior so that it would distance itself from the general licentiousness of the culture.

The idea that Leviticus was solely interested in male prostitution would be an unprecedented departure from the general tone of the biblical sexual prohibitions. Many of the Levitical laws were similar to those of the surrounding nations, but the Israelite codes consistently were morally stronger and more refined than those of pagan nations. For example, unchastity was punished more severely; and prostitution was illegal rather than regulated. Given the fact that there were generally negative attitudes toward homosexual acts in places such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon,<sup>9</sup> it would be completely out of step with the character of the Old Testament law to prohibit homosexuality associated with idol worship while permitting it for other purposes. Furthermore, even if a passage such as Leviticus 18:22 did have cultic prostitution in mind, the fact that homosexuality was associated with cultic prostitution would make homosexuality, in general, all the more abhorrent.<sup>10</sup>

What about the other use of "unnatural"? Is it possible that the biblical texts were ignorant about homosexual orientation and were thus referring to "unnatural" homosexual practice where participants had a het-

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<sup>9</sup> D. Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1955).

<sup>10</sup> Greg Bahnsen also notes, "Parallel reasoning would lead us to deem bestiality [mentioned in Leviticus 12:23] outside of religious or cultic contexts as morally acceptable—a conclusion that ought to shock our ethical sensibilities." In *Homosexuality: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), page 45.

erosexual orientation? This would suggest that the practicing homosexuals of the Bible were involved in homosexuality against their natural design. Yet the nature of sin is that people sin because they *want* to sin (James 1:13-15). It comes from our desires. No one goes into sin kicking and screaming. Homosexuality existed in biblical times because people enjoyed it; they were oriented toward it by their own hearts (Mark 7:21-23). To make an artificial distinction between homosexual practice and homosexual orientation is opposed to the Scripture's constant coupling of desire/orientation and deed. If the deed was prohibited in Scripture, the desire was too.

For homosexuals who are committed to thinking biblically, this may *begin* to challenge their ideas on homosexual orientation. But a very significant question remains: Why does it feel natural? The biblical answer is relatively straightforward. Like many other sins, homosexuality does not have to be learned. Like the child who never witnessed a temper tantrum but can be proficient at throwing them, it can be an instinctive ability of the human heart. Homosexuality is natural in the same way that anger or selfishness is natural. They are embedded in our humanness. Indeed, homosexuality is "natural," but only in the sense that it is a natural expression of the sinful nature rather than some sort of morally neutral, God-given constitution.

The fact that many homosexuals cannot remember consciously choosing homosexuality is also readily explained by Scripture. Most sin works on a level where we do not feel that we self-consciously choose it. Our sin can be "unintentional," but that does not make us less responsible for our violation of God's will (Leviticus 5:14-19, Numbers 15:22-30).

In short, it is possible that the church has accepted the unbiblical category of homosexual orientation because it has misunderstood the nature of sin. Sin has been reduced to rational, conscious decisions. Perhaps the church has lost sight of the fact that sin is part of our human fabric, and it works on a deep and quiet level.

### ***Are the biblical prohibitions relevant to committed homosexual relationships?***

But isn't the issue really love?, some suggest. (And how can we argue with that?) Isn't it the casual, unloving sexual relationships that are prohibited by Scripture? As one proponent has said, "The church must take a very open attitude to various sexual orientations and various forms of human relationships...as long as these are conducted in a loving and responsible way."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> A. Dostourian, "Gayness: A Radical Christian Approach," in L. Crew (Ed.), *The Gay Academic* (Palm Springs: ETC, 1978), page 347.

To suggest this would be to believe that the biblical prohibitions are unclear, so that appeal must be made to the more clear law of love. Yet the Leviticus passages seem to be clear. Leviticus 18:22 states, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman." The "woman" in this passage clearly refers to a biblically sanctioned, marital relationship. As such, the passage indicates that a man should not lie with a man, regardless of their loyalty to or love for each other. It is the sexual act itself that is condemned, not just the attitude of the offender. Leviticus 20:12 reads in a similar way, but it includes the punishment for homosexual relations: "Their blood will be on their own head." The severity of the punishment stresses the moral nature of the act.

Various objections are raised by the homosexual hermeneutic. "Isn't it still possible that the writers of Scripture simply did not know of committed homosexual relationships?" After all, the prejudice against homosexuality was intense, leaving homosexuals with little opportunity for committed relationships. Such an argument would suggest that the Old Testament was somewhat naive about sexual relations. A quick reading of Leviticus 18-20, however, would suggest otherwise. While the details of the sexual practices of the Old Testament times are unclear, the sheer number of prohibitions suggests that the breadth of sexual possibilities is not a recent phenomenon. Furthermore, the sexual practices of New Testament times are more available to us than those of the Old, and it is certain that the Greek and Roman cultures had every kind of homosexuality imaginable. Yet the Apostle Paul suggests no exceptions to the prohibitions against homosexuality.

It is true that, on some level, there can be great affection and commitment in homosexual relationships. But this doesn't mean that the relationship is approved by God. A man may be unbiblically divorced and marry a woman he believes he truly loves, yet this union would be wrong. Adulterous relationships may be, on some level, "loving and committed," but they are still wrong. And with this point many homosexuals may agree. Someone, namely the non-adulterous spouse, is being victimized by the adultery. But what about love and loyalty when no one else seems to be hurt, such as premarital sexual relationships? Such an argument does not apprehend biblical love. Love is not simply the absence of obvious injury to anyone. For example, critical thoughts don't victimize, but they are wrong. To limit love to such definitions would be to completely miss the biblical teaching.

Love is understood not by our definition but by God's. It is defined as obedience toward God. We do not autonomously decide what form love takes. God tells us how to love. When we love on *our* terms rather than

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God's, we are in sin. Even if our sin does not seem to be hurting another human being, it is still sin. If sin was reduced to hurting others, then we could become morally perfect by isolating ourselves from all people. Sin, however, is not primarily a human-against-human action. It is human-against-God.

***Are the biblical prohibitions against homosexuality part of the Old Testament ceremonial codes that are no longer enforced?***

Another objection raised by homosexuals is that these Levitical prohibitions are ceremonial, enforced only during a specific period in Israel's history. Like the laws declaring certain animals unclean, the laws against homosexuality are no longer applicable. This is untenable, however, for the two reasons already mentioned. First, the penalty for violation was death. This was the penalty for moral violations rather than violations of ceremonial law. Second, the New Testament writers considered the laws to be applicable.

***Are the prohibitions against homosexuality an application of the command to fill the earth, which is no longer relevant in a heavily populated world?***

A fourth objection to the permanence of the command against homosexuality is that it was written to a culture that felt the weight of the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it. Homosexuality, because it is sterile, would not be politically correct in such an environment. With the coming of Christ, some would suggest, the mandate was rightly interpreted as a command to evangelize. The mandate was a spiritual filling more than a procreative filling. Furthermore, in a world that seems somewhat cramped, there is no longer a need to emphasize the procreation aspect of the mandate.

This may seem like grasping at straws at first, but parts of the argument would most likely be acceptable to most Christians. For instance, how many people use birth control? Isn't this in violation of the commandment to fill the earth? Or what about marriages that choose to be childless? Are such people excommunicated? How is a homosexual union different from a heterosexual union that chooses to be childless? Or how is it different from a heterosexual union that is barren?

The homosexual argument would have some merit if the purpose of marriage was simply to procreate. But procreation is not the sole purpose of marriage. Marriage is a covenant of companionship that is ordained by God. It is the bringing together as one flesh two people who are truly "fit" for each other. It is not deficient or immoral when the marriage is barren, but it is immoral if there is a violation of the marital design.

This takes us back to the question of the validity of

committed, loving, homosexual relationships. Aren't these covenants of companionship? How can we say that two people of the same sex, who love each other, can't enjoy the privilege of marital sexuality? Again, we reiterate that God defines the way we love each other.

***The Biblical Position***

Before leaving this very brief biblical discussion, we should remember that all of us can find sanction for almost anything in Scripture. Our hearts enjoy sin and are quick to self-justify and self-deceive. Is it possible we are self-deceived when we get into Scripture because we find homosexuality threatening and different? It is possible. Our response is to prayerfully search our own hearts and prayerfully approach the Scripture. This, I trust, is what we have done. Is it also possible that homosexuals are self-deceived because they want their own desires more than obedience to God? Is it possible that, like good defense lawyers, they are trying to plant a seed of doubt so they can liberate their consciences and practice their desires? This possibility should be taken especially seriously because the homosexual hermeneutic disagrees with a plain reading of Scripture, goes contrary to the history of biblical interpretation, and is reminiscent of the Pharisaic narrowing of the law so prevalent in the New Testament.

The biblical position is that there is a creation order for human sexuality. God's ordained design for sexual relationships is male-female. Homosexual acts *and* homosexual *desire*, by either male or female, are a violation of this creation ordinance and are thus sinful. As such, the church must warn and rebuke those who call themselves Christians but persist in homosexual practice, *and* the church must actively teach that homosexual affection is sinful. It can never suggest that there is a morally neutral, constitutional, homosexual orientation. To plead with those struggling with homosexual desire to simply refrain from acting on their desire would be to sin against these brothers and sisters.

***Biological Causes***

The biological research has been used to bolster the assumption that there is a predestined homosexual orientation. That is, it is used to support the contention that homosexuality is part of our biological constitution rather than our sin nature. Since Scripture consistently indicates that homosexuality is an expression of a sinful heart, we should expect certain results in the scientific literature. Negatively, scientific observation will not be able to establish a biological cause to homosexuality. Positively, science should be friendly with the biblical position. And this, indeed, is the case: the findings of science support rather than challenge the biblical view.

Perhaps the most well-known study on the biology of homosexuality appeared in the periodical *Science*.<sup>12</sup> The lead researcher, Simon LeVay, conducted post-mortem examinations on the brains of nineteen homosexual men who died from AIDS and sixteen presumed heterosexual men, six of whom died of AIDS. His results suggested that the brains of the heterosexual men consistently had more brain cells in a specific area of the brain (INAH 3) that is allegedly implicated in sexual behavior. When viewed with a homosexuality-as-biologically-determined bias, the conclusion is that homosexuality is located in the brain.

Christians and non-Christians have frequently noted that the results of this study do not in any way establish a causative link between brain activity and homosexual behavior. Even LeVay recognizes the limitations of his study, suggesting that it is little more than an invitation to further research. He knows that his observations are very tentative until corroborated by other researchers, and this corroboration has not as yet been forthcoming. He recognizes that AIDS may have confounded the results, that sample size was too small to draw any clear conclusions, and that his measurements could be prone to error. Furthermore, the brains of three homosexual men in the study were indistinguishable from the analogous brain areas in heterosexual men. Even his assumption that there is a relationship between INAH 3 and sexual behavior has never been clearly established.

The conclusion, therefore, is that we can conclude nothing from this study. *Science* even published a letter to the editor which criticized the journal for prematurely publishing an article of dubious quality.<sup>13</sup> Yet let's say there is eventually research that will actually establish some connection between the size of INAH 3 and homosexuality. Even then, LeVay acknowledged that "the results do not allow one to decide if the size of INAH 3 in an individual is the cause or the consequence of that individual's sexual orientation." In other words, from his perspective it may be just as likely that the possible brain differences are a *result* of homosexuality rather than a cause.<sup>14</sup>

Or let's take the most extreme possibility. This could

<sup>12</sup> Simon LeVay, "A Difference in Hypothalamic Structure between Heterosexual and Homosexual Men," *Science*, 253 (1991), pages 1034-1037.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph M. Carrier and George Gellert, *Science*, 254 (1991), page 630.

<sup>14</sup> Another possibility is that the brain is neither cause nor result. For example, people who demonstrate sinful anger would demonstrate different patterns of brain activity than those who were very peaceful because of faith in Christ. But such an observation does not mean that the brain makes us angry. It simply means that the brain is the physical representation of the intents of the heart.

never happen in the next fifty years because of the methodological problems inherent in such research, but let's suggest that someone was able to demonstrate that INAH 3 was, indeed, a participant in sexual desire and that INAH 3 was smaller *from birth* in people who eventually became homosexuals. In other words, the brain was not laying down neuronal patterns that were a *result* of homosexual experience. Instead, the smaller INAH 3 was apparent *before* any homosexual activity.

If such research existed, Christians and many non-Christians would make at least the following observa-

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tions. First, there would always be exceptions to the rule. Some heterosexuals would have a smaller INAH 3 and some homosexuals would have a large INAH 3. Second, even the secular writers would be firm in saying, as they are now, that biology is not destiny. Human sexual response is too complex to reduce to a deficit of neurons in the brain. Third, Christians would remain firm in their stance that biology can't make us sin. At most, biology is analogous to a friend who tempts us into sin. In such cases the friend might be bothersome, but the friend can be rebuked and resisted.<sup>15</sup>

Another approach to studying the biological basis of homosexuality is to observe the occurrence of homosexuality in families and twins in order to suggest a genetic tendency to the behavior. A frequently cited example of such research was done by Michael Bailey and Richard Pillard.<sup>16</sup> This study reported that of fifty-six homosexual men who were identical twins, 52 percent (29) had a twin brother who was also homosexual. Among non-identical twins the rate was 22 percent, among non-twin brothers the rate was 9 percent, and among adopted siblings the rate was 11 percent. The research group also found comparable statistics with females.<sup>17</sup> This is what you would expect if there was a genetic component to homosexuality: the closer the

<sup>15</sup> This analogy is also applicable to experiences such as PMS.

<sup>16</sup> J. Michael Bailey and Richard C. Pillard, "A Genetic Study of Male Sexual Orientation," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 48 (1991), pages 1089-1097.

<sup>17</sup> J. Michael Bailey, Richard C. Pillard, Michael C. Neale, and Yvonne Agyei, "Heritable Factors Influence Sexual Orientation in Women," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50 (1993), pages 217-224.

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genetic relationship, the higher the rate of shared homosexuality.

To be blunt, this study is meaningless. Even if you ignore the sampling biases (they recruited through homosexual publications) and the fact that no other researchers have found such high percentages among identical twins, the study is inconsequential. This is because identical twins typically have a profound influence on each other. If one twin is introduced to something new, it is likely that he will introduce the other twin to that activity. Also, why did genetically unrelated, adopted brothers of homosexuals have such an allegedly high rate of homosexuality? Their 11 percent incidence rate was five times what you would expect (the incidence rate of active homosexuality is generally believed to be about two percent in the general population).<sup>18</sup> The study would be better used to support the influence of peers in the development of homosexuality.

The researchers are aware that the only thing they really prove is that homosexuality is *not* solely caused by genetics. If genetics was the only contributor to homosexual activity, then the concordance rate in identical twins would be 100 percent. If one twin was homosexual, the other twin would *always* be homosexual. Since the statistic is much lower than that, homosexuality cannot be a straightforward genetic trait. Apart from this conclusion, the study is not able to prove anything. Along with problems in the way the study was structured, identical twins share an environment that is more similar than that of other siblings. Therefore, it is not unusual for them to share sins. The only way to strengthen their research would be to study twins who were separated at birth.

But let's again suppose that this research was supported by better studies. What if research finds that identical twins more frequently share homosexuality even when they have no contact with each other? If this research were to emerge, it would still illustrate biblical truth. First, there will never be a 100 percent concordance rate. Second, a principle of Scripture is that the context for our lives is the physical body, and we should expect that the physical body (the brain in this case) would have some way to biologically represent the intents of the heart. It is even possible that a certain brain type is necessary to express homosexual intent. This brain or genetic hardware is not *sufficient* to cause homosexuality, but it may be necessary. Or, to put it another way, a certain genetic predisposition may be necessary for homosexual intent, but it is not determinative.

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<sup>18</sup>John O. Billy, Koray Tanfer, William R. Grady, and Daniel H. Klepinger, "The Sexual Behavior of Men in the United States," *Family Planning Perspectives*, 25 (1993), pages 52-61.

It is important to be precise in making this point. It sounds as if I am suggesting that it is biblically possible that the body could cause homosexuality; and, indeed, I am. But the word "cause" in this context means "biologically shape or influence," not "irresistibly compel." Used this way there is nothing shocking about the statement. It is simply saying that the way our sinful hearts are actually expressed in behavior is the result of hundreds of factors, biology being one. A person whose sinful heart is manifested in murder may have been influenced by unjust treatment, parents who allowed him to vent his rage on siblings, and Satan's incessant encouragements to kill. None of these influences remove personal responsibility, however. The ultimate cause of sin is always the sinful heart.

To use the more scientific terms of *necessary* and *sufficient*, biology may be necessary for some homosexuality, but biology is not a sufficient cause, in and of itself. Consider the following illustration. If I am going to wash my car, I will need a pail of water. A bucket of soapy water will be *necessary*. If I don't have it, I won't be able to wash the car. Of course, there are a number of other necessary conditions, such as good weather, available time, and a dirty car. None of these conditions, however, are *sufficient* for the task of washing the car. None of them can irresistibly force me to wash it. The sufficient condition for me to wash the car is that I must have the intention or motivation to wash it. I must *want* to wash the car.<sup>19</sup> In the case of homosexuality, this sufficient condition is the function of the heart, and it is something for which I am always responsible.

A third type of research on the biological basis of homosexuality also focuses on genetic data, but it looks for it at the microscopic level, on the gene itself. The best known of the research teams doing this work is from the National Institute of Health and is headed by Dean Hamer.<sup>20</sup> This highly technical work is in its infancy, but neither its youth nor sophistication should keep the Christian lay person from asserting the functional authority of Scripture over the data.

Like the two studies previously mentioned, there are methodological flaws in this study. It has not been duplicated, so there is really very little that must be said at this point. Also, even if practicing homosexuals were consistently genetically distinct from heterosexuals, this would not make homosexuality a biologically-based

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<sup>19</sup>When I was younger, my father *made* me wash the car; often against my desires. This, however, is not analogous to the homosexual experience.

<sup>20</sup>Dean H. Hamer, Stella Hu, Victoria L. Magnuson, Nan Hu, and Angela M. Pattatucci, "A Linkage between DNA Markers on the X Chromosome and Male Sexual Orientation," *Science*, 261 (1993), pages 321-327.

behavior for which people are not morally responsible.

These three studies are the most recent in a relatively long but fruitless attempt to locate homosexuality on the biological level. A physician who reviewed the literature said, "Recent studies postulate biologic factors as the primary basis for sexual orientation. However, there is no evidence at present to substantiate a biologic theory, just as there is no evidence to support any singular psychosocial explanation."<sup>21</sup> The only thing certain is that human sexuality is too complex to be reduced to the workings of the brain.

Since behavior is mediated (not caused) by our biology, it would not be surprising to hear of future studies that would offer better evidence for a biology and behavior link. But the Scripture is clear: our bodies can never make us sin. The body is weak but not the cause of sin. This is an inviolable principle that, when used accurately, can bring increased clarity to brain research. The brain sciences can offer exciting observations, but these observations can only be rightly interpreted when Scripture provides the contours.

### A Biblical Model of Homosexuality

While the church has been quick to refute the biological literature, it has been slow to apply the same principles to the psychological theories. For various reasons many people tend to be more comfortable with psychological influences than biological ones. Note, for example, how well *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic*<sup>22</sup> is received by many Christians. In this book Elizabeth Moberly suggests that behind almost all homosexuality, male or female, is a deficit in the relationship with the same-sex parent. The theory is that there is a God-designed need for same-sex love, affirmation, acceptance, and bonding. When these allegedly normal attachment needs have been left unmet, the needs become eroticized at puberty. Homosexuality is a drive to make good this relationship.

When we listen closely to the application of this and other psychological explanations,<sup>23</sup> we should begin to wonder if the church has been duped. While we are looking at the medical research and being ruthless in our

critiques, we have allowed the psychological explanations in the back door. We want to emphasize that homosexuality is learned rather than biologically inbred; and since it is learned, it can be unlearned. But notice the problem. All this does is suggest that the orientation toward homosexuality starts a little later than birth instead of before birth. We are left at almost the same place as the biological theories: the orientation is still established by forces outside of ourselves, and orientation precedes sin (Figure 1). Therefore, the real problem, the deep problem, is the homosexual orientation. A diagnosis of sin and a cure that included repentance would be considered superficial.

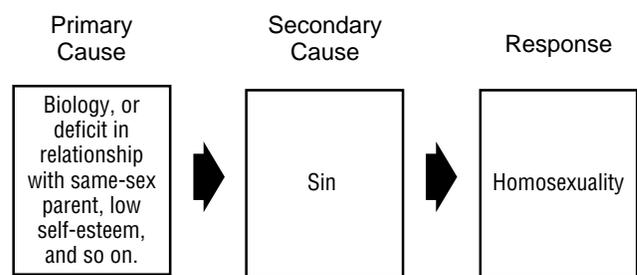


Figure 1.  
A common though unbiblical conceptualization of the development of homosexuality.

A biblical view acknowledges that there may be psychological and biological influences in the development of homosexuality. In fact, the Bible would warn us not to be too limited in considering the vast number of possible influences. However, the Scripture is adamant that it is not what influences us that makes us "unclean." Instead, "from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality.... All these evils come from the inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:21-23) (Figure 2). This means that our sinful orientation has innumerable expressions in our lives. With some it is greed or jealousy, with others it is sinful anger, and with others it can be expressed in homosexual desire.

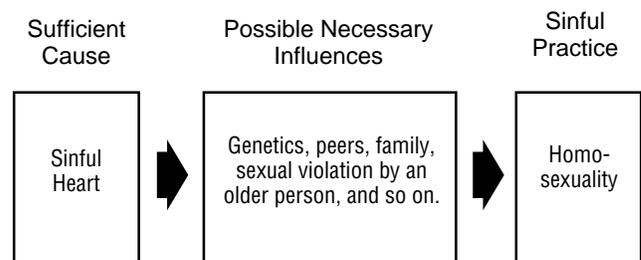


Figure 2.  
The development of homosexuality.

<sup>21</sup>William Byne and Bruce Parsons, "Homosexual Orientation: The Biologic Theories Reappraised," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 50 (1993), 228-239.

<sup>22</sup>Elizabeth Moberly, *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* (Stony Point, South Carolina: Attic, 1983).

<sup>23</sup>Others have suggested that homosexuality is a result of victimization. For example, E. Hurst and D. Jackson, *Overcoming Homosexuality* (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook, 1987). Leanne Payne, *A Broken Image* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway, 1981) and *Crisis in Masculinity* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway, 1985).

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## The Process of Change

Like all sin, homosexuality, at the level of the desires of the heart, does not relent easily or quickly. It is put to death over time in the course of progressive sanctification. But change is certainly possible. "Such were some of you" (1 Corinthians 6:11) is the often-repeated reminder that there is hope to vanquish both homosexual acts *and* homosexual desire. The way of change is familiar. You need no special techniques. It consists of simultaneously juggling two themes: the knowledge of ourselves and the knowledge of God. These themes are presented in love and with a willingness to listen.

Listening is a good place to start. After all, how can we bring truth to a person unless we know him? So you might begin with questions. What is it like for the person to struggle with homosexuality? What are some of the events that shaped the present expression of homosexuality? Was the person homosexually raped? Was the person manipulated into sexual activity by an older person? This victimization doesn't explain homosexuality or make people irresponsible for their future thoughts and actions. But God certainly speaks with compassion to those who have been sinned against, and homosexuals must hear this.<sup>24</sup> How has the person been hurt in relationships? How has it been painful to pursue a homosexual lifestyle? What is it like to be suddenly confronted with the reality of leaving close friends, long-term partners, or a supportive community? "I ached physically from all the emotional turmoil," said a man who was leaving his partner. "But several Christian heterosexual men made themselves available any time of the day or night. I'm alive today because those guys loved me."<sup>25</sup>

In this context we introduce the knowledge of God, especially God's forgiveness of sinners. This is the anthem that both attracts and changes those struggling with homosexuality. Some may suggest that there is enough teaching that God warmly embraces everyone and not enough on God's hatred of sin and His justice. This may be true, but it is no reason to sacrifice the greatness of the doctrine of grace. Homosexuals are in a complex position: they are rebels against a Holy God; but they are also, at some level, aware of their sins and afraid of God's wrath (Romans 1). They do not believe that God could really bring Himself to forgive homosexuals. As C. John Miller has said, "There is no more important factor in the transforming of a homosexual

than confident faith that his or her sins really have been pardoned by God at their deepest root."<sup>26</sup>

To know the grace of forgiveness, homosexuals must know the truth about themselves: they are sinners in need of grace. Even though they have some knowledge of this, they often lack biblical clarity because their knowledge of sin is suppressed. The flesh does not want to see sin in all its ugliness; it works to keep it covered. What clouds sin even more is the myth that there is, by God's design, a homosexual orientation. These two factors work violently against the truth about ourselves.

The process of exposing the heart comes through the Holy Spirit's application of Scripture. The goal is to understand what God says. The goal is to learn to "think God's thoughts." One way into the Scripture is to understand that there actually *is* something deeper than homosexuality. As summarized in Romans 1, homosexuality is an expression of an idolatrous heart. *This* is our deepest problem. We have an instinct that switches our allegiance from God to our idols. What are our idols? Comfort, pleasure, power, personal meaning, self-esteem, and so on. The possibilities are endless, but they all have one thing in common: an allegiance to self. We rebel against God, and we choose to live for our glory rather than God's. We choose to obey our own desires rather than God's Word. Homosexual desire or activity is an expression of the idolatrous instincts of our hearts.

Does the person have questions about homosexual orientation? Does he or she have a sense that they were always more interested in same-sex relationships? If so, stick with this issue until the person can think biblically about it. It is too easy to settle for the absence of homosexual behavior and not worry about attitudes. Remember that it is on the question of homosexual orientation that the world, flesh, and devil converge. The world, with its sub-biblical views, has voted that homosexuality is normal. Our flesh wants to exonerate ourselves from homosexual fantasy. And the devil stands behind both, whispering his murderous deceptions. The deception of homosexual orientation must be exposed and corrected. It is a false teaching that will eventually lead to bad fruit. We truly do have an "orientation," but it is a spiritual orientation that is against God. It is not a simple physical propensity.

As the Holy Spirit exposes these critical issues about the person, the Spirit also reveals more of the knowledge of God. The theme of God's love continues, but now we are reminded that it is a *holy* love. By holy we mean that it is unparalleled in human experience. There is nothing like it. It is beyond comprehension, and it is unsur-

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<sup>24</sup>See my article on suffering, "Exalting Pain? Ignoring Pain? What do we do with Suffering?" *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 12:3 (1994).

<sup>25</sup>Bob Davies, "Will We Offer Hope?," *Moody*, May 1994, page 16.

<sup>26</sup>C. John Miller, "The Gay '80's," *Eternity*, November 1986, page 18.

passed. It is distinct or separate from our own. As a result, it leaves witnesses in awe. This is the beginning of the fear of the Lord. When we witness His forgiveness, we learn the fear of the Lord (Psalm 130:4). When the disciples saw His power over the wind and the waves, "they were terrified" and grew in the fear of the

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*An effective church  
should have homosexuals!*

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Lord (Mark 4:41). When Isaiah was taken into the throne room, he was so overwhelmed by the holiness of God that he cried out, "I am ruined" (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah's knowledge of God's holy majesty and holy forgiveness established him in the fear of the Lord for the rest of his ministry as a prophet. Indeed, the fear of the Lord is both the beginning of wise living and its goal.

One of the great blessings of the fear of the Lord is that it can teach us to hate sin (Proverbs 8:13). The knowledge of the holy can mobilize. It can take the drudgery out of daily self-control. It can make us warriors against the tendencies of our sinful nature. This aggressive stance toward sin is especially critical since our problem is that we *like* it. It has the power of our affections. If we don't root out these affections, we are guaranteed that temptation will always be nearly overpowering. The fear of the Lord can keep us battle-ready. With the heavenly throne in sight, we do battle with the "sin that so easily entangles" (Hebrews 12:1).

Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Corinthians 9:26,27). Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1,2).

What expectations should there be for change? What is the goal? The goal, again, is to think God's thoughts rather than our own. This means that we can engage the battle when we see the very *seeds* of homosexual temptation (James 1:13-15). We can grow to be able to hate anything that hints of rebellion against God. We can be liberated from homosexual obsession. And we can understand that male-female marriage is one of God's good gifts. This does not mean that all people who once struggled with homosexuality will pursue marriage. In some cases God gives grace to be celibate. But since marriage is a good gift, and God's pleasure is toward

Christian marriage, then as one-time homosexuals grow in adopting the mind of Christ, they will find pleasure in the same thing that God does.

How long will it take? If a person is willing to follow Christ, and he or she is surrounded by a caring church, then homosexual behavior can stop immediately. "The grace of God...teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives" (Titus 2:11,12). No one should think, however, that homosexual *desire* will be gone as quickly. The person who has had a long history of homosexual practice will be doing battle for many years. The power of homosexual thoughts to enslave will gradually be defeated, but the stray homosexual thought may be evident decades after there has been cessation of homosexual acts. Is this discouraging? Does this mean that deliverance is necessary? No, it means that God is at work, giving power to fight, reminding us that warfare is normal, progressively sanctifying us, and giving us the privilege of constantly depending on Christ by faith.

For these goals to be steadily approached, one-time homosexuals need more than a counselor. Like us all, they need the larger body of Christ and its varied relational opportunities. Men need other men who love, listen, and model brotherly relationships. Women need other women with whom they can have close but not obsessive or sexualized relationships. Both men and women need godly relationships with the opposite sex and with elders and pastors who can faithfully pray and, if necessary, bring church discipline as a means of God's loving correction. Other relationships might include small groups with couples and singles, accountability groups with other men, and small prayer groups. In some cases churches may have specialized ministries to homosexuals (e.g., support groups) or more general ministries to those who want to leave sexual slavery of any kind.

An effective church should have homosexuals! Because of the love of Christ, the church should pursue homosexuals. And through its exaltation of Christ in preaching, corporate prayer and worship, the church should attract homosexuals. It should minister the Word to those who are already in church by flushing out the self-deceived, exposing the dishonest, confronting the rebel, offering forgiveness to the guilt-ridden, and giving hope. The church should also welcome and hold the attention of those who struggle with homosexuality but have never been part of the church. With such people we can add that the church should minister by surprising them with love, a sense of family, and the absence of self-righteous judgment. It should offer truth in such a way that it is convicting, attractive, and radically different from anything else the homosexual has ever heard.