

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

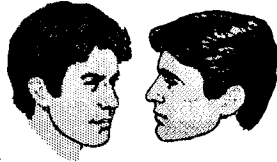
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Seeking God's will about homosexuality

To find God's will about homosexuality, as about any other subject, we have to look prayerfully and with open minds and hearts. We have to look in a variety of places and consider a variety of views. We can't just assume that we already know God's will or that no one with a view different from ours could be a real Christian.



We need to remember, too, that God has often spoken through people whose views were in the minority. Many were considered social outcasts, rebels, or even heretics by most members of the leading religious and political institutions of their

time. It's possible, therefore, that God is speaking through such people today. In fact, it seems quite likely. ❖



We may have been wrong

When I look at the Bible, Christian tradition, the views of contemporary Christians, and recent research findings, I'm afraid we've been wrong in shunning homosexual people, refusing to let them be clergy, or even demanding celibacy from them as many churches and individual Christians do.

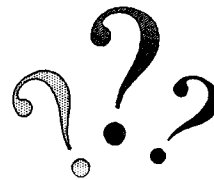
▪ Nothing from Jesus

The few Bible verses that mention homosexual acts give the impression that homosexuality is sinful. But the gospels don't show Jesus saying anything about it. To me this means he must not have considered it important compared to oppression, spiritual blindness, injustice, greed, and the many other offenses he spoke about constantly. I therefore doubt that followers of Jesus need to oppose homosexuality.



I'm not claiming to have the answer

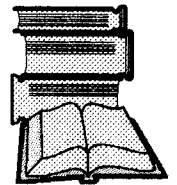
I'm not claiming to know God's will about homosexuality. I'm not even speaking from first-hand experience or professional expertise. I'm merely reporting some of what I've observed and some tentative conclusions I've come to. I hope that reading them will help *Connections* readers to do their own investigating, because I believe we church members all



need to do some. We need to take a fresh, careful look at the wide variety of scriptures, beliefs, feelings, traditions, and experiences that influence our own and other Christians' beliefs about homosexuality.

I've tried to learn

I am heterosexual, and as far as I know, all the members of my immediate family and my closest circle of friends are also. I'm not a biblical scholar or a professional in any field that studies sexuality or counsels people about their sexuality.



Because the subject of homosexuality has become so divisive in churches, however, I've tried to learn more about it. I have re-read the biblical references. I've read many opinions about them, by biblical scholars, professional theologians, and pastors with a wide variety of views. I have also read and listened to the views of many lay Christians, about whether homosexuality is a sin and about what the church should do about it. I have read personal stories of Christian and non-Christian gays and lesbians. I have read opinions and findings of scientists, sociologists, psychologists, therapists, and physicians.

Some of our rules seem unwise and unkind

All I've become sure of is that no one has THE answer even though many Christians adamantly claim to have it. Because so much is still unknown about homosexuality, I believe that making new rules or preserving existing ones that make gays and lesbians second-class church members or citizens is unwise and unkind. I believe we need to keep our hearts, our minds, and especially our churches open.



A refusal to obey God?

In response to my recent pleas for the church to stop treating women as second-class people, some clergymen have written, "my wife likes being my helper in my role as pastor." Other men write, "None of the women that I know feel mistreated by the use of all-male language." Some women say, "I don't mind being expected to do only the background jobs."

These men and women submit their experience as proof that no change is needed.

Love your neighbor as yourself.
—Mark 12:31
and many other places in the Bible

I don't think this kind of evidence proves any such thing. When we claim that it does, it seems to me that we're refusing to obey God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves. I believe that commandment means, "Do whatever is necessary to relieve pain that you see others feeling, just as you would try to relieve it if you felt it yourself."

Some Bible words don't mean what we assume they mean



Scholars find that our concept of sexual orientation was unknown until the late 1800's, so what scripture writers wrote isn't likely to mean what that concept means to us now. Many Bible scholars believe that the scriptures about sexual contact between people of the same sex refer only to prostitution, sexual contact forced on a powerless person by a powerful one, and other behaviors that are harmful but aren't limited to homosexual people.

The Bible's overall message is what counts



Throughout the Bible we're repeatedly told to treat others with love and justice and to help people we see being mistreated. We're told that God's grace is

for everyone. We're told that Jesus has atoned for all sins. I believe these messages override the few verses that seem to condemn homosexual acts.

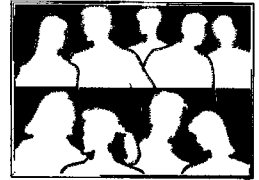
Homosexuals have no monopoly on sexual sins

Preying on children for sexual contact is wrong whether the person who does it is heterosexual or homosexual. Rape is wrong no matter who does it or who is raped. Every other kind of sexual contact forced on an unwilling or unaware person is wrong. So is sexual promiscuity. We need to oppose these

spiritually, emotionally, and physically harmful behaviors, but this doesn't mean opposing all homosexuals or ignoring the behavior in heterosexuals.

Most gays and lesbians are harmless

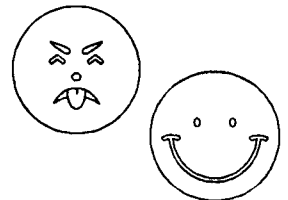
According to the research I've seen, violent, promiscuous, and predatory sex acts are no more typical of homosexuals than of heterosexuals. We hurt innocent people when we accuse a whole group of behavior that many of its members don't engage in.



Repulsive doesn't mean sinful

"What they do is repulsive!" many heterosexual people say about homosexuals, claiming this as proof that homosexuality is sinful. But let's face it. Many heterosexual people also consider heterosexual sexual acts repulsive, and many others found these acts repulsive when they first heard about them. However, experiencing sexual contact with someone you love and are faithfully committed to is very different from just hearing about it.

Besides, being repulsive doesn't automatically mean being sinful. Raw oysters happen to seem repulsive to me, but you may love raw oysters and consider some other things repulsive that I like. This has nothing to do with whether eating raw oysters is or isn't sinful. Personal likes and dislikes simply aren't reliable standards for deciding what is sinful and what isn't.



We don't yet know what causes homosexuality

Many gays and lesbians realize that even as children they were aware of being different from most other people with regard to their feelings toward people of their own sex and people of the opposite sex. And some researchers see what they think may be evidence that homosexuality is at least partly genetic. Although other researchers disagree, so far no one seems to be sure why some people are homosexual. It doesn't seem to be merely a choice or the result of upbringing. To me that means we're on very shaky ground when we treat homosexuality as if it were a choice and therefore sinful.

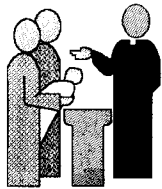


A powerful new book

I've just read a new book that I highly recommend. It is *We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God's Grace for Lesbians and Gays*, by Marilyn Bennett Alexander and James Preston (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996). It's short and easy to read, and it's dynamite.



Both authors are lifelong church members and strongly committed Christians. Both are seminary graduates and are in church-related professions into which they believe God has called them. In their book they tell their heart-rending stories of growing up in the church but then realizing they were homosexual and being continually confronted by the church's cruel rejection and hypocrisy.



The church doesn't remember

Marilyn Alexander describes her baptism on a crisp Dakota Sunday morning in a Methodist Church. The ritual and the comments of church members expressed delight and acceptance. But now the church expresses only rejection if she reveals her true self. "I remember my baptism," she assures us, but the church does not. "Why else," she asks, "would it deny me my identity?"

Alexander and Preston also include equally compelling first-hand accounts by other Christian lesbians and gays. They alternate these stories with discussions of what they understand to be God's will about homosexuality. These discussions are clear, concise, easy to read, and based on solid information about scripture, Christian history and tradition, and today's church.



The ultimate blasphemy?

In his foreword to *We Were Baptized Too*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu rightly calls the book a cry from the heart. The cry comes, he reminds us, from people we have accepted as fellow Christians but then have spurned, shunned, and rejected. "We make them doubt that they are the children of God," Tutu observes, "and this must be nearly the ultimate blasphemy."

Every lost second causes more pain



This powerful book is hard to put down and even harder to forget. I wish that all heterosexual church members would read it, to see how the church's traditional attitude toward homosexuality looks from the other side. I wish that all delegates to the upcoming United Methodist General Conference would read it before voting on any issues related to homosexuality. "Every second that the church takes to make up its mind," Alexander and Preston remind us, "gay and lesbian church members and non-members, their parents, lovers, children, and siblings will be in pain. How long will the church take?"

▪ Even if it's not normal, so what?

We often mistakenly call people abnormal just because they're different from the majority, but even if homosexual people actually *were* abnormal, that still wouldn't justify requiring them to do without sexual contact. We don't demand that a person born with misshapen hands abstain from using other ways of doing what so-called normal people would do with their hands. So how can we justify requiring all homosexual people to be celibate? I don't think we can.



▪ We ignore many sins named in scripture



The rules of the United Methodist Church, similar to those of other denominations, say that "since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."

This position is based on a strangely selective use of scripture. Greed, lying, gossip, envy, craftiness, haughtiness, boastfulness, and foolishness are also included in the New Testament lists of sins that include some homosexual practices, but we don't forbid self-avowed practicing greedy people or gossips from becoming clergy.

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. ...
—Leviticus 18:22

You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.
—Leviticus 19:19

Neither do we oust clergy or shun anyone else for wearing clothes made of two fabrics, yet that is forbidden in the same part of the Bible that forbids certain homosexual practices. And Christians who oppose homosexuality

apparently don't oppose the plant hybridization that has eased famine and improved nutrition, yet hybridization requires planting two kinds of seeds in the same field, which the Bible specifically forbids. To me, that kind of selectiveness in using the Bible makes no sense. ❖



God doesn't require perfection

There is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are now justified by grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ...
—Romans 3:22-24

I seriously doubt that homosexuality is a sin, but what if it is? David and many other heroes and heroines of the Bible are evidence that God chooses leaders who aren't perfect and who haven't even reformed. God calls sinners into ministry and into leadership positions. There's no other kind of people to call!



I'm afraid that if we really want to follow Christ and to do God's will, our churches can't reject people whom God has called. We can't pretend that other people's sins matter but our own don't. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

What qualifies a person as a Christian?



Some helpful books . . .

Caught in the Crossfire: Helping Christians Debate Homosexuality, Sally B. Geis and Donald E. Messer, editors (Abingdon Press, 1994). In chapters by 15 different authors, this book presents a variety of viewpoints.

My Own Country: A Doctor's Story, by Abraham Verghese (Random House, 1994). A specialist in infectious diseases tells about his experience with AIDS patients and their families in Tennessee in the 1980's.

Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story, by Paul Monette (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992). A gay man who grew up in a small town in the 1950's tells his story.

The Family Heart: A Memoir of When Our Son Came Out, by Robb Forman Dew (Ballantine, 1994)—a mother's story.



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman and neither a church employee nor the wife, mother, or daughter of clergy. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to about 12000 readers in 49 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.