

“Which Side Are You On?”

And Are There More Than Two?

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In the debate about the status of gay and lesbian members of the Presbyterian Church (USA), it sometimes seems as though the only options are “for” and “against.” Either one condemns homosexuality as contrary to God’s will or one affirms homosexual persons and puts discussion of appropriate behavior off limits. Like most issues, this never has been as simple as “for” and “against,” because in fact there are several different questions being asked at the same time ... about the nature of human sexuality as well as about what is right and wrong in sexual behavior. In this essay, I suggest that rather than two sides there is a range of responses to the issue of homosexuality, each of which is based on different theological ideas and ethical values.

At one end of the spectrum are those who see homosexual behavior as something that is always wrong. The reason most frequently given is that such behavior is contrary to nature or to the order of creation. This view holds that God created human beings male and female for the purpose of procreation. Because procreation is impossible for homosexuals, they and their relationships are “disordered” because they do not conform to God’s design. The only hope for homosexual persons is to become “reordered” or restored to the proper relation to the opposite sex.

Other essays in this volume have addressed some of the problems associated with this view. Leaving aside the question of same-sex relationships, it has long been argued that although procreation is surely one important purpose for human sexuality, it is wrong to reduce human sexuality to reproduction. The human experience of sexuality is also the opportunity for men and women to express values such as intimacy, companionship, mutuality, fidelity and joy.

From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

At the other end of the spectrum is a view that also begins with creation. According to this view, God created everything, and everything that God created is by definition good. As children of God, created in God's image, all persons are loved by God just as they are: male, female, gay, straight, of every ethnic or racial background, able-bodied or not. On this view, homosexuality is part of God's good creation to be celebrated without further question.

Sometimes persons who hold this view want to end the discussion at this point. That is to say, they want to set aside questions of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior. But such a position fails to recognize that all humanity and all human behavior stand not only under the gracious mercy but also under the judgment of God. Sexuality is part of God's good creation, but it is also marked by human sin in need of restoration and redemption by God's grace and subject to the ordering of God's word.

We might call these two positions "prohibition" and "celebration." Sometimes in our church's debates it sounds as if there are no other options. But these two positions do not exhaust the possibilities; they define the ends of a spectrum. Between these two poles, there are a number of other positions that can be identified. While these other views make use of the doctrine of creation, they also bring other theological considerations to bear on the issue.

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One approach might be called "differentiated judgment." According to this view, the critical issue is homosexual activity. It is not who the homosexual is that is a problem; it is the behavior that is wrong. Thus, homosexual persons can be welcomed into the life of the church and even elected and ordained to office as long as they are not sexually active.

This is one way to understand the current position of the Presbyterian Church going all the way back to the first "authoritative interpretation" of the Constitution in 1978. At that time, the judgment of the church was that "avowed, practicing homosexual persons" were not eligible for office. The clear implication is that non-practicing and repentant homosexuals could be eligible. The same idea is conveyed in the phrase "chastity in singleness" found in G-6.0106b.

On the one hand, this approach seeks to recognize that all persons are sinners in need of repentance and amendment of life. On the other hand, it can be argued that this standard assumes that all heterosexual relations between a wife and husband are right and that everything else – including all homosexual

practice, whether between committed partners or not – is always wrong. But this focus on sexual behavior begs the question of whether sexuality is not something more than specific activities but also part of one’s deep identity as a person. If sexuality is part of a person’s identity, then this attempt to differentiate between behaviors becomes discrimination against persons.

Another approach might be called “pastoral acceptance.” This view often begins from the experience of getting to know gay or lesbian persons and coming to the judgment that their sexual identity is simply part of who they are; it is “the way they are made.” While this way of being may fall short of the ideal for human life, it is part of reality as we know it.

Now, the question becomes: how should the church respond to gay and lesbian persons? The response of the pastoral approach is that we should follow the model of Jesus who came to seek and save the lost, who welcomed sinners and brought hope to the broken-hearted. Church members who affirm a position of pastoral acceptance might believe that homosexual behavior is a sin, while at the same time believing that the church should welcome gay and lesbian persons and

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could ordain them to church office. After all, does the church ordain anyone but sinners who are less than fully repentant? Those who favor pastoral acceptance believe that the church should be for gay and lesbian persons what it is for everyone else: a community of hospitality given and received in the name of Jesus.

Yet another perspective can be called “sanctification.” This view begins with acknowledgment of homosexuality as part of the way human life is and asks how Christians should live in relation to this reality. Unlike the “celebration” position, this view remembers that all Christians, of whatever

sexual orientation, are sinners redeemed by the grace of God alone. As forgiven sinners, all are set free to ask: how then are we to live? The simple answer is that we are to love one another (and ourselves) as God has first loved us. Among other things, this means to take part in the ministries of the church and live in relationships (of community and family) ordered by the kind of “covenant fidelity” that we see demonstrated by God in Jesus Christ. On this view, the church would not only welcome gay and lesbian persons to membership and ministries, but also welcome and bless covenants of life-long partnership just as the church blesses and honors marriage. The church would welcome gay and lesbian

Christians to ministries and faithful partnerships not so much as privileges to which they have a “right,” but rather as disciplines through which, by the grace of God, sanctification occurs.

Other positions could be identified. Each of these has been stated in oversimplified terms. And other typologies of positions could and have been made. What matters is not so much the particulars of the positions, but the fact that neither a simple “for” or “against” is an adequate response to the complex set of questions involved in the issue of homosexuality. The church should continue to bring to these questions a broad range of biblical and theological ideas as we seek to discern how God is calling us to live faithfully in our day.

In our discernment, it is critically important that we recall as a church community that the question of how we as Christians understand homosexuality comes not as a “social issue” impressed upon the church from “the world.” This question has come from within the church family and our own families. It is fellow believers, baptized sisters and brothers, who have come seeking to share their gifts and the fullness of their lives with Christ and the church. Perhaps it is with that reality that we had best begin.