



A CALL FOR DIALOG

Gay and Lesbian Christians and the Ministry of the Church

Lutherans Concerned/North America presents the following paper as an offering of love and a resource for understanding. It is the product of more than two years of work on the part of our Task Force on Theology, and has had the benefit of much theological study, criticism and evaluation by many pastors and lay persons across the continent. We offer A Call for Dialog in commitment to a church we will not abandon, as it labors to perfect its understanding of and ministry with lesbian and gay people. We offer this document also to our brothers and sisters in the lesbian and gay community: those within the church; those who have left, feeling the cold wind of alienation; and those who have never heard the good news of the Gospel.

This paper is not the final word spoken by Lutherans Concerned to the church, but represents our experience and the best of our current theological reflection on issues in these times of rapid change. As the ministry of the church in a complex society progresses, some issues will be resolved or supplanted by new ones. We are above all confident of the grace that is ours in Christ Jesus. Our call for dialog is a call for our church to become a place both of reconciliation and of justice, which we believe are inseparable for the spiritual health of our church and our people. Thanks be to God!

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INTRODUCTION

We, members of Lutherans Concerned/North America, address this paper to the Lutheran churches, in order to identify and clarify the issues of homosexuality as we see them, and to call our churches to an intentional dialog on the ministry of the church to gay and lesbian persons.

Most discussions in Christian circles about homosexuality have been conducted in muddy waters, stirred by the strong emotions which the issues evoke. There is much fear, confusion and avoidance. Objections and alarms within the church have unclear connections to faith or theology. Homosexuality is often regarded as one of the most divisive issues to face the church in this generation.

Both the ministry of Lutherans Concerned and the contributions of this paper are offered as an invitation to bring light, clarity and reconciliation to the dialog. Unfortunately, there has been little Lutheran theological reflection on these critical issues. In recent years the church bodies, in their social statements or convention resolutions, have included material on homosexuality that affects the lives of thousands of lesbian and gay Lutherans. We are grieved that the churches have adopted authoritative statements about a significant minority of people within their midst, with little significant or intentional participation of the people whose lives are involved.

It is from the perspective of these persons that we speak. We are not outsiders. Lutherans Concerned includes lesbian, gay and bisexual persons, as well as non-gay parents, friends and pastors, who are active members of the Lutheran churches. We speak as sisters and brothers to our churches about the faith and the ministry of the church in the world, as these relate to lesbian and gay persons. We speak in the spirit of love for our church, for the growth of the whole Body of Christ, and for the integrity of its ministry to all persons.

PART ONE:

Gay and Lesbian Persons in the Church

Homosexuality personally affects the lives of tens of thousands of persons in our churches. There are no hard sociological data to tell us how many gay and lesbian members there are in Lutheran churches,¹ but that number may parallel the estimate often made of the whole society: between five and ten percent of the population.

In our churches, then, it may be that as many as one person in ten is lesbian or gay, and that one family in four is directly involved, because a child, sibling, parent or spouse is homosexual.

However, it is typical for gay and lesbian people to be invisible in the church and general society. Indeed, most of them feel compelled to maintain their invisibility to remain in the church. Consequently, in contrast to the increasingly open discussion of gay and lesbian issues in the public arena, *denial* and *avoidance* have been the general rule within the walls of the church. Many clergy insist they don't have "that problem" in their congregations. Others dismiss the issue, saying they are not interested in what people do in their private lives. Both attitudes are symptoms of an inability to face the issues honestly and to relate pastorally to gay and lesbian members.

Lesbians and gays recognize this denial and avoidance as a conspiracy of silence—a pervasive, long-standing pretense which isolates, alienates, and in the end, drives many away from the church.

With few exceptions gay and lesbian persons are not welcome in the church, neither as clergy, other church professionals, nor as laity. Members of Lutherans Concerned have heard countless stories that begin, "I used to be Lutheran, until . . ."—stories which recall the pain and rejection many have experienced in the church because of their sexuality. It is only as they hide their sexual orientation and remain silent about the joys and pains of their personal lives and relationships that lesbians and gay men are present in our pews and at our altars. Thousands

choose to stay away.

We recognize that an encounter with homosexual persons is fearful both for the church and for much of society. Thus, our mutual agenda must, above all, find ways to lay down the arsenals of fear. Because the issue of gay and lesbian persons in the churches has been so enmeshed in a whole fabric of fears enshrouding our society—fears about family, economic security, nuclear war, personal identity, etc.—we have not been able to speak honestly with one another in the spirit of love.

Gays and lesbians are afraid. Many live in fear of exposure. Most live in fear of losing jobs and housing, and live under the threatening shadow of the betrayal of confidence—by a friend, a family member, a colleague, a pastor. Ultimately, there is the ever-present fear of rejection. Tragically, they are afraid of the very people from whom they most desire support—parents and family. Horror stories of shock and aversion therapy and family ostracism are too common. And for many, the church has intensified this reign of fear with a divine sanction in words of direct personal condemnation.

Non-gay persons are afraid, too. They worry that homosexuality is somehow contagious, and thus fear the influence of gay and lesbian church professionals, teachers, or other leaders. The sudden AIDS epidemic has brought the new fear that gay people might spread disease within the church. Many are afraid to be seen publicly with a gay man or lesbian for fear of guilt by association. Parents of gays and lesbians fear the rejection of their friends and acquaintances if the "family secret" is known. Many live with a haunting, uninformed sense of failure as parents.

The church has its institutional fears as well. There are fears that if it appears too friendly to and accepting of gay and lesbian people, the more conservative constituency will withhold funds or leave the church, or that it will not be effective in attracting new members. Ironically, it is apparently of less concern to the church that thousands of gay men, lesbians and their supportive families are permanently alienated from the church, or that religious lesbians or gays are left hungering for spiritual support.

In all these fears, the truth about life becomes distorted and the ministry of the church is truncated. Masking the true self. For gay and

¹ One statistical measure is found in Merton P. Strommen, et al., *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), p. 372. Five thousand Lutherans ages 15 to 65 were asked if they "had homosexual intercourse" within the past year. One percent said "frequently," three percent said "occasionally," and seven percent gave no response.

lesbian persons, that experience of distortion is manifested in the hypocrisy most of them feel compelled to maintain in the church, with a façade or mask of being heterosexual or of being asexual.

This distortion produces a spiritual and psychological bifurcation. There is a sense of two selves wedged apart by feelings of guilt, self-hate, rejection, alienation, or anger. The duplicity of necessary lies has deprived many of their integrity and dignity. The overwhelming experience of lesbian and gay persons is that there is a significant part of their lives which they must never reveal in the church. Gay and lesbian persons find it fearful and difficult to remove the mask. The genuine need for honest self-disclosure is unmet.

Poor counsel. With some notable exceptions, when gay and lesbian persons have sought the counsel of the church, it has been poor and ill-informed. Self-disclosure, in some cases, has brought about the denial of the sacraments, public humiliation, accusations, and abuses of both confessional confidentiality and of the office of the keys. Gays and lesbians have often been advised that they are already rejected by God—damned—or have been pressured toward involuntary celibacy.

Loss of faith. Because of the condemnation of the church, many experience spiritual death, becoming cynical, irreligious and unbelieving. Rather than providing a ministry of compassion, clergy have attempted to interpose moralistic conditions between the homosexual Christian and the unconditional love of God. Law, rather than Gospel, has predominated in much of the counsel of the church, which communicates that the church is unwilling to listen or to learn what has been the experience of gay and lesbian people. Too few clergy and church leaders are familiar with any of the contemporary literature on the issues to provide meaningful and appropriate pastoral counsel.

Lack of due process. The church must re-examine its own ethical behavior in dealing with its lesbian or gay professionals. Reports come to us of breaches of confidence, betrayal of trust, arbitrary legalism, duplicity and secrecy, and the total absence of due process or justice. Church professionals have been dismissed or removed without evidence, without a hearing, without pastoral counsel, without access to peer support. Rumors and allegations have supplanted due process. The needs, competence and personal integrity of those with a vocation to serve the church

have been arbitrarily ignored.

While the Lutheran church bodies in public statements have spoken on behalf of the civil rights of gay and lesbian people in the public arena, within the church itself elementary standards of justice have been violated. This hypocrisy of the church is felt most painfully by its own believers, and stands as a major obstacle to the effective witness of the Gospel among unchurched gays and lesbians, as well as with those who have lapsed.

Absence of serious study. Especially disappointing is the lack of pastoral and theological discussion in the Lutheran community on homosexuality. In a tradition that has prided itself on theological vigor and lively debate, these issues have been largely neglected or avoided. Theological papers, requested of seminary faculty, have been kept quiet, remaining unpublished and unavailable. Lutheran ethicists or biblical scholars are not writing on these issues. There is little evidence that the Lutheran academic community has seriously engaged the enormous quantity of research and writing done in the social sciences in the last fifteen years.

We are particularly saddened and angered that church body statements, pastoral letters and guidelines have been drafted with little reference to or inclusion of lesbian and gay people in the process. There should be no further discussions of issues relating to homosexuality without including gay and lesbian Lutherans as full participants in research, hearings, and study. We affirm the principle identified in the work of the Commission on the New Lutheran Church: “Whenever possible, the people most directly affected by a decision shall be the principal parties responsible for decisions and implementation, with other expressions facilitating and assisting that group.”²

Progress. Though our task in this paper is to outline our major concerns for dialog, we also want to acknowledge those ways in which the church is showing a new openness to lesbians and gays. Through the Reconciled in Christ program of Lutherans Concerned/ North America, more and more congregations are publicly and intentionally making known their welcome to gay and lesbian persons. In a few synods and districts, conversations have begun

² See the Report to the 1984 Church Conventions (March 1984), p. 7.

between bishops and their lesbian and gay constituents. Enlightened pastors provide individual support to gay and lesbian members and their families. We applaud this progress.

However, for the sake of the Gospel and for the unity of the Body of Christ, we press with urgency for dialog on these issues. There remain many gays and lesbians, brothers and sisters within the Lutheran family, who have been greatly hurt by the continuing fear, denial and avoidance they experience. As St. Paul reminds us, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:26-27). For the church to speak and act with utter disregard for the life experience, faith and conscience of any believer is ultimately a further grieving of Christ our Lord, who suffered for all.

PART TWO: Theological Issues

Several major theological strands are intertwined in considering human sexuality—concepts of creation and fall, redemption and grace, of Christian maturity and freedom in the Spirit. In discussing the issues pertinent to homosexuality, however, two opposite viewpoints stand in marked contrast to one another. These irreconcilable viewpoints are most sharply focused by different presuppositions about the creation itself, in “First Article” theology.

One point of view argues that there is one normative, heterosexual, orientation operative in human beings—a pre-scientific view which prevails in biblical and church historical literature. Heterosexuality alone is divinely willed, thus any variation from it, such as the homosexual orientation, is a reflection of the flawed, broken nature of the world after the Fall.

The other point of view regards the creation as more mysteriously diverse in matters of sexual orientation—a reality which contemporary scientific research is continuing to elucidate. Orientations such as bisexual and homosexual have a causality totally apart from the willful disobedience of the human family (the Fall) or the choice of any individual, and are to be understood as still another facet of the complexity of God's created order.

The distinction between these two views is central to the discussion of the appropriate pastoral ministry of the church to gay and lesbian persons. If the gender orientation of gay and lesbian persons is regarded as essentially flawed and sinful, the thrust of the church's ministry must be to bring God's forgiveness to these specially burdened sinners and to assist them in overcoming their sinful inclinations and behavior.

On the other hand, if the capacity for love and affection is the gift of God to those of homosexual orientation, then the ministry of the church must be to assist gay and lesbian persons in finding wholeness and dignity in themselves, to offer them full acceptance in the life of the Christian community, to aid them in developing relationships of love and fidelity, and to address the injustices of the church and society towards these people.

These two alternative views are incompatible, and we reject efforts to construct a confused middle ground.

As members of Lutherans Concerned/North America, we affirm the second alternative in this debate. To clarify our argument for the full acceptance of all people, regardless of sexual and affectional orientation, and to provide for an arena of discussion with our churches, we present the following theses:

I. Human sexuality, without distinction based on sexual orientation, is a gift of God, not only for procreation, but also for learning and expressing love and affection.

Sexuality exists, of course, for the biological continuation of the species. But in the human family God has fused this gift with the unique vocation to and capacity for mutual love. The capacity to love—the impulse to reach out beyond ourselves toward others—has its grounding in our sexuality. Indeed, it is only as mutuality of love is attained that the gift of children, who need a nurturing and affectionate environment in which to grow, comes to its intended fruition.

Mutuality of love is central to human sexuality, apart from procreation, and contributes to the fullness of God-given personality. For this reason, the church supports heterosexual relationships in which procreation is not expected—couples who choose not to have children; marriage among the elderly, the infertile or the physically challenged.

Human sexuality is the good gift in which our

ability to love finds its home. Human love is never disembodied. Human beings incarnate love in touching and embracing, in exchanging the wisdom of the mind and the laughter of the heart, in making love, and in sharing one another's tears and sufferings. We affirm the right and vocation of all people, as a matter of justice, to give and receive love and affection.

II. Human sexuality manifests itself in a variety of gender orientations, from exclusively hetero-sexual to exclusively homosexual.

Only very recently the scientific community began to discover and disclose the variety of gender orientations among human beings. The terms "homosexual" and "homosexuality"³ are inventions of the nineteenth century. Not until the work of the Kinsey Institute for Sex Research⁴ in the mid-twentieth century was there empirical evidence of a continuum of sexual orientation.

The widespread acceptance in the social sciences of the findings of the Kinsey associates impels both church and society to a radical re-evaluation of gay, lesbian and bisexual persons. Theories abound as to how human sexual orientation is formed; but the implications cannot be ignored: humans are not all heterosexual.

The work of Kinsey and others has also underscored the fact that human sexual orientation, heterosexual or homosexual, is neither a matter of choice nor subject to any radical change in adult life. In whatever ways human sexual orientation comes into being—in the mystery of human genetic make-up or in early childhood development or both—it occurs very early in life.

This has been affirmed again and again by gay and lesbian people, many of whom indicate that from an early age on they sensed they were "different," though

³ The words "homosexual" and "homosexuality," when coined a century ago, were used to describe what was then considered a pathology. For this reason they are unsuitable for the contemporary discussion, except that there are no better terms where the literary usage requires speaking about both lesbians and gay men together. We thus acquiesce, with some reservation, to the continued use of these pejorative terms for the sake of common recognition and convenience.

⁴ Alfred C. Kinsey, et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948); and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1953).

it may not have been until their adult years that they understood and accepted that difference. Universally, lesbian and gay people have told us that they had no choice about their orientation. In fact, many Christian gay and lesbian and bisexual persons, with tremendous spiritual and emotional resolve, have tried to choose otherwise, before coming to accept the givenness of their orientation.

The journey of self-discovery that leads a person to say that he or she is gay or lesbian or bisexual in orientation is most often lonely and fearful. Sexual orientation lies deep within the human personality. We affirm the right of all people, as a matter of justice, to engage in honest self-discovery in the matter of sexual orientation.

III. All sexual orientations are gifts of God, and are to be honored as such.

As John Boswell has shown in his definitive study of homosexuality and Christianity,⁵ there have been major periods in the history of the church, prior to the twelfth century, when there was considerable acceptance of same-gender love in the Christian community. The contemporary church is the heir of a heterosexual bias which gained ascendancy in the general rise of social intolerance in the thirteenth century. This bias became articulated in late medieval traditions of "natural law," and later, in the Reformation concepts of the "orders of creation." This bias is echoed in all the current Lutheran statements on human sexuality.

This is clearly the arena in which we challenge the church to seek fresh theological insight. The variety of human sexual orientations is a given reality. On the basis of empirical evidence, it is to be seen as a part of the created order. It is natural.

There is no evidence that same-gender love and affection are inherently different from or inferior to heterosexual love and affection. To love at all is to love beyond oneself. To risk seeking the love of

⁵ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe From the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). The brief conclusion, pp. 333 f., is helpful, but cannot begin to capture the careful scholarship of the whole work documenting the substantial acceptance of gay men and lesbians for more than a millennium of Christian history.

another is fraught with the same difficulties and bears the same responsibilities, regardless of the gender of that person. We reject the contention that same-gender love is inherently narcissistic, since it is the otherness of an individual's personality and capacity for love, not the otherness of gender, which draws one out of oneself and gives love its caring and giving character.

Same-gender orientation equally well enables a person to love, and so fulfill God's purpose both for sexuality and for relationship. By condemning their homosexual orientation and natural feelings of affection, the church has impaired the emotional lives of thousands. By affirming all people in their sexual orientation, the church will liberate them for the full and appropriate expression of love.

Same-gender sexuality and affection is not a pathology or disease. In fact, the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from their classifications of mental disorders more than a decade ago.⁶ Homosexuality, therefore, cannot be compared with pathologies like alcoholism. To be lesbian or gay means to have a normal potential for love and affection.

If there is any real affliction for the gay or lesbian person, it is *homophobia*—the unreasonable fear of homosexual impulses—which is created by society and, regrettably, internalized by many gay and lesbian persons. It is homophobia, not the homosexual orientation, that can be the stumbling block for gay and lesbian people in their search for love, affection, affirmation and personal wholeness.

We affirm, as a matter of justice, that all persons are to be supported in their sexual orientations and encouraged in the development of their capacity for love as grounded in their sexuality.

IV. Love is the criterion by which our sexuality is judged, not vice versa.

We want to make very clear our understanding of the priority and primacy of love in all matters of human sexuality. Love is at the very heart of the Gospel, and love is the only appropriate norm by which all

sexuality may be judged. It is contrary to the Gospel, however, to condemn love because of a particular sexual orientation. It is particularly offensive to hear people in the church condemn love, affection, mutuality and caring that occurs between people simply because they are of the same gender. Implied in this condemnation is the belief that gay and lesbian people are incapable of, perverse in, or undeserving of love, an untruth which must be laid to rest once and for all.

As with heterosexual relationships, same-sex relationships have the potential for love and sharing, and are subject to the same ancient enemies of selfishness, manipulation, and abuse. In the name of love we condemn all perversions of sexuality manifested in sexism, rape, child and spouse abuse, adultery, prostitution and the like. Sins of sex are failures in love—a criterion that applies to everyone. Likewise, in the name of love, we affirm all relationships in which persons mutually seek the welfare and growth of the other.

V. While sexual orientation may be distinguished from sexual expression, we reject the argument that would divide the two in order to condone the one while condemning the other.

Some in the church have attempted to come to terms with the work of Kinsey and others in the social sciences who describe the variety of sexual orientations⁷ by making a clean distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior, and have argued that the sin is not in the orientation but in the behavior: it is not wrong to be gay or lesbian, but it is sin to give any expression to that orientation. This kind of distinction becomes apparent among those whose concern is to expose “practicing” homosexuals.

We regard the separation of orientation and affectional expression in this way to be specious. It denies the integration of human sexuality into the total personality, and the wholeness of human life in the context of a loving relationship.

In speaking of human sexuality, including homosexuality, we mean much more than the capacity for genital stimulus and response. To be sexual, including to be lesbian or gay, involves an affectional capacity woven into the fabric of the whole personality. To forbid a person any expression of

⁶ In 1974 and 1975 respectively. See Toby Morotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), p. 324; and Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), pp. 195-198.

⁷ See Bell and Weinberg, op. cit., pp. 13-14, 49-54.

affection, intimacy and sexuality toward another to whom he or she is naturally disposed, constitutes a denial of that person's humanity. The implication of such a view is that of a sadistic God who disposes some to a propensity for affection and expression with the same gender, but also forbids any realization or wholeness through such affection, expression or relationship.

The choice for same-gender oriented persons is not between homosexual expression of affection and heterosexual expression. It is between homosexual expression and *no* satisfying, relational intimacy whatever. The specious separation of orientation and behavior has only added to the emotional dysfunctionality of dedicated Christian homosexuals, taught they cannot please God and live out the affectional component of their loves as others do.

The change of orientation is not a gift given to most homosexuals, nor, in most cases, a therapeutic option. The claims of certain ministries that they can create “ex-homosexuals” have been widely shown to be spurious,⁸ and have caused unspeakable harm to persons who have already suffered enormously. Furthermore, such claims and hopes distract the church, if it is serious about ministry to and with homosexual persons, from meaningful dialog with informed and experienced professionals and counselors.

Celibacy is a gift given by the Spirit only to a few. It is not a commandment of God, nor can it be assigned by the church to those who do not have it, as Luther and the Confessions make clear.⁹ Any expectation of the church regarding celibacy must account for the relational/affectional needs of every person, not simply the suppression of genital gratification.

We affirm the right of all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, to live a life of wholeness and intimacy, the enjoyment of relationships of love and companionship, and the sexual expression of their personhood. It is illegitimate to attempt to sever sexual orientation from sexual behavior. To do so is to sever the person.

⁸ One succinct review of the so-called “ex-gay” ministries and literature is Ralph Blair, *Ex-Gay* (New York, HCCC Inc., 1982).

⁹ Especially see Article XXIII of the Augsburg Confession and Apology of the Augsburg Confession, *The Book of Concord* (Tappert edition, pp. 51-56, 239-242).

PART THREE:

Biblical Issues

In examining gay and lesbian sexuality in the light of biblical theology, the church has most often confined its study to six texts traditionally accepted as disapprobations of homosexuality (Genesis 19:1-13; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:8-11).¹⁰ However, in recent years, a number of scholars have given fresh attention to these texts and added substantially to the literature available about them. We summarize here their specific insights which identify major issues for our dialog with the church—issues of translation, exegetical and contextual interpretation, and the silences of the Bible.

Ambiguities and translations. Scholars have shown us that the ambiguities in certain biblical texts render most prevailing translations questionable. It is uncertain, what is meant, for example, at 1 Corinthians 6:9 by *malakoi* and, also at 1 Timothy 1:10, by *arsenokoitai*. Walter Wink¹¹ underscores that “it is unclear whether the issue is homosexuality alone, or promiscuity and ‘sex-for-hire’.” The RSV rendering of these two terms as the single word “homosexual” has appropriately been criticized as an unwarranted conflation of the two ambiguous Greek words.

John Boswell¹² has cited evidence that *malakoi* was for many centuries thought to refer to masturbation, but to Paul it may have referred to the morally loose in a general sense. *Arsenokoitai*, in the Pauline literature, may mean “male prostitutes,” but Robin Scroggs¹³ exhaustive examination of the texts

¹⁰ We do not review here the various passages which discuss the *kadeshim*, or fertility cult prostitutes, who served in pagan temples. Though certainly condemned in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46), they have no bearing on the present issues. The King James Version's mistranslation of *kadeshim* as “sodomites” notwithstanding, John Boswell has made clear (*op. cit.*, pp. 98-99) that “there is no reason to assume such prostitutes serviced persons of their own sex.” Victor Gold in *Now the Silence Breaks*, pp. 14-15, clarifies that since female prostitutes were condemned as well as male prostitutes, “the issue was not homosexuality or heterosexuality but sacred prostitution.”

¹¹ Walter Wink, “Biblical Perspectives on Homosexuality,” *Christian Century* (November 7, 1979), p. 1082.

¹² Boswell, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

¹³ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 107.

and of sexual practices contemporaneous with the apostle demonstrates that Paul may be proscribing paedophilia and prostitution. Scroggs has noted that the term “has no recoverable history prior to Paul's use of it,” and that it “does not appear after 1 Corinthians with any frequency.” He argues from research sources that *arsenokoitai* is rooted in the rabbinic term *mishav zakur*. “A very specific dimension of pederasty is being denounced here,” he concludes,¹⁴ the passive role of the “effeminate call boy” and the active role of his adult suitor or “customer.”

Textual misappropriation. Some texts have been misappropriated beyond what honest contextual interpretation will bear. While in recent centuries the story of the Sodomites in Genesis 19 has been used to condemn homosexuality, there is nothing in the scriptures to support this. In all other biblical texts, the sin of the people of Sodom is general wickedness, selfishness and pride, xenophobia and inhospitality.¹⁵ Nothing in the biblical utilization of the Sodom story indicates that the sin is homosexual love, promiscuity or even lust.

Contemporary readers cannot help but view the incident as an attempted gang rape directed against male strangers, a phenomenon not unknown in the brutality of ancient tribal or national conflicts. The incident's literary relationship with Judges 19:15—20:6 is unmistakable. The intent of violent humiliation and murder, the suppression of the foreigner, and the attitude of xenophobia are quite transparent in these passages, qualifying them as pertinent to the contemporary discussion of rape, sexual violence, and male aggression and the objectification and depersonalization of women (Genesis 19:7-8); but they are not pertinent to the discussion of appropriate expressions of sexuality and love. The condemnation of the male townsmen, Genesis 19:6, is no more helpful in the discussion of same-gender love and sexuality than is the immediately

following verse in understanding appropriate heterosexual relationships. Thus, we concur with scholars who would put Genesis 19 to rest as a text applicable to the discussion.

The ancient social and cultural context. Crucial to the proper use of a biblical text is its original social context. We caution against utilizing isolated biblical pericopes in an attempt to construct a generalized biblical sexual ethic. For example, the same two texts which narrate the evil of sexual violence directed against males—homicidal gang rape—condone the recreational sexual use of women (Genesis 19:8 and Judges 19:23-25), as an appeasement for male hostility.

If Scroggs is correct in his analysis of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, then Paul offers no generalized condemnation of homosexual love or behavior, but of “a very specific dimension of pederasty.” The same disapproval of this form of pederasty, he indicates, is found throughout “the entire literature of the Greco-Roman world.”¹⁶ Because it is a very specific condemnation, we believe the conventional generalized application of these texts to other expressions of gay and lesbian sexuality is unsupportable.

Thus the major issue not to be overlooked is the enormous cultural and sociological gulf between Christians in the contemporary world, and ancient societies, especially the Old Testament Hebrew community. The sexual values of the Old Testament presuppose and accept a misogyny and patriarchalism virtually unthinkable today. Wink¹⁷ has noted that “social regulations regarding adultery, incest, rape, and prostitution are, in the Old Testament, determined largely by considerations of the males’ property rights over women.”

Polygamy is the model for sexuality and marriage in the Old Testament. Procreation and the growth and strength of the tribe, not relationship and love, are given the highest concern in matters of sexual behavior. Cultic, or ritual, idolatrous sexual practices are an ancient concern which have little relevance to the discussion of relational and loving sexual ethics today.

It is likewise evident that the condemnation of two men lying together, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, is

¹⁴ Scroggs, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹⁵ Genesis 13:13, 18:20; Jeremiah 23:14; Ezekiel 16:49-50; Wisdom 10:7-8, 19:13-14; Ecclesiasticus 16:8; Matthew 10:14-15; Luke 10:10-12; 2 Peter 2:6-8 and Jude 1:7. Only these last two indicate anything sexual in the sin of the Sodomites, and only in the most general terms with no reference to homosexuality. See also Boswell, pp. 94-95, and George Edwards, *Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective*, (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), pp. 48-51.

¹⁶ Scroggs, p. 108.

¹⁷ Wink, p. 1083.

inextricably linked with cultural norms that promulgated and protected the superiority and privilege of males as a class, thought to be compromised by same-gender acts. As part of the Holiness Code, Wink¹⁸ underscores, the two Levitical passages reject male homosexual activity as an abomination, *toevah*, a rejection which was cultic, not moral. Biblical literature is also dependent upon the “Hebrew pre-scientific understanding . . . that male semen contained the whole of nascent life.”

Taken as a whole, the sexual material in the Bible is disappointingly ambiguous. It is an illegitimate use of scripture to selectively apply Old Testament mandates directly to Christians today. It is questionable to appropriate one or two pieces of an ancient cultic tradition which, as Boswell reminds us, also provides the death penalty for “incest, bestiality, blasphemy, soothsaying, violation of the Sabbath laws, intercourse with a betrothed virgin, cursing one's parents, sorcery, and filial disobedience.”¹⁹

The context of the Gospel. Countless texts in Romans, Galatians and elsewhere demonstrate that the embrace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ requires the relinquishment of the Old Covenant for life and salvation. While the Law permanently stands, its place in the lives of Christians is no longer that of moral guardian (Luke 16:16; Romans 3:21-23; Galatians 3:21-28; Hebrews 7:18-19). It is theologically dishonest to superimpose inconsistently the Law as a moral code over a theology of justification and Christian freedom. We repudiate such selective fundamentalism and the abandonment of the Gospel itself to such manipulation.

The silences of the Bible. Perhaps the most perplexing of the biblical issues are the silences about many of our contemporary concerns regarding sexuality. The Gospels are utterly silent about homosexuality. No concise and unequivocal texts are available which speak, for example, to abortion; birth control; loving relationships between gays, lesbians, or unmarried heterosexuals; or sexual violence within marriage.

Furthermore, the Bible is silent about sexual or gender orientation and its causation. As we have noted, biblical literature appears to presuppose that

homosexual behavior is willfully chosen by heterosexually-oriented persons.

In Romans 1:26-27, considered to be the major New Testament text on homosexuality, scholars readily agree that Paul did not understand any distinction between “orientation” and “behavior.”²⁰ If he thought that virtually all human beings are naturally heterosexual, then his denunciation of same-gender sexual expression as a willful, unnatural disobedience and departure from heterosexual human nature would have a logical consistency. If such is the case, however, as Scroggs, Boswell, Edwards, Wink and others have noted,²¹ Paul's ignorance of gender orientations is at least equal to the Bible's pre-scientific ignorance of ovulation and menstruation, which renders his reasoning quite precarious in establishing clear answers to other contemporary questions.

Boswell has also shown that the church's development in later centuries of concepts of “natural law” cannot legitimately be read back into Pauline texts.²² “For Paul, ‘nature’ was not a question of universal law or truth but, rather, a matter of the character of some person or groups of persons, a character which was largely ethnic and entirely human. . . . ‘Nature’ is not a moral force for Paul.”

A convincing interpretation of Romans 1:26-27 is made more difficult by Paul's silence about faith and matters of ethical behavior of believing, baptized homosexual persons—who are not idolatrous pagan unbelievers. Paul writes about same-gender behavior only in the third person as people entirely outside of the Christian community. George Edwards,²³ in elucidating the dependence of Romans 1 upon Wisdom 13-15, cogently argues that Paul presents “not thoughts that proceed from his own understanding of divine justice but those of Jewish tradition looking out in a customary way on gentile depravity.”

With the support of other exegetes, Edwards demonstrates that Paul includes attacks upon gentile (non-believer) sinners, and upon unnatural homosexual sins in particular, “in a rhetorical context . . . in order to turn the accusation against the accuser” in Romans

¹⁸ Wink, p. 1082.

¹⁹ Boswell, p. 101, n. 32.

²⁰ Cf. Wink, p. 1083; Boswell, p. 109; Edwards, p. 88.

²¹ See the discussion in Scroggs, pp. 116-117, 123-125.

²² Boswell, pp. 110-111.

²³ Edwards, p. 86; see also pp. 72-73, 91-93.

2.²⁴ It is clear that the particular reference to unnatural homosexual lust—as distinct from same-gender love—is not singled out for moral reprehension as the most odious depravity, but is used precisely for the opposite effect: to engage, “to set up (for indictment) the chauvinistic reader” explicitly addressed, in the second person, in Romans 2. Thus Paul demonstrates the universally flawed nature of all human behavior (1:18, 3:23), condemned before the wrath of God and in need of divine grace.

A careful examination of the specifics of Pauline disapprobation must include a clear understanding of idolatry, which the apostle uses, Romans 1:18-32, in a most general judgment of gentile depravity. The word for idol, *eidolon*, has its roots in the concept of “shadow”; an idol or false god, Wisdom 13-14, is spurious, an imitation, not genuine.²⁵ Paul's theological persuasion may be understood that lust (whether heterosexual or homosexual) is a “shadow” of love, and that lustful behavior is not an authentic expression of genuine love.

As we have said, love is the only appropriate norm by which all sexuality may be judged. But again, in this passage, Paul is silent about the genuine love that is expressed between people who are of the same gender.

PART FOUR: The Ministry of Reconciliation

Far more important for the Christian community than the critical examination of the foregoing six texts is the reconsideration of the Bible as a whole in order to formulate—with the broadest possible understanding of gay and lesbian people—a theology that provides genuine counsel and concern. The best of the evangelical tradition should be brought to the discussion: our understanding of faith and grace, the centrality of incarnational love in Jesus Christ, the place of the conscience in spiritual formation, and the role of Christian freedom.

Too often the Bible—especially these six passages—has been used by many in the church as an

instrument which opens a gulf of estrangement between heterosexual and homosexual people. In the traditional application of the law—in unexamined condemnation of gays and lesbians—we do not suggest that the church intentionally has misused the Bible or misunderstood the heart of the message. But the Bible is indeed misused if the church fails to understand the heart of the homosexual person.

The church bears a profound responsibility to use scripture and theology as the bridge to overcome the apparent distances which separate homosexual and heterosexual people—especially within the household of faith. Alienation will end, controversy and division will cease, only in a true ministry of reconciliation, which is the heart of the Gospel (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19). It is only in Christ that we have a perfect model for this reconciliation:

For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.... for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:13-18)

The scripture provides the Christian community with evidence that reconciliation is both possible and imperative, as it ministers in the midst of divisive issues and disputes. Joseph Weber²⁶ makes clear that Paul faced disputes and tensions over fundamental theological issues in the church at Rome, but in Christ, “no one should despise a brother or sister because of these differences of opinion.” Reconciliation takes precedence over disputes (Romans 14:1-10).

How this reconciliation is effected pastorally has very much to do with dealing with moral issues from a biblical perspective. The law which accuses speaks to all—to heterosexual and homosexual alike (Romans 3:20). But Christ is the end of the law (Galatians 5:4-6; Acts 13:39; Ephesians 2:15). His grace is offered without distinction (Acts 15:8-9; Romans 10:12). Most importantly, the law is best summarized in love; love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14).

Reconciliation summons the Christian community

²⁴ Edwards, p. 93. His important demonstration of this rhetorical device in Romans 1-2 follows, pp. 93-98.

²⁵ Cf. Earl F. Palmer, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 9.

²⁶ Joseph C. Weber, “Reconciliation Rediscovered,” *Manna for the Journey* I:1, (1985), pp. 8-10.

to address the common issues of humanity, especially in order that it grow in love and that the model of love is applied to all human relationships. If in love the whole community responds to the call for dialog, then we will approach one another without distrust, cynicism or fear; we will support one another in building relationships of hopefulness, nurture and integrity—authentic expressions of love rooted in the love of Christ for all.

However, a theological impasse is reached in the ministry of the church because of an inability or unwillingness to recognize the reality of love and affection between persons of the same gender. The love of the heart which they express ought never to be equated arbitrarily with sexual lust, and thus discounted or disbelieved. The Christian community must reckon with the validity of such love, even within the biblical literature. The vivid and endearing stories of the depth of commitment and love of Ruth for Naomi (Ruth 1:6-18) and of Jonathan and David for one another (1 Samuel 20:35-42; 2 Samuel 1:24-26) cannot be overlooked or undervalued. These texts, of course, will bear no speculation that either of these famous relationships found genital sexual expression (wholly beside the point), but they must be seen as important examples of genuine love and lifelong commitment between two women and between two men—relationships which the Bible neither disapproves nor attempts to conceal.

As always, in the ministry of reconciliation, people of faith will give primacy to the Gospel in dealing with one another. We are justified by grace through faith, which places all believers on an equal footing before God (Acts 15:8-11; Romans 3:23-24). Each must work out one's own salvation (Philippians 2:12-13). For lesbians and gays, the Gospel speaks persuasively because in it is found the end of terror and fear (John 14:1-3; 1 John 3:19-24). Love, not fear, defines our relationship with God and thus with one another (1 John 4:16-19). Conscience is a reassurance of faith and love, and those who are uncertain need only to look deeply inward to see if they have motives of love.

The community of faith will give cognizance to the emerging spiritual insight of these sisters and brothers who have made a troubling but profound inward journey: discovering their true and natural sexuality; then wrestling with, praying about, studying and keeping faith with the word of God as it speaks to their lives. Their spiritual pilgrimages are not myths of self-

justification but the true witness of people lifted from self-despair by the recognition of Christ's overwhelming love for them. Like many others who had not previously heard the Gospel, gay and lesbian Christians share a clear "conversion experience" in understanding the grace of God which overpowers the human predicament (Acts 13:38-43; Romans 11:32-33), welcomes all into a new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:4-6), and grants new status and new life (2 Corinthians 5:16-19).

Indeed, gay and lesbian Christians, like any other Christians who have had deep encounters with the word of the Gospel, are able to see the word speaking directly and profoundly to their own experience. Lesbians and gay men will be bold enough to offer new insight into the Gospel to the whole community of Christ. They will claim the biblical word for themselves, in the experience of hoping and believing the Gospel, of trusting in one's own conscience, even in the face of opposition:

Though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated ...as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the face of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from error or uncleanness, nor is it made with guile; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please people, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never used either words of flattery, as you know, or a cloak for greed, as God is witness.... But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. (1 Thessalonians 2:2-8)

The ministry of the church, then, which is most evangelical and most biblical will not be judgmental (Matthew 7:1; Romans 14:4, 10-14), but will stand with the gay and lesbian believer as brother and sister.

Such counsel will understand that, as with all other Christians, lesbian and gay persons themselves are capable of and entitled to personal moral discernment (Luke 12:57; Romans 2:14-16; 1 Corinthians 6:3) and to their faithful understanding of the scriptures (John 5:39-40; Romans 15:4), to assurance in faith (Hebrews 10:22), to self-acceptance, integrity and dignity (1 Corinthians 15:10; 1 Timothy 4:4; Romans 14:14).

Ultimately, lesbian and gay people within the church will make a great contribution to the construction of relational ethics and to evangelical

outreach, which we pray will draw many others who are estranged, alienated or unloved, to Jesus Christ, to the household of faith, and into the reconciliation which has begun.

To these ends, then, we call the church to dialog.

Lutherans Concerned, in its ministry to individuals, pastors and congregations, offers its fullest resources for pastoral care and counsel, study and theological discussion.

But we also challenge the synods and districts, church body commissions, offices and agencies, seminaries, colleges and institutions, and all congregations, to enter fully and honestly into dialog at every possible level, with the highest pastoral and evangelical concern, and with all possible urgency.

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