

Celibacy and Gay/Lesbian Relationships

by Dan Hooper ■ 2004

Christian celibacy—a permanent state of singleness and dedication to the Lord—is an ancient tradition, beginning with Jesus and Paul, and becoming a recognized vocation or lifestyle from at least the Second Century. How should LGBT people understand this tradition?

Bible scholar Walter Wink summarizes the issues which arise from the biblical view :¹

The Old Testament regarded celibacy as abnormal, and 1 Tim. 4:1-3 calls compulsory celibacy a heresy. Other New Testament texts seem to support it (Matt. 19:10-12; 1 Cor. 7; Rev. 14:3-4; Acts 21:9; and Jesus' own example). The Catholic Church has made celibacy mandatory for priests and nuns. Some Christian ethicists demand celibacy of gays and lesbians, whether they have a vocation for celibacy or not. But this legislates celibacy by category, not by divine calling.

If indeed Paul's view of "the flesh" (Galatians 5:16-21) is a dim one, he does not make a strong case for celibacy as a permanent state. The thrust of his argument at 1 Corinthians 7 is not that celibacy is a higher, purer or more virtuous status for any Christian, but in practical terms it frees one to serve the Lord without distraction. Yet his view also allows that for some "being aflame with passion" would be a serious distraction and therefore, it might be "better to marry."

Nonetheless, Paul's critical view of "the flesh", if normative, would certainly have to apply to all Christians—heterosexual as well as homosexual, bisexual or transgender.

Indeed, celibacy was *not* the rule from the beginning of the church, even for clergy. There is evidence that as many as 39 popes were married men!² The rule of celibacy for clergy was not widely enforced, even in Western Christendom, until the 12th century. I have written elsewhere at much greater length about the development of celibacy from a voluntary self-discipline to a mandatory state for clergy and religious.

The Gift of Celibacy

Christian celibacy has been understood historically to be possible only because of a very special gift, or charism of the Holy Spirit, which enables a person to remain sexually abstinent in order to dedicate his or her life more completely to God's work in the world. Paul suggests that having a wife or husband is a significant distraction from serving the Lord (1 Cor. 7:25-38). It is ironic in this significant discussion of virginity and celibacy that he never even mentions children, for in practical terms, it is the nurturing and raising of children which are the greatest distraction for married couples.

To say that celibacy requires a special gift of the Spirit is much more than suggesting that marriage is "not for everyone." To be dedicated and single-minded in one's living out of celibacy requires a very distinct sense of self, of purpose, of inner strength and support which sustains one's life.

Indeed it is celibacy which is "not for everyone." A very small minority of people seem to discern this gift needed to direct one's energies toward a celibate life rather than a family life.

The Vocations of the Christian Life

Before a commitment to a life of celibacy may be undertaken, the individual must discern a distinctive call or vocation to undertake the discipline which the celibate life requires.

We might note that the statement of Genesis 2:18 does not become irrelevant even for an individual with the gift of celibacy: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”³ Celibacy was never intended for, and very seldom adopted by, individuals who remain alone in the world, but has been practiced as a discipline within Christian communities such as monasteries and convents. In its best tradition, Christian celibacy has always been supported as a life lived out in community, and the commitment to remain celibate is a commitment made to one’s peers in the monastic community. This community life serves as a counterpart to family life.

In the same manner, Christian marriage also has been seen as a vocation, or calling, and one that requires a full commitment to the enormous responsibilities of family life. It has been customary, of course, to view marriage and celibacy as twin models in a simple dualism.⁴

For many years, marriage was commended by Christian pastors to members of their churches who confessed to homosexual “inclinations,” believing with Luther and Paul that marriage was a “cure for fornication.” In our times, however, with law enforcement and the news media hunting down human sinfulness more completely than the Church had ever done, countless tragedies have come to light where those who do not have the charism or the vocation either for marriage or for celibacy have undertaken one of these states.

If marriage and celibacy are the only two choices for Christians, then neither is a vocation. Every Christian can rightly ask him or herself what purpose God has in mind for one’s life. And every Christian ought also to ask him or herself the questions which lead to moral discernment about sexuality—how to live responsibly and rightly with the charism of sexuality.

But it is only because of the emergence of sexual minorities into public view that the church has begun to ask, What does chastity, or the moral life, mean for those without the gift or vocation for marriage or celibacy?

We must respect the thousands, down through the centuries, who have chosen Christian celibacy, but we know God does not require anyone to be something or undertake something as demanding as the celibate life, without the God-given power and spiritual gifts necessary.

Paul is clear that no self-denial, work, faithful observance of the Law will commend one to God, since all people have sinned and all are justified solely by God’s grace, not by obedience to law. More to the point—given the freedom inherent in the Gospel—the Church does not have the right to impose an impossible ethical expectation on some of its members when God does not.

It is cruel and insensitive to imply that some people are inferior, morally weak, or unwelcome in the Christian community because they don’t have the gift or power for lifelong sexual abstinence. In fact, most heterosexual people also do not have this gift, either!

We agree with Martin Luther and the Reformers that the gift (charism) of the Spirit for lifelong abstinence, not only from genital sexual gratification but from emotional and relational gratification—which makes a commitment to celibacy possible—is given only to a very tiny percentage of people. The Reformers were especially concerned with the emotional and spiritual

burden placed on people expected to live according to a rule which was so strict that it actually forced them into greater sin—the clergy!

In the arguments against clerical celibacy in the Lutheran Confessions, the Reformers make the case that there are legitimate needs for the physical body and its care, including “natural love” and the normal hunger for relationship, which are not to be confused with lust:

As we said, we are not talking about sinful lust but about the desire which is called ‘natural love,’ which lust did not remove from nature but only inflamed. [Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XXIII, §13]

Now, if a person does not discern this gift for lifelong abstinence, but does discern a homosexual orientation, how then should she or he live?

Spiritual Discernment

The Gospel do not require of all or most homosexual, bisexual or transgender persons an entire lifetime of sexual abstinence. But gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians are called to live responsibly and ethically, so that our lives give glory to God and reflect well upon the Christian community. How one makes wise ethical choices with regard to remaining single or building and living in a love relationship is the hard work of spiritual discernment as children of grace.

Presently, some Lutheran church bodies are wrestling with the issues of gay and lesbian persons in relationships—that is, same-sex relationships. The current studies by the ELCA at least are an acknowledgment that the church can no longer enforce a blanket condemnation of gay and lesbian people which is on shaky grounds biblically, theologically and pastorally. If in the past it seemed facile to espouse a condemnation of homosexual expression in any form, it is perhaps harder to address an implied condemnation to a life which is unlivable and even more prone to error or terror.

Presently, the ELCA and many other Christians denominations exclude gay and lesbian people from ordination and ministry.⁵ In Protestant church bodies, the ordained ministry is the only form of religious vocation, since the merits of monastic life were discounted by the Reformers and simply abandoned by the Protestant churches. Thus the churches, with their short memories of the history of monasticism and the Reformation, have simply created the classic bind in which gay and lesbian people are expected, by virtue of their innate sexuality, to undertake the celibacy as with the dedication of a Christian vocation, but remain excluded from the only vocation which exists in the Protestant churches: the ordained ministry!

Luther on Disobedience of Church Law

One cannot make an exact comparison with the Reformer’s views of celibacy and marriage. Luther clearly saw only marriage as the alternative to the corrupt and hypocritical celibacy which existed in his day.⁶ Luther’s advised remedy to individuals for the torture of conscience was to break the church law! He indicted the church itself (specifically, the Pope) in its complicity with sin for setting up a situation where sin is the only choice open to an individual with an ordinary sexual drive. In his “To The Christian Nobility,” referring to the demand of a vow of celibacy, Luther wrote:

The pope has as little power to command this as he has to forbid eating, drinking, the natural

movement of the bowels, or growing fat. Therefore, no one is bound to keep it, but the pope is responsible for all the sins which are committed against this ordinance, for all the souls which are lost, and for all the consciences which are confused and tortured because of this ordinance.

Celibacy and Relationships in Reconciling Churches

A Lutheran congregation's Reconciling Ministry will not resolve all the theological or ethical issues about gay/lesbian relationships as legitimate alternatives to an impossible life of celibacy (without the charism and without the vocation to it). But a welcoming, Gospel-centered, pastoral ministry with lesbian and gay people will recognize the validity of loving and faithful relationships, and recognize the need to help and support couples to pursue appropriate ethical choices as Christians.

At the same time, a Reconciling in Christ congregation should be prepared to also support individuals who understand themselves to be homosexually-oriented but, for spiritual, psychological or other reasons, elect to remain celibate as best they can.

If understanding clergy today avoid suggesting that "marriage is the cure" for homosexually-oriented persons (a disaster!), they should also be sensitive enough not to believe that lifelong celibacy is "the answer." So many LGBT persons have been treated so badly by the church in the past, and have suffered open hatred and blatant rejection, that it would be gravely insulting to those who do return to the church, in the hope of finding a welcoming church home, to be told that they should consider being a monk or a nun in order to be welcomed.

Some congregations may choose to offer public support for lesbian and gay couples and their family life, especially through liturgical blessings. At present, such ceremonies are not approved by the ELCA, but equally are not expressly disapproved. The current ELCA studies have begun to address these issues, but no conclusions or recommendations have been reached.⁷

The Bishops of the ELCiC have expressed disapproval of pastoral participation in blessing ceremonies, but their public letter on the subject in August 2003 contains some serious internal inconsistencies, and one hopes that the issues will be revisited.⁸



Resources

Brundage, James A., *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, [Chicago: University of Chicago Press], 1987.

Eskridge, William N., Jr., *The Case for Same-Sex Marriage: From Sexual Liberty to Civilized Commitment* [New York: The Free Press], 1996.

Hooper, Daniel M., *Building, Blessing, Living in Relationship: Gay and Lesbian Couples and the Ministry of Lutherans Concerned*, 1994.

McNamara, Jo Ann, *A New Song: Celibate Women in the First Three Christian Centuries* [New York: Harrington Park Press], 1985.

Thurian, Max, *Marriage and Celibacy*, Norma Emerton, trans., [London: SCM Press Ltd.], 1959.

- Wingren, Gustaf, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press], 1957.
- Yost, John K., "The Reformation Defense of Clerical Marriage in the Reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI", *Church History* (50:2, June, 1981), pp. 152-165.
-

Endnotes

1. Wink, Walter, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999; 133 pp.], p. 41.
2. J. N. D. Kelly, J. N. D. *Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, New York, Oxford Press. 1986.)
3. It is interesting that, as the narrative is told, God does not create a woman as a helper and partner for the man, but instead creates all the animals and birds out of the earth. This is mythic language, but as presented, the purpose of the narrative was not to present a complementarity of the sexes, but to support the more general idea of help, relationship and thus community.
4. This is the plan of Max Thurian's work, *Marriage and Celibacy*. While his study is eminently worthwhile for its time, Thurian—writing in the 1950s—seems not to have contemplated why many Christian persons remain unmarried yet with no sense of *vocation* to celibacy, nor did he voice any concept of a Christian homosexual person who cannot necessarily follow either vocation.
5. Technically, the ELCA's *Vision and Expectations* does not preclude all homosexual persons from ordained ministry, but only those who refuse to live a celibate life. But those gay and lesbian people who discern the charism for celibacy and are prepared to live out its requirements and demands without the support of life in a monastic community are extremely few. It seems clear that the rule in *Vision and Expectations*, while leaving a theoretical opening for gay and lesbian people, has quite knowingly closed the door to them. It is readily apparent from the history and manner of how the document came to be written, approved and promulgated that the church body had no intention even to discuss these issues with actual gay and lesbian members who were already ordained and serving in ministry, or were preparing for ordained service.
6. There undoubtedly many dedicated celibate women and men, living out vocations in honorable way within honorable communities. But the conditions of corruption and sexual vice was so widespread, Luther believed, that the entire way of life was simply an impossibility and a lure into sin. This insight is too often lost by people in the debate about gay and lesbian people today. But Luther was convinced that so few people had the physical, emotional and spiritual resources to live a life of total abstinence that the monasteries and convents could not be saved, and that most people belonged in a legitimate relationship: marriage. The question before the church today, if it rightly understands Luther's insight, is to ask what kind of legitimate relationship there ought to be which is available for gay and lesbian people who do not have the physical, psychological/emotional and spiritual resources for, or the sense of calling or vocation to, a lifetime of sexual abstinence.

Moreover, Luther's own views on marriage and sexuality contain problems and internal inconsistencies that often preclude his being used as an accessible authority and reference. In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522) and *Lectures on Genesis* (1535-1536) Luther believes that intercourse, even within heterosexual marriage, is always sinful, occasions of shame and disgust, yet somehow excused by God's grace overlooked as fulfilling the divine command to procreate. In his *Sermon at the Marriage of Sigismund von Lindenau* (1545) Luther prays to God, "let us remain in the holy estate of matrimony, where thou dost wink at our infirmity." (von Lindenau, a priest, was publicly marrying after seven years

of secret marriage.) It seems evident to some scholars that Luther inconsistently deferred to Augustine's overwhelming negativity toward sex, but softened it by repeated reference to his own experience and general human experience as he understood them, together with insight from his frequent examination of Biblical texts. See: Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Martin Luther: Marriage, Procreation and Sola Scriptura," in *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* [Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985], pp. 123-137.

7. For an overview of the spectrum of opinions, see *Journey Together Faithfully, ELCA Studies on Sexuality: Part Two*, pp. 5, 32-35.

8. See "A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the ELCIC Regarding Same Sex Marriages," p. 3.