

November 2, 1999

Dear Friend,

As I said in my e-mail, I grimace every time this topic surfaces. No, not because I am afraid of it, nor that I don't know what to say. Rather it is because more often than not discussions or conversations around homosexuality become either opportunities for dogmatic diatribes or invitations to harden difficult theological, ethical, moral, and social positions.

Charles Price (the eminent theologian at both Virginia Theological Seminary and Harvard who died two weeks ago), my friend and former Rector at St. Michael's of the Valley in Ligonier, Pennsylvania, wrote eloquently in *Episcopal Life* (May 1996) about the Bishop Richter trial. "We must respond to the whole situation, though, at a deeper level. One of the undercurrents flowing within these arguments is a profound difference of opinion about how God is at work in our time."

I begin with a sadness in my heart that the tone and tenor of Episcopalians United is often brazen, defensive, and *right*. I do not know that there is a correct view on this issue. They do, however. I remember hearing that one way to tell a fascist is to see if they are sure they are right. I think probably there is not a single, simple morally acceptable view. Instead, I imagine that just as many people have differing natural eye sight or hearing, each person perceives the same thing quite individually. Which, of course, begs the question that you most certainly want answered: But what does God say?

There are exactly nine Biblical references to anything like homosexual acts in the Bible. They follow:

### **Hebrew Scriptures**

(Deu 23:17 NRSV) *None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute.*

(1 Ki 14:24 NRSV) *...there were also male temple prostitutes in the land. They committed all the abominations of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.*

(1 Ki 22:46 NRSV) *The remnant of the male temple prostitutes who were still in the land in the days of his father Asa, he exterminated.*

(2 Ki 23:7 NRSV) *He broke down the houses of the male temple prostitutes that were in the house of the LORD, where the women did weaving for Asherah.*

(Lev 18:19-23 NRSV) *You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her. You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion.*

(Lev 20:10-16 NRSV) *If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death. The man who lies with his father's wife has uncovered his father's nakedness; both of them shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. If a man lies with his daughter-in-law, both of them shall be put to death; they have committed perversion, their blood is upon them. If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity; they shall be burned to death, both he and they, that there may be no depravity among you. If a man has sexual relations with an animal, he shall be put to death; and you shall kill the animal. If a woman approaches any animal and has sexual relations with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them.*

### **New Testament**

(Rom 1:26-2:1 NRSV) *For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit,*

*craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.*

(1 Cor 6:9-11 NRSV) *Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

(1 Tim 1:9-10 NRSV) *This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.*

Surely you notice immediately that in the Gospels there is no reported opinion by Jesus about homosexuality. Perhaps you notice also that the Deuteronomy and Kings citations deal with prostitution by men and women. As for Leviticus, these are concerned with the *Holiness Code*, a code that quite explicitly prohibits homosexual acts. You might also want to know, however, that the *Holiness Code* prohibits the eating of raw meat, the planting of two different kinds of seed in the same field, and wearing garments made of two different kinds of yarn. Tattoos, adultery, and sexual intercourse during menstruation are likewise outlawed. (Peter J. Gomes, *NYT*, 8.17.92, a Baptist minister and professor of Christian morals at Harvard.) Perhaps we get to choose our scripturally based moral wrongs. The penalty most often is death. What about that?

As for Paul, he was evangelizing in the Greco-Roman world, a culture in which the predominant secular sensibilities ran counter to the Judeo-Christian spiritual idealism (Gomes). “He was against lust and sensuality in anyone, including homosexuals,” Gomes writes. “To say that homosexuality is bad because homosexuals are tempted to do morally doubtful things is to say that heterosexuality is bad because heterosexuals are likewise tempted.” Gomes also notes that the story

of Sodom and Gomorrah, so often equated with the evil of homosexuality, is not about sexual perversion and homosexuality at all. It is a story about in-hospitality (Luke 10.10-13) and the failure to care for the poor (Ezekiel 16.49-50).

*But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. (Luke 10.10-13)*

*This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it. (Ezekiel 16.49-50)*

Returning to the Greco-Roman world for a moment, homosexuality, prostitution, and public lust (orgies) were not only common place but accepted. It is not unlike the ancient Hebrew days when the Temple prostitutes were an important part of the worship ritual of the faithful. Note too, another "abomination" that was once acceptable and then banned was human sacrifice. The story of Abraham and Isaac can be read as the end to human sacrifice among God's chosen.

My point? The interpretation of how God would have God's people live is dynamic and changing. Each successive generation lives with and into a new relationship with God. The Bible is the story of that evolving relationship; and the relationship continues to evolve. I call your attention to Thomas Cahill's recent best seller *The Gifts of the Jews* for a decent treatise on this subject. I also need to say that two of the most important and visible changes that humankind has had (is having) with God concern slavery and the "value" of women in society.

Abolitionists battled Biblical literalists on the issue of the morality of slavery. But the Bible was clearly on the side of slavery! Only through a most bloody war was change wrought. And, consider that my grandmother was not even a voting citizen of this great land until 1922! What in the world was wrong with her? Other monumental changes in the way humanity experiences God's creation of the female

gender now sees their exclusion from the voting booth, workplace, air force, clergy stole, etc. as simply wrong. What took so long?

Still, I have not answered your question: But what does God say?

I cannot speak for what God says to you about homosexuality. I can only speak for what God says to me. It comes from Luke 6.36. My translation is: *Be compassionate as God is compassionate*. The moral imperative incarnate in Jesus is to *Be Love*. Not sometimes. Not here but never there. Not with these but not those. Compassion, it seems to me, is God's clear and unequivocal invitation to engage all people where ever they find themselves and where ever we find them. Jesus never asks us to fix anybody. But he certainly expects us to *love* them. That different people experience life—and so God in their life—individually is just one more example of God's creative beauty and wonder. Ultimately for this Christian person, I care most passionately that the love and affection that is God's love and affection is expressed kindly, considerately, and compassionately, be that between man and woman or homosexually. To judge the affections of individuals is to judge God's creative energy itself. Through faith I stand in the awe of God's wisdom and try not to impose my own limited sensibilities on the Divine.

Faithfully,

*Puck.*