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Sexuality, Hierarchy and Evangelicalism

by Kathleen E. Corley and Karen J. Torjesen

The Seventh Plenary Conference of the Evangelical Women's Caucus International, held in Fresno, CA, July 6-10, 1986, was the scene of a difficult and turbulent debate over the issue of gay rights. The debate resulted in the passage of a resolution which supported civil rights for homosexual persons and publicly acknowledged the lesbian minority of the EWCI.¹ The debate has rocked the organization, which had two years previously decided to limit its central focus to the issue of biblical feminism, exception being made for a stand in support of the ERA. The passage of the resolution caused some members to leave the organization and led other non-members to join. The debate has continued within local chapters of the EWCI. The text of the resolution runs as follows:

Whereas homosexual people are children of God, and because of the biblical mandate of Jesus Christ that we are all created equal in God's sight, and in recognition of the presence of the lesbian minority in the Evangelical Women's Caucus International, EWCI takes a firm stand in favor of civil rights protection for homosexual persons.

The discussion itself was a heated and emotional one, and included anguished testimonies of lesbian Christians, as well as parents and children of homosexual persons, concerning their struggles within their evangelical communities which had not always offered the acceptance and understanding that they so needed. Many voting members present did not want to force a statement on so sensitive an issue, which was evidenced by an attempt to table the resolution as had been done previously at the Sixth Plenary Conference of the EWCI in Wellesley, MA in 1984. Finally, after the motion to table the resolution lost by a narrow margin, the vote was called for and the members present passed the resolution. Eighty voted in favor of the resolution; sixteen were opposed to it; 25 abstained.

It seemed that many members of the EWCI instinctively felt the support of civil rights for homosexual persons was an issue of human rights that was intrinsically related to the issue of biblical feminism, but still hesitated to support a public stand by the EWCI on such a sensitive issue. This hesitancy of many members of the EWCI to take such a stand is indicative of a greater trend within the larger evangelical community to avoid the difficult theological questions concerning homosexuality and lesbianism, as well as other general issues of sexuality. Moreover, the vehement negative response to the resolution indicates such reactions may be based more on prejudice than on careful theological reflection. Anne Eggebroten, a founder of EWCI and a cosponsor of the resolution, comments: "The anger and emotion raised both within the EWCI and the larger evangelical world reveal how deeply important it is to us to believe that homosexuals are *not* children of God, are *not* equal, and do not deserve any protection, even in the

areas of civil rights."² As Christians in a world that has been deeply affected by Western Jewish and Christian tradition, we need to take a hard look at our own traditions, particularly when those traditions may be fostering injustices and are being used in support of political oppression of minority groups.

That the traditional rejection of homosexuality and lesbianism on religious grounds is being used in the public sphere to deny civil rights to homosexual persons is clearly evidenced in the recent decision of the United States Supreme Court upholding the right of the state of Georgia to maintain laws prohibiting the practice of sodomy (*Bowers vs. Hardwick*, 106 S. Ct. 2841, 1986). Chief Justice Burger, in his concurring opinion, repeated Chief Justice White's argument for the "ancient roots" of the anti-sodomy laws and further stated that, "Decisions of individuals relating to homosexual conduct have been subject to state intervention throughout the history of Western Civilization. Condemnation of those practices is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards." This argument reflects the brief presented by the state of Georgia which states:

No universal principle teaches that homosexual sodomy is acceptable conduct. To the contrary, traditional Judeo-Christian values proscribe such conduct. Indeed, there is no validation for sodomy found in the teaching of the ancient Greek philosophers Plato or Aristotle. More recent thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, have found homosexual sodomy no less unnatural . . . To find this tradition and the roots of modern conventional morality and law relative to the crime of sodomy, only a brief historical review is necessary. Sodomy was proscribed in the laws of the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:22) and in the writings of St. Paul (Romans 1:26, 27; I Corinthians 6:9, 10). Sodomy was a capital crime in ancient Rome under the Theodosian law of 390 A.D. and under Justinian. Sodomy was proscribed by the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas. Sodomy was prosecuted as heretical in the ecclesiastical courts throughout the Middle Ages. During the English Reformation when powers of the ecclesiastical courts were transferred to the King's courts, the first English statute criminalizing sodomy was passed.³

This hailing of "traditional moral values" was repeated in various Amicus briefs in support of the petitioner, such as those of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, Concerned Women for America, and the Rutherford Institute. It was therefore on the basis of Western Jewish and Christian moral tradition that the Supreme Court of the United States felt that the continuance of the state anti-sodomy laws was justified.

The response of the official religious bodies submitting Amicus briefs (Presbyterian Church U.S.A., The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, The American Friends Service Committee, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Office for Church and Society of the United Church of Christ, and the American Jewish Congress) did little to combat the traditional prejudices against homosexuality reflected in the briefs in support of the petitioner, unlike the brief of the American Psychological Association and American Public Health Association.

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tion, which cited recent and ongoing research within these professional organizations that challenged notions of homosexuality as an illness or disorder.⁴ It is unfortunate that the religious organizations did not have the support of modern theological reflection and research to dispute those arguments in support of the anti-sodomy laws that were primarily founded in the religious heritage of United States. This lack betrays the need for theologians, biblical scholars and religious ethicists to undertake research into the roots of legal prohibitions against same-sex relations that are found within the Bible itself and in subsequent theological reflection on the biblical texts throughout the history of the Western Church.

giving up his sexuality.⁸ (In Augustine's day the virginity movement was the most impressive and powerful expression of Christianity). Augustine's first experience of grace was the experience of special enabling power to renounce his sexuality.

According to Augustine, the sinfulness of sexuality can only be redeemed by the good of procreation which adds new members to the church, the body of Christ.⁹ All sexuality, however, even sexuality within marriage, remains sinful unless procreation is its object.¹⁰ So, for example, Augustine condemns sex after menopause, because only lust or passion could be its object.

Thomas Aquinas is the major theologian whose arguments

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The civil condemnation of homosexuality as reflected in these briefs and in the larger society is based on a set of theological beliefs that evolved over a period of a thousand years. In the arguments cited in the briefs we are actually looking at the tip of a theological iceberg. Therefore it is necessary to understand the massive theological structure which lies just below the surface of this set of theological briefs on which the social prohibition of same-sex relations is based.

The theological arguments against same-sex relations fall generally into three groups. Such relations are classified either as lustful, or as unnatural (contrary to natural law) or as falling short of full humanness (understood as the complementarity of male and female). We will briefly sketch the historical development of each one of these.

Before starting, we need to understand that all the Christian arguments against homosexuality and lesbianism are rooted in a theological definition of sexuality created at the beginning of the Western theological tradition. Thus before the theological arguments against same-sex relations can be considered, the theological understanding of sexuality must be reconstructed. The architect of the Christian theology of sexuality which has prevailed for fifteen centuries is Augustine. The most important legacy of Augustinian theology is the strange equation between sin and sexuality.

Augustine did his thinking on sexuality in the tradition of the Greek philosophers. They understood the soul, the center of the human person, to be composed of a rational and ruling part, reason, and an irrational part which must be ruled, namely the passions. In the perfected human being the rational part exercised perfect control over the passions. Augustine, the creator of the Christian doctrine of original sin, used this notion of the soul to explain the consequences of the fall. The rational part of the soul was no longer able to govern the passions, specifically sexual passion.⁵ Consequently, all of humanity descended from Adam inherits original sin, or the inability to rule the passions.

Augustine equates sexuality with sin.⁶ Sexuality itself is sinful because it is irrational passion: Augustine's idea of sex in the garden before the fall is that it was rational and therefore without passion!⁷ Since the fall, the expression of sexuality is not possible without irrational passion, which is the punishment of Adam and Eve's original disobedience.

Augustine himself struggled and agonized over his conversion to Christianity because in his understanding it meant

against same-sex relations are cited. He builds onto the framework of Augustine's theology of sexuality in two ways. First, homosexuality is sinful sexuality because lustful passion is exercised without the redeeming factor of procreation. It is "contrary to right reason" and "out of control."¹¹ Lechery, according to Thomas, is less sinful than same-sex relations because although it is lustful, it is still procreative.

Second, Aquinas takes Augustine's notion that procreation is the only redeeming feature of sinful sexuality and uses it to determine the divinely ordained purpose of sexuality. The divinely ordained purpose of sexuality is procreation; procreative sexuality is, then, "according to nature."¹² Thus same-sex relations and masturbation are contrary to nature. Thomas carries the argument further by saying that a sin against nature is a sin against God who created nature, and therefore homosexuality, lesbianism and masturbation are equivalent to sacrilege.¹³ Both of these theological arguments developed during a period when celibacy was the ideal. They are based on the premise that sexual passion is sinful and that to be truly human is to be rational, and rationality is expressed by ruling the passions.

The repudiation of the monastic system during the Reformation led to a rejection of celibacy as the ideal. Marriage was no longer seen as a "hospital for incurables to keep them from falling into graver sins" but as a holy obligation placed on all men and women.¹⁴ This led to a slightly modified vision of what it meant to be fully human. To be human is to exercise dominion. The primary form of this dominion was the rule of the male over the female, husband over wife.¹⁵ By the Augustine definition of human nature, women were not fully human because they were more irrational (sexual) than men. By the Reformation definition of human nature women were not fully human because they could not fully exercise dominion.

This ordering of male over female was understood to reflect the divine order established by the will of God and to reflect the rule of God over the world. This theological understanding of human nature underlies the arguments that homosexuality and lesbianism are wrong because they fail to achieve the ideal rule of humanity over the world, which entails the complementary relationship between a man and a woman, with the man as the ruling head over the woman. So Karl Barth, for example, argues that man cannot be man except in relationship to woman, and that woman cannot be woman except in

relationship to man.¹⁶ This is the theological basis for his condemnation of same-sex relations. The relationship between man and woman is not an interchangeable one; they have different natures. One is created to stimulate, lead and inspire, and the other is created to respond and follow.¹⁷ Thus they cannot be who they are except in relationship to each other—male and female. Homosexuality and lesbianism therefore violate this divinely instituted hierarchical order.

As heirs of this theological tradition, many within the modern Christian community feel unable to support any theological statement which moves toward a theological acceptance of homosexuality or lesbianism.¹⁸ The official position of the Catholic hierarchy housed at the Vatican, as expressed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, upholds the traditional condemnation of homosexual practices, and considers the current efforts to elicit the support of the clergy for legislation decriminalizing such practices as manipulative and detrimental to the common good of society. Bishops are therefore advised to keep the defense and promotion of family life as their uppermost concern when they assess proposed legislation. Moreover, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith advises that support “be withdrawn from any organizations that seek to undermine the teaching of the church.”¹⁹

Other Christian organizations try to keep the theological issues of same-sex relations separate from the civil issues. These organizations attempt to maintain a theological disapproval of the practice of same-sex love and then couple this disapproval with a call for tolerance of these practices in the public sphere in the name of human rights. This is evidenced in many official Protestant church statements on homosexuality and lesbianism, in various theological and exegetical writings, as well as in the statement of the EWCI itself.²⁰ The EWCI res-

olution was clearly an attempt to make a resolution which was limited to the issue of civil rights, to avoid the theological furor that would have arisen had the resolution made a clear bid for the theological acceptance of the practice of lesbianism. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, on the last day of the Seventh Plenary Conference, pointed out that the organization had “not made a theological judgement concerning homosexuality.”²¹ Due to the diverse nature of the EWCI membership, the resolution was limited to a call for civil rights to allow many members to remain within the organization and continue to participate in the ongoing discussion of the theological and exegetical issues on both the local and national level. The statement itself, however, has been taken by some as an implicit acceptance of lesbianism as a valid life-style for certain Christian women, although that was not the intent of the EWCI.

Important as it is for Christian organizations to support human rights in the secular sphere, even though they are not able to offer theological justification for those rights, in light of the current abuse of Christian religious authority within the dominant society, does not the Christian church also have a moral responsibility to begin to critique and reevaluate the theological and exegetical arguments that are being used to deny civil rights to homosexual persons? As the denial of human rights for homosexual persons is based on historically religious moral precepts, can the church hope to affirm and procure the civil rights for homosexual persons without being willing to examine the theological foundation within their own tradition upon which the anti-sodomy laws are based? One could argue that no hope of a solid basis for change on the civil level can take place without any support for that change on a theological level. Although it is important that Christians

Carl Henry on Hierarchy

There are a lot of references to women in *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5 and 6. Look *women* up in the index. I think women are great. Life would be terribly monotonous without them.

First, what is our question? Christ is the head of the church. Second, in New Testament times we have the universal priesthood of believers, male and female. Women are priests no less in that universal priests are all believers. So Paul is surely not a male chauvinist and anti-feminist when he says that the exclusive male priesthood of the Hebrew theocracy is gone forever. Christ has destroyed it. Next, prophecy in New Testament times, which is not prophecy in the Old Testament understanding but nevertheless prophecy, is the proclamation of Christ and belongs to women no less than to men in the New Testament era by the work of the Holy Spirit. “I shall pour out my Spirit upon all flesh and they shall prophesy.” And Peter says that in a sense, Pentecost is the beginning of this. That doesn’t mean inspired teaching but testimony of Christ in the New Testament. And certainly the New Testament says there is a service ministry from women, deaconesses, they’re in the New Testament. Service ministry as I understand it can be temporary or it can be permanent. I have no problem with deaconesses in the Lutheran churches as a life vocation and that sort of thing.

What that doesn’t settle is the question of women in the role of pastoral leadership in the churches, whether they should be ordained or not. Well, first the New Testament does not stipulate ordination; it does not mandate ordination for anybody. The cases of ordination are rather simple and they represent a recognition on the part of the church that the Holy

Spirit has set aside a person for a particular work. I don’t see any necessity in the New Testament for ordaining. You don’t have the same mandate—as you do in the great commission—for ordaining men who are called to ministry in the modern sense. That whole question of ordination in those universal terms is something that needs to be squared with the New Testament.

But in any case, I have read Paul many times and reread him within the last few years because I was on the committee of the Southern Baptist Convention when this issue of women’s ordination came on the floor. I cannot get around the fact that Paul seems to say that there is a basis in the order of creation and in the order of redemption for restricting the role of pastoral leadership in the church to the male or at least excluding the woman from that realm. And it is quite possible to get around this by saying this is a cultural accommodation. But if you do, I think there is a hermeneutical shift and I don’t think those who do it on the basis of an hermeneutical shift have clearly worked out the implications of what this implies for apostolic teaching generally. I might wish it were not so. I know gifted women and certainly have no objection to them teaching Sunday School classes. I know that the bottom would fall out of the mission field if it weren’t for the women who go, bless their hearts. I know many gals, even from the earlier years, seminarians and collegians who went out. They were as interested in marriage as we were. They just put it all onto the cross. So there I am. I’ve sort of wrestled with that in volume 5, I think in *God, Revelation and Authority*.

Taken from a conversation with Carl F.H. Henry by Diana Hochstedt Butler for TSF Bulletin.