

HOMOSEXUALITY: CHARTING A PASTORAL RESPONSE

By

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INTRODUCTION

Homosexuality may be defined as a definite erotic attraction to persons of one's own sex (Collins 1988, 280). It should be noted that there is a distinction between the orientation and the act.

Pastors and church leaders in the Caribbean and the world are today faced with the frightening reality that there are persons within the church and community who present a variety of homosexual experiences and orientations. Some of these persons are coming forward for help or family members are sharing the information with the intention of getting help for them, while others are establishing themselves into groups and are repeatedly calling for equality in the home, workplace, and church. One such group is the *Jamaica for Lesbians and Gays (J-FLAG)*.

The Evangelical church in Jamaica, for the most part, is opposed to this kind of sexual orientation. This opposition is expressed in many ways. In some cases these persons may be ridiculed, abused (physically or verbally) and even ostracised from

the community.

In this paper I will respond to the question, "What should be the appropriate response of a pastoral counsellor to a person found to have homosexual orientation and experience?" In order to answer the question I will discuss the historical and biblical perspectives of homosexuality, I will also examine the etiology and effects of homosexuality, and look at the implications for Pastoral care and counselling, paying close attention to interventative and preventative strategies.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The earliest account of homosexual behaviour seems to be found in ancient pagan religious practices (Buchanan 2000). It was believed that if a man added his maleness to a male god, by ejaculating semen into another man's anus at the shrine, it would multiply fertility.

Researchers agree that the Greek culture was the most accepting of homosexuality. Same-sex behaviour between adult men and boys was widely accepted. Homosexual relations between Hellenistic scholars (e.g. Plato, Socrates) and their students were considered a natural and valuable part of the young boys' education.

The Roman culture also embraced homosexuality as a lifestyle. It is said that fourteen of the first fifteen emperors of Rome were homosexuals and that homosexual marriage was permissible among the upper class in the Roman Empire (King 2002, 279). It was during the sixth century A.D. that the Roman Empire banned homosexuality. This was due, mostly, to the spread and influence of Christianity. Western Europe, at this time, experienced a gradual change in its attitude towards homosexuals, as the Catholic Church, which at that time was very powerful, stood opposed to it.

The rise of anti-homosexual attitudes towards the end of the Roman Empire and the rise of the Middle Ages changed when

various states within the empire emerged. The rise of intellectualism and the Protestant Reformation saw homosexuals being punished by castration, death, and confiscation of properties. The French Revolution brought an end to criminal laws regarding homosexual activities in 1810; England abolished the death penalty for acts of homosexuality in 1861.

The days leading up to the twentieth century continued to stigmatise and treat homosexuals as deviants. In the mid 1950s the Church of England commissioned one Sherwin Bailey to investigate this matter. His investigation came out in favour of homosexuals. This marked the beginning of varying views in modern culture on this minority group. The three days of demonstration in Greenwich Village, New York, after a police raid in 1969, is considered to be the beginning of the Gay rights movement. The American Psychiatric Association took the decision to drop homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1973 (Sue, Sue, and Sue 1997, 292).

THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Bible is not silent on the subject of homosexuality. There are a number of passages that refer to homosexuality, and they have been generally viewed as seeing the act as detestable in the sight of God. Some of these are Gen. 19:1-13, Judg. 19, Lev. 18:22, 20:13, Rom. 1:26-27, 1 Cor. 6:9-10 and 1 Tim. 1:8-11 (Landis 1997, 45-55).

These passages, commencing in 1955 with Bailey, are now being reinterpreted to suggest that God is not against homosexuality. The Genesis and Judges passages that traditionally were viewed as depicting the judgement of God against homosexuality are reinterpreted as the breach of Eastern hospitality laws. The Leviticus passages that openly condemn homosexual practices are now viewed as referring to homosexual act in religious ceremonies and not referring to a stable, permanent, monogamous homosexual

relationship. The Romans 1 text is viewed as a condemnation of heterosexual persons who engage in homosexual acts, since these persons are engaging in what is unnatural to them. The Corinthian and Timothy texts in the Greek are said to be unclear and may forbid only pederasty.

In my own thinking, the reinterpretation of these passages lacks an objective, critical exegetical analysis of the texts in question, resulting in the apparent neutralisation of the biblical injunction against homosexuality. Jones (1993, 20) suggests that

There are only two ways one can neutralize the biblical witness against homosexual behaviour by gross misinterpretation or by moving away from a high view of scripture.

Although the foregoing scriptures are important, they do not necessarily form the core for understanding or even making a decision on whether or not homosexual behaviours are permissible. The core of scriptures' negative assessment of homosexual behaviours is the positive biblical vision of sexuality (Jones 1993, 20). One must, therefore, turn to the scriptures to acquire a working knowledge of what the Bible really teaches about sex.

The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 provide the basis for heterosexual relations (Stott 1993, 344). Stott argues that in chapter 1 the equality of the sexes is affirmed, since both shared the image of God and the stewardship of the earth. The second chapter affirms the complementarity of the sexes, which constitutes the basis for heterosexual marriages. He says that in this account three fundamental truths emerge: the need for relationship, the divine provision to meet this human need, and the institution of marriage.

This explains the mystery of heterosexual intimacy... it is much more than a union of bodies... it is the blending of complementary personalities... the complementarity of male and female sex organs is only a symbol at the physical level of a much deeper spiritual complementarity. (Stott 1993, 348)

The biblical position on homosexuality was not given an exhaustive treatment in Stott's work. It is however clear from that which was stated that the bible does not present homosexuality as an ideal but rather as a deviation from God's ideal for sex. God's original intent for sex was that it takes place within the confines of marriage and that it be between man and woman.

ETIOLOGY

When one attempts to discuss the etiology of homosexuality, one has to bear in mind the complexity of the issue and the fact that there is no definitive answer to this question. Apart from the most simplistic, dogmatic or ideological position, it is now generally accepted that the cause of homosexuality is not known with any certainty (Taylor 2003, 1).

The current etiological debate focuses on three main areas: sociological, physiological, and psychological causes (Beck 1997, 83-97). Sociological studies focus on how families and family life may account for the eventual development of homosexuality. Physiological studies try to find evidence for innate biological traits that lead to homosexuality. The focus of psychological studies is give psychological explanation for the cause of homosexuality. Researches in these areas have not been able to definitively answer the question relative to the cause of homosexuality.

A growing number of persons argue, with some measure of comfort, that the causes of homosexuality are multifactoral. According to Satinova (1999, 13),

...homosexuality is multifactoral; it is neither exclusively biological nor psychological but results from... a combination of genetic predisposition, intrauterine influence... postnatal environment, parental and sibling behaviour, [and] a series of reinforced choices occurring at critical phases in development.

Gibbon (1999, 87-90) points out that there are certain conflicts and risk factors that can result in homosexuality. In men these can be weak masculine identity, mistrust of women and narcissism. In women these can be mistrust of men's love, weak feminine identity and loneliness.

He argues that weak masculine identity in men may cause weak eye-hand coordination, a poor emotional relationship with father, a poor estimate of one's own body and an obsession with the look of other men's body. Mistrust of women may be caused by difficult or demanding relationships with a mother or other women. Narcissism is all about his own obsession with self.

In women, mistrust of men, may be caused by an insensitive, abusive father or a traumatic experience. The actions of an emotionally distant or non-affirming mother, rejection by peers and a poor view of one's body can result in a weak feminine identity.

From a clinical perspective, it may be argued that homosexuality may be caused by a number of developmental and social issues and may be viewed as a learned behaviour. It is more a result of compound nurture rather than nature (Chisholm 2003). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that since it is learned it can be modified.

EFFECTS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Homosexuality affects individuals in different ways. It may affect a person's lifestyle, self-concept, and interpersonal and family relationships (Collins 1988, 292). With regard to lifestyle, some homosexuals may be open to sharing about their orientation or activities, while others suppress this with the hope that it may not surface. This may lead to anger, fear of rejection, guilt and even pain. In the Jamaican context and especially church this may be due, at least partly, to the homophobic attitude that exists in our culture. Rediger supports this by saying:

The consequences of homophobia are that homosexuals ... live an excruciating ordeal of fear, anger and guilt regarding their orientation and the attitude of the church towards it. (Rediger 1990, 80)

With regard to self-concept, Collins argues that with the recent openness about homosexuality, some gays have concluded not only that being gay is good, but also that to be gay is to be superior to others. He points out that a good number of them may suffer from insecurity and low self esteem. This he says is characteristic of any one who may be different from the majority (Collins 1988, 292). Guilt, hopelessness, inner anger are all emotions that have been observed in homosexuals. In many cases these persons resolve to maladaptive practices to address these emotions. Studies have revealed that some gays ingest or plaster the faeces of their partner over their bodies and even bathe in the urine of their same-sex partner (Chisholm 2003). These, in my own thinking, are abnormal practices and seem to be attempts to address some of the negative emotions that they may experience.

Same sex relationships are generally short term. Some have confessed to having up to a thousand same-sex partners during their lifetime (King 2002, 285). This in my thinking can be considered promiscuous. If an individual from a heterosexual marriage is of this orientation and keeps it hidden, then when discovered it generally puts a strain on the marriage (Collins 1988, 286). It is also true that homosexuals find it difficult to relate to their parents. The feeling here then is that the overall effects of homosexuality on persons could be deemed as negative.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELLING MINISTRY

The foregoing material forces one to draw the conclusion that homosexuality is certainly an issue that warrants an urgent and appropriate response from the Christian church.

I am of the view that the response should be one that express the concern and compassion of Christ as well as demonstrate a commitment to speaking the truth about homosexual orientation and behaviour. The underpinning philosophy of this response is that the fall of man resulted in the impairment of the *Imago Dei* in man and consequently the divided self with its needs. Like all sinners, homosexuals choose the wrong means to have these needs met. The Church must, therefore, understand this and treat them with the same compassion and concern with which they would treat other sinners. This concern and compassion must exclude ridicule, stigmatisation and hostility. It should include love, care and understanding (Mixon 1979, 163-183). I firmly believe that pastoral counsellors should also include appropriate interventative and preventative strategies in his response.

Prior to intervening, a Pastoral counsellor must understand that a fully developed homosexual identity, complete with homosexual lifestyle and practice, may be difficult to change, though possible (Wilson 1988, 54-72). The counsellor should be careful to make objective assessments of where persons are in their homosexual orientation or experience before attempting to intervene. A Five-Stage Assessment Continuum proposed by Gardner, Barber and Kellogg (1993, 27-35) could be used as a guideline.

Stage one is called the emotional dependency, stage two, homosexual event resulting from emotional dependency, stage three, homosexual tendencies, stage four, clearly acknowledged homosexual orientations, and level five, overt or covert homosexual lifestyle.

Pastoral counsellors can urge homosexuals to practice listening prayer that responds to God's voice through Scripture as well as silence (Beck 1997, 87). Pastoral counsellors can also use gender-

matched, gender-specific psychotherapy as a part of his or her intervention strategy (Beck 1997, 87). This means that the homosexual would form a healthy same-sex bond with the Pastoral counsellor that would repair that same deficit from childhood and would allow the individual to proceed with further development toward heterosexuality.

When it comes to preventative strategies, the church and its pastoral counsellor(s) must speak the truth about homosexuality. Providing biblical and clinical education, on sex and sexuality, for the entire church can do this (Chisholm 2003). Pastoral counsellors, along with their parishioners, should create and foster a climate of honesty and sensitivity on sex and sexuality (Chisholm 2003). Churches should also encourage the building and maintaining of healthy family relationships (Collins 1988, 286). I also believe that the church should encourage same-sex friendships in the context of other mature accountability relationships.

CONCLUSION

The historical data presented in this paper have demonstrated that homosexuality is a resurgence of activities and attitudes that have been present in other eras. It is also clear that the act, like other manifestations of sexual immorality, is reprehensible in the sight of God and that it can have debilitating effects on individuals and families.

The church should, therefore, respond to this phenomenon with urgency and appropriateness. The response should express the concern and compassion of Christ, and also demonstrate a commitment to speaking the truth about homosexual orientation and behaviour.



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