

A Theology and Ethics of Homosexuality

A digest of Dr. James B. Nelson's article
"Sources for Body Theology: Homosexuality as a Test Case"
in Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate, editor Jeffrey S. Siker, 1994

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For the full article on line: <http://faculty.plts.edu/gpence/2490/html/nelson.htm>

Dr. James B. Nelson, who, in 2012, was named professor emeritus of United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, Minnesota, USA, is widely known for his writings on the ethics and theology of human sexuality. His 1978 book Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology is still recognized as a major contribution to the topic.

However we label it, homosexuality is the most divisive issue the churches of America have encountered, or evaded, since slavery. Yet, the basic issue is not homosexuality but rather human sexuality.

The issues and questions around homosexuality are many, but the paramount concern is this: what is our theological-ethical perspective on sexual orientation in general, and homosexuality in particular? The approach to take to arrive at a theological-ethical perspective is to draw upon the four major sources of interpretation: Scripture, church tradition, reason, and experience.

SCRIPTURE

Scripture says nothing about homosexuality as an orientation, nor does it address the present day question of homosexual relations between adults committed to each other in mutuality and love. The best of biblical scholarship agrees with Walter Wink's conclusion: "There is no biblical sex ethic. The Bible knows only a love ethic which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period." The sexual *moralities* endorsed by scripture are inconsistent and are expressed in many different forms. Therefore, there is no biblical sex ethic, that is to say, there is no direct guidance from scripture about specific sexual behaviors. This is as true for heterosexuality as it is for homosexuality.

John Calvin discovered much to his consternation that sexual intercourse between unmarried consenting heterosexual adults has no explicit prohibition in either the Hebrew scripture or the New Testament. In fact, the Song of Solomon celebrates one such relationship. And at various points in the Bible, there are endorsements of sexual practices that most of us would now reject: women as sexual property of men; the uncleanness of menstrual blood and semen; proscriptions against intercourse during menstruation; and the acceptance of polygamy, levirate marriage, concubinage, and prostitution.

TRADITION

Postbiblical tradition offers no more unambiguous guidance on specific sexual expressions than does scripture. Instead, tradition raises questions that challenge conventional wisdom and refocuses our perspectives.

First, the church has been inconsistent throughout its history in its condemnation of homosexuality. According to Yale historian John Boswell, the church did not condemn homosexuality for the first twelve centuries except from the third to sixth centuries when the church, not for theological reasons but in accordance with governmental regulations, did. At the end of the twelfth century hostility and general intolerance reappeared, but only after an eleventh century resurgence of gay-lesbian literature and leadership in both secular society and the church.

Second, heterosexual marriage has not always been central as the norm for Christian sexuality. Singleness, particularly celibacy, was prized above marriage until the sixteenth century Reformation. Unions of gay or lesbian Christians were celebrated in some churches earlier than heterosexual marriages.

Third, procreation has not always been deemed primary to the meaning and expression of Christian sexuality, an important observation since procreative sex as the meaning of human sexuality is often used to judge lesbians and gays adversely since their sexuality is inherently nonprocreative. Beginning in the seventeenth century, some among the Puritans, Anglicans, Quakers and others, started teaching that love, intimacy, mutuality and not procreation, were central to the divine intention for sexuality. Children were an added blessing, not the central purpose of the marriage. For three hundred years most Protestants have affirmed this and, in practice, so have numerous Catholics, even without the approval of the Vatican.

REASON

The various sciences (biology, psychology and the social sciences) provide important insights for our theological reflection and understanding of Scripture. We honor our God-given reason when we eschew the use of double standards in reasoning and do justice to the widest range of data. The following three discussions illustrate the ways in which the uses of reason, including the sciences, can shed significant light on questions of sexual orientation.

First, most sexologists have validated Kinsey's 1948 continuum and have added other dimensions to it. Kinsey was primarily interested in behaviors (genital experiences culminating in orgasm). Later sexologist, adding other dimensions of orientation – such as fantasy, desire, social attraction or emotional preference – conclude it is probable that none of us is exclusively heterosexual or homosexual. Most of us have more bisexual capacities than we have realized

or than we have been taught in a bifurcating society. This recognition is of particular importance when we come to try to understand some of the dynamics of homophobia.

Second, two facts seem quite clear: our sexual orientation is given, not freely chosen, and our sexual orientation is established early in life, between the ages of two and five. Therapies that attempt to change persons from homosexual to heterosexual are discredited by reputable scientists. Therapies may change certain behaviors but they will not change deep feelings and will most likely produce great psychic and emotional confusion. These facts, too, are relevant to the theological-ethical questions.

Third, stereotypes about gay men and lesbians wither under scientific scrutiny. Two examples will suffice. Homosexual males are no more likely to abuse children sexually than are heterosexual males. This has been thoroughly proven. And, linking emotional instability or immaturity to homosexuality is no longer scientifically tenable.

EXPERIENCE

Our individual and shared experiences – a finding of those things which nurture wholeness and those things which are destructive to our best humanity – is the fourth and last area of insight by which we may validate our scriptural insights.

Homophobia and heterosexism provide key studies for illustrating the uses of experience in doing a theology and ethics of sexual orientation. Heterosexism, for example, is not simply a private psychological dynamic but, like racism and sexism, is also structured deeply into our institutions and cultural patterns.

But my focus here is an accounting of on my own awareness of the homophobia I found in myself and the factors and reasons I saw as underlining and fostering my homophobia. In my early forties, upon the occasion of working closely with a number of articulate gay men and lesbians in volunteer work in urban ministers, I was challenged, by them, to examine my stereotypes and my homophobia.

What is homophobia? The term refers to deep and irrational fears of same-sex attraction and expression or, in the case of lesbians and gay men, internalized self-rejection. As I processed my own experience, I discovered the following underpinnings of my own homophobia and that the several ways by which homosexuals seemed caused me fear was, in actuality, a fear of myself:

1. Homophobia is particularly an acute problem for males – it certainly was for me. Gay men with their perceived ill-defined masculinity and lesbians who did not need a man to validate or complete them as persons, threatened my own masculinity.

2. Gays threatened to “womanize” me, that is, to treat me simply as a sexual object, a desirable body – not a full person (a threat to any male in a sexist society where men have higher status). How the tables were turned: this was the way that men had treated women for so many years.
3. We all have a mix of heterosexual and homosexual capacities. I might be involved in projecting on to gays, and blaming gays, for having more obviously what I, to some extent, may also experience. Our rigidly bifurcating society teaches us to deny the existence of anything homosexual in ourselves. We, therefore, vigorously defend against all same-sex feelings in ourselves by projecting our feelings onto others and blaming those others for having, more obviously than ourselves, same-sex feelings.
4. The stereotyping of gays as very sexual people was cause for sexual envy. Seeing gays fundamentally not as persons with richly multifaceted lives, but almost exclusively as sexual actors, I envied them for having what appeared to be a life with more sex than mine. I envied them for the virility they seemed to have, a key sign of authentic masculinity, so I had been taught.
5. I had to evaluate if my intimacy envy and consequent resentment were part of my homophobia. Gay men closely bonded with each other, something I wanted, too. Male-to-male emotional intimacy.
6. I came to realize that, as a male who was conditioned to repress most bodily feelings and to armor myself against any emotional or physical vulnerability, I was more distanced from my sexuality than I cared to admit. I discovered I was more alienated from my body than I had previously acknowledged. Gay men and lesbians, because they represented sexuality in a fuller way, made me aware of my own negative attitudes about sexuality.
7. The fear of death may sound like a strange contributor to homophobia, but it is likely there. Children are our immortality. The thought of childless persons awakens fear of death. And while many gays and lesbians have produced and parented children, they stand as a key symbol of nonprocreating people.

Homophobia thrives when people are cut off from their own bodily feelings and when reality is divided into two opposing camps – heterosexual and homosexual. Homophobia thrives when all males must prove their manhood, and when all people in general must prove their worth. A deep fear of sexuality and pleasure fuel the fires of homophobia, as does the resentment and anger of those who are deprived of sexual pleasure. And, wherever there is fear of death, homophobia can thrive. Though its varied dynamics are complex, the root cause of homophobia is always fear.

Our awareness of these dynamics in ourselves gives us heightened self-critical consciousness, an important ingredient of theological-ethical reflection.