

Homosexuality and the Bible

An Anabaptist Perspective

Western District Conference Workshop

August 3, 2013

Preliminaries and Disclaimers



- Not addressing sexuality in its broader dimensions
- More narrowly focusing on homosexuality and the Bible
- Aware of how contentious this issue is/has been
- Not: how all Anabaptists see this issue
- Not: how all Anabaptists *should* see this issue
- Though I do commend my reading and perspective, about which I will be frank

Preliminaries and Disclaimers



- Aware that some of you may disagree with me and may even not appreciate this presentation: I respect and honor your right to do so.
- *I am not sufficiently aware of what I am not aware of:* how this issue may have become personal for you, what toes I may be stepping on.
- I beg forgiveness in advance for any ways in which I may unintentionally offend this afternoon.

Preliminaries and Disclaimers



- I realize that I am personally “at variance” with the larger church on this issue in at least two respects:
 - I think we should be taking the Bible far more seriously in this conversation than we have.
 - I think God blesses gay and lesbian covenants and that we are wrong if we refuse to do so ourselves.

My Story



- Early 1980s, MCs and GCs commissioned a study on human sexuality.
- Bethlehem '83 (first joint MC/GC assembly), initial report.
- Controversial!
- Pastoring in Pennsylvania and attended Bethlehem '83.
- “I wish I knew some gays or lesbians.”
- A 19-year-old in the congregation came out to me, leading to useful discussions.

My Story



- In 1990s served as a faculty rep on the informal gay/lesbian support group at Bluffton University.
- Regularly read the BMC listserv, where I got to know more gays and lesbians.
- Many gays and lesbians are in monogamous, long-term relationships, together for 20, 30, 40, even 50 years.
- Some lesbians and many gay men don't want to be gay. Some have tried hard to adopt heterosexuality, usually failing miserably.

My Story



- Many gays and lesbians are seriously committed Christians,
- ... *despite the church* and its lack of support.
- This topic scares the bejeebies out of a lot of people!
- Prepared a handout on all the biblical passages on homosexuality for “Introduction to Biblical Literature”
- In 1996 a “thank you” letter from a graduate who was gay
- Decided to post my handout on homosexuality and the Bible on the Internet: my first web page

Two Web Pages



Available at <http://ljohns.ambs.edu/glbmenu.htm>

Resources on Homosexuality

- [Statements of Mennonite Conferences, Boards, and Committees on Homosexuality \(1985-2004\)](#)
- [Homosexuality and the Bible: A Case Study in the Use of the Bible for Ethics](#)



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Collection of Church Statements on the Issue



Statements of Mennonite Conferences, Boards, and Committees on Homosexuality (1985–2004)

1985	Human Sexuality in the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue , commissioned by the General Conference Mennonite Church Triennial Sessions in 1980 and by the Mennonite Church General Assembly in 1981.
1986 1987	The Saskatoon and Purdue Resolutions . Side-by-side comparison of the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church Resolutions on Human Sexuality . The General Conference Mennonite Church resolution was adopted in 1986 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; the Mennonite Church resolution was adopted in 1987 at Purdue University (West Lafayette, Indiana).
1991	Summary Statements by [the Mennonite Church] General Board on Homosexuality
1992	[Mennonite Church] Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministry memo detailing actions accepting the Final Report of the Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns and submitting it to the General Board for information and counsel
1992	Final Report: Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns

Quotations with More Restrictive and More Open Interpretations Side-by-Side



Homosexuality and the Bible

A Case Study in the Use of the Bible for Ethics


[Loren L. Johns](#)


Introduction

Homosexuality has proved to be one of the more intractable issues the Mennonite Church has faced. Official church documents clearly **call for celibacy** on the part of gays and lesbians while also calling the church to **repent of its judgmental attitudes** and to **remain in loving dialogue** as we continue to study the Bible on this issue. These calls are in some tension with each other. Meanwhile, loving dialogue on this issue is rare in the Mennonite Church even though the [Purdue and Saskatoon statements](#) call for it. May God have mercy on us! I believe that individual church members must recognize and honor the authority of church discernment (Matthew 18:15-20) even as the church humbly admits its limited capacity to understand God's will on this side of heaven.

Article 19 in the [Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective](#) says:

We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life. Christian marriage is a mutual relationship in Christ, a covenant made in the context of the church. According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship. Marriage is meant for sexual intimacy, companionship, and the birth and nurture of children.

		
<h1>Three-Column Presentation</h1>		
Passage	Considerations suggesting that God does <i>not</i> bless homosexual unions	Considerations suggesting that God <i>does</i> bless homosexual unions
<p>Genesis 19</p> <p>The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." ³But he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. ⁴But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; ⁵and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring</p>	<p>In later biblical tradition, Sodom and Gomorra were widely recognized symbols of immorality and of the judgment of God that falls on such immorality. Sodom and Gomorra are symbols of God's terrifying judgment in Deut. 29:23; Isa. 1:9-10; 13:19; Jer. 49:18; 50:40; Ezek. 16:53-58; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9; Matt. 10:15; Luke 17:29; Rom. 9:29; 2 Pet. 2:6; Jude 7 ... symbols of shameless immorality or unbridled sin in general in Isa. 3:9; Lam. 4:6; Ezek. 16:48; Jude 7 ... and symbols of foolish impotent rebellion (or unresponsiveness) against God, see Deut. 32:32; Jer. 23:14; Matt. 11:23-24; Luke 10:12; Rev. 11:8. The word <i>sodomite</i> has become, in the English language, a synonym for one</p>	<p>The inhabitants of Sodom displayed a despicable form of sexual immorality. Nevertheless, this passage cannot be construed as condemning loving, committed, monogamous homosexual relationships. The sin displayed in this story is the sin of homosexual (gang) rape, possessive lust, and sexual abuse. Homosexuality itself is not the focus of these cities' later notoriety within the biblical tradition -- at least not in all cases (see the passages listed in the middle column). This is aptly demonstrated in Ezekiel 16:49: "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." And in v. 51, Ezekiel says that in comparison with sinful Judah, Sodom and Gomorra were righteous. Some Jewish writings indicate that the sinful desire behind the Sodomites' lust for Lot's guests was because they were <i>angels</i>, not because they were <i>men</i> (see Testament of Naphtali 3:4-5). This story reflects the sacred value placed in Middle</p>

	
<h1>My Story</h1>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My web page has saved lives . . . at least according to some emails of gratitude that I have received. • When I moved from Bluffton University to AMBS in 2000, what to do? • In conversation with the president and others, decided to move it • Several constructive conversations with conservatives around the church, from a bishop in Lancaster Conference to the moderator of Franklin Conference to a conservative lay leader in First Mennonite of Berne. • Face-to-face conversations so much more helpful than third-party emails or even direct email "conversations." 	

My Story



- In Fall 2000 or Spring 2001, Nelson Kraybill (AMBS President) and I (AMBS Academic Dean) received invitation to lead workshop on homosexuality and the Bible at Assembly 2001.
- We considered, talked about it, sought wisdom from the AMBS Board, which said, “No, it’s not worth the risk to AMBS.”
- So we declined the invitation.
- No question about the reality of that risk, yet I have wondered whether AMBS might have served the church better had we taken that risk.

Examples of Risks Taken



- November 2000: One bishop to other bishops in Lancaster Conf.:
- We certainly don’t want Lancaster Conference to join MC USA! Look at who they have as dean at AMBS (citing my web page on the Bible and homosexuality).
 - Led to a useful face-to-face conversation in the man’s home.
- A Franklin Conference email to the President at AMBS:
- When are you going to start controlling your faculty (citing my web page on the Bible and homosexuality)?
 - Phone conversation: “Have you read the whole thing?”
 - I’ve looked at it, . . . but no, I haven’t read the whole thing.”
 - If you are going to write to the seminary to complain about it, don’t you think you should have read the whole thing carefully?
 - “Yes, I do . . . and I will!”

Learning from Gays and Lesbians



- On BMC listserv one throw-away comment at the end of a long, eloquent discussion of something important.
- “Well, I guess it’s time for me to practice my gay lifestyle now.
- “By that I mean, it’s time for me to brush my teeth, put on my pajamas, and study my Sunday school lesson for tomorrow.”
- I am a gay man . . . and this is my lifestyle.
- Wonderful statement: how silly a phrase like “homosexual lifestyle,” as if we know what it means!

What Does the Bible Say?



- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| • Gen 19:1-11 | • 2 Sam 1:25-26 |
| • Lev 18:19-23 | • Matt 18:15-20 |
| • Lev 20:10-16 | • Matt 19:3-12 |
| • Jdg 19:16-30 | • Acts 10:9-20 |
| • 1 Sam 18:1-4;
20:17-18, 41 | • Rom 1:18-32 |
| | • 1 Cor 6:9-11 |



Summary

- The Bible speaks with one voice on homosexuality, condemning it.
- The Bible clearly condemns “sexual immorality” and illustrates it without actually defining the concept.
- The Bible treats homosexuality as an example of sexual immorality, never treating:
 - The issue as a matter of moral discernment: is it right or wrong? It assumes and declares that same-sex “acts” are wrong.
 - Long-term committed relationships. Did the biblical writers know anything about this possibility?
 - The relationship between homosexuality as an “issue” and human love.



Three Crucial Issues

1. How significant is the Bible’s silence on these rather important issues?
2. How and why do we treat some parts of the Holiness Code more lightly? (The Bible speaks *univocally* about the sin of wearing mixed fabrics, or of charging interest.)
 - OT perspective: Lend, but do not expect payment of interest.
 - NT perspective: Lend, but do not expect payment of interest *or* principal.
 Clarification: I am **not** saying that since we don’t take the Bible seriously on *some* topics, we should not do so on *any* topic; I **am** saying that if we truly want to take the Bible seriously, we should pursue this question diligently.
3. Is there any guidance within the Bible itself about how to think about large paradigm shifts in discerning God’s will?



Some Tentative Answers

How significant is the Bible's silence on these rather important issues (no actual discernment; no consideration of relationships; no consideration of love)?

- I think it is quite significant.
- Most crucial, central question: “Does God [ever] bless same-gender commitments and covenants?”
- How do we “extend” the teaching of the Bible to issues it does not address?
 - Do we begin, for instance, with the closely related issue of same-gender *sex*?
 - Or do we begin with the closely related issue of human *love*, given its centrality to Christian faith and the fact that God *is* love?



The Torah

The Bible talks about many things as an “abomination” (*toeḇah*):

- Egyptians eating with Hebrews (Gen 43:32) [to the Egyptians]
- Raising sheep (Gen 46:34) [to the Egyptians]
- Offering sacrifices to Yahweh (Exod 8:26) [to the Egyptians]
- A male lying with a male as with a woman (Lev 18:22) [unexpressed]
- Cross-dressing (Deut 22:5) [to God]
- Putting money earned in prostitution into the offering (Deut 23:18) [to God]
- Sowing discord in the family (Prov 6:16) [unexpressed]

The variety and contexts suggest that cultural sensibilities were in part the reason for understanding something as “abominable.”

Accounting for Cultural Sensibilities



Perhaps the most difficult challenge in using the Bible for ethical discernment is how to account for differing and changing cultural sensibilities.

Evidence that the cultural meaning of dispensing with the veil was a serious problem in Corinth . . .

But not in Goshen, Indiana, today, or Newton, Kansas.

We too easily find “convincing” those biblical commandments that seem reasonable in our culture.

We too easily find “unconvincing” those commandments that seem out of touch with current culture.

We must not simply follow culture’s cues, yet how to account for it and speak into culture a word of truth and grace . . . is difficult!

Are Big Paradigm Shifts Biblical?



- Is there any guidance within the Bible itself about how to think about large paradigm shifts in discerning God’s will?
- In a word, yes.
- **John 16**¹² “I have much more to say to you, but you can’t handle it now. ¹³ However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you in all truth.
- The gnarliest problem faced by the Early Church: Must Gentile men who become Christians be circumcised?
- What does the Bible say?

Genesis 17



⁹ God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.
¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. ¹³ Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

What was it about this passage that the Early Church did not understand?

Discernment is Hard Work



- Discerning the mind of Christ on this matter was not easy.
- The two perspectives to be weighed:
 - Conservatives: “We have got to go with what the Bible says!” (Gen 17).
 - Liberals: “We have to pay attention to what God is doing in the world today, and listen to the voice of the Spirit.”
- Today we know that the liberals were right . . . but at the time it must have been difficult to discern.

What Does the Bible Say?



The apostles called for a consultation in Jerusalem.

1. They told stories about how the Holy Spirit was working to save the Gentiles, drawing on their *experience* of what God was doing (Acts 15:3, 4, 8, 10, 12, 14).
2. They *debated* with one another and *listened* to one another, using their *reason* to determine what the Holy Spirit was trying to say (Acts 15:6, 7, 9, 12).
3. They looked for ways in which *Scripture* was in line with the current activity of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:15-18), though they did not always take the “obvious” passages at face value.
4. They looked for what they could learn from *tradition*, on one side *and* the other (Acts 15:1, 21).

So if we are to adhere strictly to what the Bible says, we will take seriously how experience, reason, Scripture, and tradition all help us hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church today.

How Does an Anabaptist Perspective Help?



Disclaimer: Maybe it doesn't. Suggestion: Maybe it does.

1. *The Spirit and the Word* (or the Two-Fold Word)
 - It is not enough to go with the surface text of the Bible; we must be attentive to how and what the Holy Spirit is speaking.
2. *The Rule of Paul* (congregational interpretation)
 - Congregations have the right and the duty of discerning God's voice on this issue.

How Does an Anabaptist Perspective Help?



3. ***The Rule of Christ*** (the discipling role of the church)
 - Although congregations should refrain from making universal pronouncements, they can and should make decisions that are binding and loosing for their own context.
4. ***Christocentrism*** (Christ as lens for Scripture)
 - Jesus gladly challenged lines of cultural sensibility for the sake of loving one of God's creatures, even as he encouraged the avoidance of immorality.

How Does an Anabaptist Perspective Help?



5. ***The Priority of the New Testament*** (more authoritative than OT)
 - The centrality of love in the NT suggests, *at minimum*, that conferences should not be expelling congregations over this issue, and that congregations should not be separating from conferences.
6. ***Perspicuity*** (the essential clarity of Scripture)
 - The responsibility of reading and interpreting Scripture belongs to average Christians, even though they will gladly hear from theologians, historians, biblical scholars, psychologists, sociologists, etc., in discerning the issue.

How Does an Anabaptist Perspective Help?

7. *Epistemology of obedience* (we learn by responding)

- In being faithful to what we *do* know, we may yet come to greater understandings about what we *don't* know, even as we affirm that when it comes to God, we all have a learning disability (1 Cor 13:12-13).

