

## **A Local Habitation and a Name: Struggling with Sexual Identity**

Dr. J. Barry Vaughn  
Assistant Professor of Religion  
Samford University  
Birmingham, Alabama

It was a lovely June day in 1988 and I was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to gather and celebrate with my fellow 1978 graduates of Harvard College. Could it really have been ten years since we left Cambridge? How had we changed and grown? What had we experienced in the previous decade that had made us different people? I pondered all these questions as I walked through Harvard Square to meet my closest friend from that class for lunch.

Mark had excelled at everything. A brilliant undergraduate career (he was Phi Beta Kappa; I was not) had led to entrance to Harvard Medical School and on to internship, residency, and a fellowship at Harvard. Over lunch, we caught up on all the news since our last visit. "Mark," I said, "I've been ordained for four years and have not yet performed a marriage for a single undergraduate friend. When are you going to get married?" Awkward silence followed. "Oh, you don't know, do you?" Know what, I wondered. Mark showed me a photograph of an attractive young woman. "She's the last person I dated," Mark said. Then he took out a photograph of a handsome young man. "And he's who I'm dating now."

Although not my first encounter with homosexuality, this one shook my foundations. I begin this article on sexual identity with this story because central to my understanding of this issue is the idea that there is a world of difference between considering

homosexuality in the abstract and encountering it existentially.

I must issue a disclaimer from the beginning: I am neither an ethicist nor a pastoral theologian. My Ph.D. is in the history of Christianity, and generally I'm more comfortable (intellectually) in the 17th century than in the 20th. So, I approach this issue simply as a fairly well-informed Christian, who cannot claim to have read exhaustively in the vast scholarly literature concerned with homosexuality.

I was asked to write about "sexual identity" not about homosexuality, but when we speak about a student with a sexual identity crisis, we usually mean a student who fears that he/she is gay or lesbian. Therefore, of necessity, this essay is much concerned with homosexuality.

How should the Christian pastor respond when a distraught student tells him that he has discovered that he is gay? What guidance should a pastor offer when a young woman tells her that she has fallen in love with her (female) roommate? These issues will be faced by every person involved in campus ministry at one time or another. Issues of sexual identity, perhaps sublimated in a sheltered home environment, become acute when students begin to deal with the freedom offered by college life.

Christian theology has consistently affirmed that we are guided in doctrinal and moral matters by two sources of wisdom: the Bible and reason. The Puritans spoke of the "two books of God" -- the Bible and nature. The Bible is paramount, but it is only common sense to affirm that reason is the instrument by which we understand the Bible. Without reason, we would not be able to understand the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the Bible, much less its original languages and its "life setting." Therefore, in this essay I will turn first to what the Bible has to say about sexuality and then to new

insights into human sexuality offered by biology and the social sciences.

When we consider the Bible's attitude toward sexuality, two facts stand out: First, throughout the Bible heterosexual monogamy is presupposed as the ideal context in which sexuality should be experienced. The evidence for this begins with the relationship between Adam and Eve and ends with the image of the church as the bride of Christ in Revelation. Secondly, the Bible affirms the goodness of sexuality. Two facts are crucial: God created sexuality (Gen. 1.27: ". . . male and female God created them . . .") and God, in blessing all of creation, blessed sexuality (Gen. 1.31: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.") Therefore, it is important when dealing with questions of sexual identity to emphasize that sexuality is one of God's good gifts. It is easily abused, to be sure, but sins of sexual passion no more invalidate the goodness of sexuality than do sins of gluttony invalidate the goodness of food or sins of hypocrisy invalidate religion.

Although heterosexual monogamy is the Biblical ideal, the Bible is clearly aware of homosexuality; however, there are few references to homosexuality in the Bible. The Old Testament contains only two:<sup>1</sup> Lev. 18.22 and Lev. 20.13. Both refer exclusively to male homosexuality and both condemn homosexuality as an "abomination" (Heb. to'ebah). There is a close connection between the Hebrew word "abomination" and idol worship and its attendant practices. "An idol is an abomination (Deut. 7.25ff; 27.15; II Kings 23.13; Jer. 16.18; Ezek. 14.6), and anything that has to do with idolatrous practices is an abomination (Lev. 18.27, 29-30; Deut. 12.31; 13.14; 17.14; 18.9; II Kings 16.3; 21.2; 11; II Chron. 33.2; Ezek. 5.9, 11; Mal. 2.11; et al.)."<sup>2</sup> It appears that the Holiness Code of Leviticus condemned homosexuality because it was associated with the worship of idols.

There are three New Testament texts that refer to homosexuality: Rom. 1.26-27; I Cor. 6.9-10; and I Tim. 1.9-

10. To understand the New Testament's attitude toward sexuality it is useful to know something about the first century Hellenistic world. Deeply steeped in Judaism, Paul, like the author of Leviticus, associated homosexuality with the worship of idols; I Cor. 6.9-10 condemns "idolaters" along with "sexual perverts."<sup>3</sup> Also, Romans 1 argues that homosexuality is the result of having "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles" (Rom. 1.23). Probably Paul's only experience with homosexuality as he observed it among citizens of the Hellenistic world, a world dominated by paganism. In Greece homosexual liaisons were common, and it was not thought at all unusual or immoral for a man to have a young male lover in addition to his wife. First century Roman author, Suetonius, writes this of the Emperor Nero's sexual practices:

Having tried to turn the boy Sporus into a girl by castration, he went through a wedding ceremony with him--dowry, bridal veil and all--which the whole Court attended; then brought him home, and treated him as a wife. . . A rather amusing joke is still going the rounds: the world would have been a happier place had Nero's father Domitius married that sort of wife.<sup>4</sup>

It is likely that knowledge of practices such as these colored Paul's understanding of homosexuality. In fact, when Paul condemns the arsenokoitais in I Cor. 6.9-10 and I Tim. 1.9-10, the word, although usually understood to refer to homosexuals, might better be translated, "male prostitutes."<sup>5</sup>

Let us turn to the insights of biology and the natural sciences. There are two central questions: First, how is sexual orientation (either homosexual or heterosexual) acquired? It is genetic or learned or some

combination? Secondly, can sexual orientation be changed?

The answers in each case are far from clear. John Money argues that sexual orientation is a product of both pre- and post-natal factors.<sup>6</sup> It is often argued that gays and lesbians choose their sexual preference. Money points out that "sexual preference" is a highly charged term which should probably be avoided. He suggests that language acquisition is a useful model for understanding sexual orientation acquisition:

You do not choose your native language as a preference, even though you are born without it . . . You assimilated it into a brain prenatally made ready to receive a native language from those who constitute your primate troop . . . Once assimilated through the ears into the brain, a native language becomes securely locked in--as securely as if it had been phylogenetically preordained to be locked in prenatally . . . So also, sexual status or orientation . . . may become assimilated into the brain as . . . homosexual or heterosexual or as . . . a mixture of both.<sup>7</sup>

Money's comparison of sexual orientation and language acquisition naturally raises the second question: Can sexual orientation be changed? If it is acquired as a language is acquired, can one learn a new sexual "language?" Again, the answers are frustratingly vague. Stanton L. Jones states that "every study of conversion (from homosexual to heterosexual) reports some successes, ranging from 33 percent to 60 percent . . . But change is difficult.<sup>8</sup> Exodus, an organization dedicated to changing homosexuals, reports a 50 to 90 percent "cure" rate, but offers no documentation.<sup>9</sup> Ralph Blair, founder of Evangelicals Concerned, an organization that affirms the morality of faithful homosexual relationships, regards

Exodus's claims as "sheer nonsense" and asserts that its leaders are leading double lives--preaching the possibility that sexual orientation can be changed but secretly engaging in homosexual activities.<sup>10</sup> Psychologists David and Barbara Bjorklund write that no "conversion" has "been reported to last more than two years."<sup>11</sup> John McNeill states that many who undergo therapy to change their sexual orientation "end up seriously damaged by the treatment."<sup>12</sup>

How do the Biblical and scientific insights inform the pastor's task? As I said above the Bible everywhere assumes heterosexual monogamy to be the ideal. However, once this ideal has been enunciated the question remains: Is there room for exceptions? Some Christian ethicists would allow that a faithful relationship between gay or lesbian persons is an acceptable way of life for Christians; others would disagree. William Muehl of Yale Divinity School argues against homosexual relationships and suggests that "genital homosexuality assaults human dignity in some . . . subtle fashion."<sup>13</sup> The Roman Catholic Church has consistently opposed homosexuality. In 1973 the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops declared homosexuality to be "contrary to the will of God."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Lutheran theologian Helmut Thielecke, in his ground-breaking The Ethics of Sex, states that celibacy is a special calling and that we cannot expect celibacy of all homosexuals any more than we can expect it of all heterosexuals. The homosexual, he says, "has to realize his [or her] optimal ethical potentialities on the basis of his [or her] irreversible situation. Here one must seriously ask whether in this situation . . . the same norms must not apply as in the normal relationship of the sexes."<sup>15</sup> For Catholic theologian John McNeill, S.J., the important thing about sexual relationships is not whether they are homosexual or heterosexual but whether they are characterized by "the great transcendent values of justice, fidelity and love."<sup>16</sup>

Anthony Koznik, in his book, Human Sexuality, suggests that healthy, Christian sexuality is: self-liberating, other-enriching, honest, faithful, socially responsible, life-serving, and joyous. "Where such qualities prevail, one can be reasonably sure that the sexual behavior that has brought them forth is wholesome and moral."<sup>17</sup> I concur but would add that Christian sexuality should also be faithful to the Biblical witness. Koznik's seven criteria, plus the Biblical witness, offer useful guidance to the pastor dealing with crises of sexual identity.

For persons with a secure heterosexual identity it may seem strange that a young person could be unsure about his or her sexual orientation. Actually, it is not at all unusual for young men and women even in their late teens and early twenties to remain unsure of their sexual identity. Dr. Alfred Kinsey's 1948 study of male sexuality showed that "more than one-third of American males between the ages of sixteen and fifty-five had experienced sexual arousal to orgasm with another man at least once."<sup>18</sup> Kinsey's parallel study of women in 1953 showed that "by thirty years of age, homosexual experience to the point of orgasm had occurred in 6 percent of grade school graduates, 5 percent of the high school sample, 10 percent of college women, and 14 percent of those who had attended graduate school."<sup>19</sup> Kinsey's studies suggest that it is not at all unusual for young men and women to be in a quandry with regard to their sexual identity.

I opened with the story of my friend, Mark, and the way he revealed his sexual identity to me. Prior to learning about Mark, my attitude toward homosexuality was harsh and judgmental. As a student at Yale Divinity School I wrote an article for the divinity school newsletter in which I condemned the student gay and lesbian group. Mark put a "face" on the gay issue; in Shakespeare's words, he gave to homosexuality "a local habitation and a name."<sup>20</sup> Learning about my friends' struggles with sexual identity and becoming acquainted with more gay

and lesbian persons has made it impossible for me to sit in judgment on them any longer.

Probably most Baptist campus ministers have already put a "face" on homosexuality, but I would encourage all ministers dealing with students or others who are struggling with their sexual identity to do more listening than talking. It is easy to offer superficial advice and easy answers and to condemn those we do not know (or think we do not know). Henri Nouwen's advice, as usual, is very wise:

[If a person] prefers homosexual circles and homosexual friends and does not show any desire or willingness to change, it does not make sense to push him to try to change. It is much more important to relate to him on the basis of reality, to show understanding and to prevent any form of rejection of him as a human being who needs love and charity . . . Our general attitude towards homosexuality should be free from anxiety and fear, not to speak of disgust and rejection. By a relaxed and understanding relationship to our homosexual fellow man, we might help him more than by an overly moralistic concern which requires changes as a condition for friendship.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, be aware that many who struggle with sexual identity are deeply lonely and sometimes clinically depressed. Since early adolescence they have been trying to hide or change or sublimate a central fact of their being. They are often obsessed with guilt, real or imaginary, about sexual feelings or sexual encounters. Deep wounds have been inflicted upon them by "friends" who tell jokes about "fags" or "queers." Rigid pastors may have thundered against the "sin of Sodom" from the pulpit, and your gay or lesbian counselee may have a very real



fear of going to hell for an aspect of the personality over which he or she has no control. Gay or lesbian college students often will have never told anyone about their "deep, dark secrets." They will usually have lived in terror lest their pastor, friends, or above all their parents, find out. Regardless of our final conclusions about the morality of homosexual activity, gay and lesbian persons have a claim on our compassion, not only because they have been victims of cruelty and oppression, but simply because they are objects of God's love.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I omit the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19.1-29), because scholars disagree about whether or not the "sin of Sodom" was homosexuality. See references to Sodom in Isa. 1.10; 3.9; Jer. 23.14; and Ezek. 16.49.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Koznick, et al, Human Sexuality: New Directions in Catholic Thought, London: Search Press (1977), p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> The RSV translation of Paul's terms, malakoi and arsenokoitai.

<sup>4</sup> Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars, as quoted in Letha Scanzoni and Virginia R. Mollenkott, Is the Homosexual my Neighbor? Another Christian View, San Francisco: Harper and Row (1978), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> The best discussion of Paul's terminology is in "Lexicography and St. Paul," the first appendix to John Boswell's superbly written and voluminously documented book, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press (1980), p. 340.

<sup>6</sup> "...neonatal antecedents may facilitate a homosexual or bisexual orientation, provided the postnatal determinants in the social and communicational history are also facilitative." John Money, "Sin, sickness, or status? Homosexual gender identify and psychoneuroendocrinology," The American Psychologist, v. 42 Stanton L. Jones in his article "Homosexuality according to science: does new evidence about homosexuality mandate a change in the church's historic stance?," Christianity Today, v. 33 (August 18, 1989).

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<sup>7</sup> Money, p. 385

<sup>8</sup> Jones, p. 29

<sup>9</sup> Tim Stafford, "Coming Out," Christianity Today, v. 33 (August 18, 1989), p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> David Bjorklund and Barbara Bjorklund, "Straight or gay? Researchers are unraveling the origins of homosexuality," Parents Magazine, v. 36 (October 1988), p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> John J. McNeill, Taking a Chance on God, Boston: Beacon Press (1988), p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> William Muehl, "Some Words of Caution," in Paul T. Jersild and Dale A. Johnson, eds., Moral Issues and Christian Response (4th ed.), New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, Inc. (1988), p. 167.

<sup>14</sup> Principles to Guide Confessors in Questions of Homosexuality, Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1973), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Helmut Thielecke, The Ethics of Sex, New York: Harper and Row (1964), p. 285.

<sup>16</sup> John McNeill, "The Church and the Homosexual," in Jersild and Johnson, p. 164.

<sup>17</sup> Koznik, pp. 92-95.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward, Now That You Know, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich (1989), p. 77. Fairchild and Hayward and that

Kinsey's results "were later criticized by some professionals on the grounds that the survey sample included an unduly large number of prison inmates, but recent research confirms their basic validity." (p. 79)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 80. Fairchild and Hayward point out that Kinsey's figures for the incidence of homosexual behavior among women have generally been more favorably received than his figures for men because the women surveyed included fewer prison inmates.

<sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream, V. 1.17.

<sup>21</sup> Henri Nouwen, Intimacy, Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publications (1969), p. 52.