

CONFRONTING CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES 12

“HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE CHURCH”

I spoke with you last week about some of the physiological and theological and biblical parameters regarding this controversial subject. Though some of those points may reemerge today, my purpose is to try and limit the scope of our discussion to what impact this controversy is currently having on and in our United Methodist Church. As I stated last week; and with all due respect to those with differing opinions; as a follower of Jesus, I am bound primarily by the Word of God, regarding not just this issue, but for all the living of my life, and the conduct of my ministry. I am bound to that Word, not in some wooden, literal, ‘out of touch with reality’ sense; but in the willfully chosen sense. I have chosen God’s Word to have authority in my life, and though I fail often and miserably to follow God’s Word; God’s Word provides direction for my life, God’s Word sustains me and God’s Word governs the parameters of my life.

Secondarily to my Christian faith, I am a United Methodist; and as such I am secondarily bound to the rules and laws, history and heritage, of that denomination. Not unlike many other denominations in this country, our UMC is being challenged by parties on both sides of this issue as we wrestle and struggle with our understandings of living faithfully as disciples of Jesus. There are some in our denomination who believe that the welcoming and accepting nature of Jesus Christ overwhelms all other criteria in providing guidance for how our church ought to respond and interact with homosexual persons. There are others in our denomination who believe that the biblical evidence that points to homosexual behavior as a sin ought to guide us as a church to love and welcome every sinner, but not endorse or disregard anyone’s sin. Each of these parties can point to biblical evidence. Each of these parties can find examples in culture, history, and even personal experiences.

Each of these parties have radical representatives, who do more harm than good in this ongoing debate and struggle. And each of these parties offers much to the other, and to the whole church, as we try to find our way to some resolution. For the record, I like our churches current stance on this issue, and I will work to uphold it, and support it by my votes at annual conference, and in my ministry in your midst.

Since the 1972 General Conference, our United Methodist Discipline (which contains the UM history, Wesley's Articles of Religion, our social principles, and the rules and regulations that govern our denomination), has included (and through the years added) instructions for what we United Methodists believe about this important subject. Following the 2004 General Conference the UM Discipline includes the following 5 directives regarding this subject:

1. All persons, including homosexuals, are individuals of "sacred worth." We are committed to ministry for and with all persons.

"Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The UMC does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all, and we will seek to live together in Christian community. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons." (Par. 161.g)

2. Self-avowed, practicing homosexuals may not be ordained.

"The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals(1) are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.

(1-‘Self-avowed practicing homosexual’ is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, board of ordained ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual.) (Par. 304.3)

3. United Methodists are committed to supporting civil liberties and human rights for homosexuals.

“Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims where they have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians. We also commit ourselves to social witness against the coercion and marginalization of former homosexuals.” (Par. 162.h)

4. No church funds shall be given to organizations that promote the acceptance of homosexuality.

“No board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give UM funds (Apportionments) to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality. This restriction shall not limit the Church’s ministry in response to the HIV epidemic.” (Par. 806.9)

5. No homosexual unions shall be performed in our churches.

“Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our Ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.” (Par 341.6)

There are also two paragraphs in our discipline that speak about marriage, and singleness, and children, which also affirm our support for laws in civil society that define marriage as the union between one woman and one man.

To me the crux of the issue regarding homosexuality in the UMC is found somewhere in the tension between these two phrases we have just noted: “All persons, including homosexuals, are individuals of sacred worth”...and... “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” I know the temptation to try and oversimplify any of these issues, but at first glance these two phrases might appear contradictory, or (as we are often accused) speaking out of both sides of our mouth, so let me try to clarify.

I believe the first fact that all persons are individuals of sacred worth. All of us are created in the image of God, and though each of us sins, we are still not beyond the reach of God’s grace...if we wish to be reached. And I believe the second fact, that the practice of homosexuality (like ALL other sins) is incompatible with Christian teaching. Understanding lies in defining the difference between homosexual orientation, and homosexual practice or behavior. It would be easier to lump them together, and dismiss them altogether, but we can’t. As noted last week, there clearly are individuals in our society and our personal circles of relationships, who evidence an orientation to be drawn to or attracted to members of the same sex. We noted that most of the medical evidence seems to be pointing to genetic, biological, or chemical reasons for this discovery. We also noted that homosexuality, like every other behavior in this world results because of our fallen human nature; a result of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden.

We likewise noted that though Jesus was silent on the subject, building any argument from silence is suspicious, and the preponderance of the scriptural evidence points out that homosexual behavior is outside the will of God. (I hope you also remember the conclusion...Romans chapter 2...it is not for us to judge, because we are equally guilty...of multiply sins of our own!)

Think of it this way. I have inherited from my family, through the genes of my father, a genetic predisposition to heart disease. Through little fault of my own (at least initially), I find myself facing the prospect that I'll likely die from some form of coronary problem.

Though heart disease is nowhere mentioned in scripture as a sin that must be overcome, or labored against; gluttony, the over consumption of alcohol and even behaviors such as smoking and drugs being introduced into my body; "The temple of the Holy Spirit", are identified as contributing factors to my health or dis-ease! But I love to eat, and I love to eat food I know is bad for me. Should I expect sympathy for making choices that are not in my best interest? I don't think so. Let me try another.

There are some people who through no fault of their own, inherit from their family gene pool, a chemical disposition to alcoholism. Alcoholism (an orientation) is not identified in the Bible anywhere, but drunkenness (a behavior) clearly is. So, what should we as a church do for/with the person who is susceptible to alcohol? We have addressed this as a church, and thus don't serve wine at our communion ritual. It would be irresponsible for us to encourage an alcoholic to continue drinking, because it's not their fault, it's a chemical thing. It would be irresponsible for us to condemn a person who is an alcoholic, but who is not drinking. Who of us doesn't know someone who is an alcoholic, (by nature or orientation), but who is not drinking? Do you see what I am saying?

Let me ask it this way? Can you be an alcoholic and a Christian? Yes you can, as long as you are not willfully living in defiance of God's will, and are honestly wrestling against what is in your genes, or what is in your (fallen) 'nature'. Let me ask you this: Can you be a homosexual, and be a Christian? Yes, I believe you can, as long as you are not willfully living in defiance of God's will, and are honestly wrestling against what is in your genes or what is in your (fallen) 'nature'.

Sometimes our double-standard with this issue slaps us in the face! Can you be an adulterer and be a Christian? Not an unrepentant practicing adulterer! You can be a Christian even if you committed adultery, but I think it would be irresponsible for me, or us, or the church local or universal to affirm any sinful lifestyle behavior; just because its sinfulness has fallen out of favor because of the declining values or morals of our current culture.

There are many things that I am 'naturally wired' for, but which I cannot pursue; because I know they are bad for me, and because I believe God has something better for me. I have a natural predisposition to do things that will hurt me, or hurt others, or that will dishonor God. Some of these desires and longings are easy to resist, but some of them require, at times, all of the strength I have not to act upon them. I ask for God's help, and when I fail, I ask for God's forgiveness.

In conclusion, I think our church's stance on this issue is pretty good, and though the radicals on the extremes of the spectrum; get all the press with their seemingly endless challenges to our 'discipline', we must abide by our 'laws', and the systems in place that make and sometimes change those laws. The challenges probably won't end anytime soon, which troubles me. All the time we spend fighting about these issues, we are neglecting the more important ones of winning souls, making disciples, and building God's kingdom!

Yes...I believe homosexual practice is not God's will for any of us. But... homosexual people are welcome in God's house, at God's table, in God's service; along side the adulterers, the alcoholics, the gossips, the gluttons, the prideful, the Pharisees, the jealous, the vengeful, the angry, the defiant, the abusers, the liars, the cheaters, the promise breakers, and even the murderers.

As long as we are honestly seeking to repent of our sins, and live in harmony with God, even when we fail, we are persons of sacred worth; God made us, Jesus died for us; the Holy Spirit fills and empowers us...we might stumble, but we cannot fail!
SO let us pray!

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