

UNSETTLING QUESTIONS

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So here we are, gathered together to talk about the lightning rod issue at the center of so much controversy in the churches. Why would sensible people want to do such a thing?

This question presses itself with particular force upon many of us evangelicals, who like to insist that Scripture is clear on this subject, that the relevant discussions have already taken place, and that further talk can only lead to mischief.

It is with considerable fear and trembling that I come before you today to say that I do not believe the issue is settled. In fact, I think aspects of the current church situation ought to be deeply unsettling to all of us who confesses the authority of Scripture and the Lordship of Christ.

My goal today is to share some of my own unsettlement with you—misery does love company after all—with the hope and prayer that God will be at work among us to bring forth from it either a renewed comfort or a deepened distress for the purifying and up-building of Christ's church.

The first source of unsettlement I want to lift up is pastoral. I believe that the Presbyterian Church has a massive pastoral problem on its hands, one that goes right to the heart of gospel faithfulness. Our current church policy assumes that homosexual practice is something people can and should turn away from. It might be difficult, as life this side of glory frequently is, but with the assistance of divine grace and caring fellow Christians it is what our church calls gay and lesbian people to do. We conservatives in particular have made a “trust in Jesus and just say no” stance the hallmark of our pastoral counsel.

But the pastoral reality is that there are many gay and lesbian believers who experience that kind of “no” as impossibly out of reach. Countless gay and lesbian persons showing up on the church's doorstep do not believe there is any alternative path available for themselves other than the one they are on.

There are reasons for this. Many have built faithful lives with partners to whom they have been committed for many years. I try to think sometimes what my own response would be if the church said I had to leave Kat, my dear wife to whom I have been married for nearly twenty five years. I wouldn't think such a request was difficult, I would think it was immoral and unfaithful!

So there are lots of people coming to church who deep in their hearts do not believe there is any moral or practical possibility of their ceasing to be gay. We could perhaps talk about whether they were mistaken in that assessment, but to have any integrity such a conversation would need to be with them rather than just being about them.

But rather than beginning even at that level, the first and primary word these people hear from our sex-obsessed church is that they are fundamentally unacceptable to God unless they make this change in themselves which they see as immoral or impossible or both. Perhaps they may meet with a certain generous toleration which at least invites them to worship. But the church's ruling that they are categorically unqualified for ordination communicates loud and clear the message that even in a church of redeemed sinners, they are uniquely unacceptable, no matter how faithfully they might try to live out the hand they've been dealt.

The tragic result is that countless thousands of gay people turn away from Jesus in despair. They leave the church convinced that the Christian God is against them, that Jesus has nothing to offer them, that Christ's church is their deadly enemy.

Should this picture, of shattered souls turning away from Jesus in despair, raise some unsettling questions for us as a church? Is this snuffing out of faith and hope the good fruit of the Gospel that Scripture would lead us to expect when the church faithfully engages its mission? Is this harvest of despair consistent with the ministry of Jesus, who broke bread with outcasts and promised life to all who put their trust in him? How could biblically-serious Christians not ask such questions?

But wait a minute, you say. The church can't just declare God's approval of everyone who walks in the door. What if all the alcoholics banded together and said, "We see no realistic possibility of becoming sober, but the church should ordain us anyway, lest we turn away in despair"? Is it unchristian to insist that God wants all of us to change?

In answering this, I think perhaps we conservatives need to read Genesis 1 and 2 more carefully than we have been. Remember how God creates the world in six days, and declares all of it "very good." But there is one aspect of the original creation that the Lord declares "not good"—do you remember what it is? Genesis 2:18, "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the human being should be alone; I will make a helper corresponding to him.'"

Human existence, as the Bible portrays it, is fundamentally oriented toward intimate communion with another person as the good gift of God. This creation for nuptial fellowship is not a choice that can be simply unmade or undone. It is deeply inscribed in our nature as the good gift of our Creator.

I would submit that a proper biblical description of homosexuality has to acknowledge that this orientation toward life with another, this good gift of the Creator, has not been done away with or overruled in gay and lesbian people. It has simply been shifted toward persons of the same gender.

We can certainly ask an alcoholic to work on becoming sober because there is nothing like an orientation toward drunkenness inscribed into the universal fabric of human nature. But to ask someone to renounce the very possibility of life lived in nuptial communion with another—that is asking them to renounce a piece of their humanity that God has placed into all of us as a good and gracious part of our creation.

Now the Bible does recognize the possibility of a celibate existence for some people. Jesus and Paul are exemplars of a way of life different from the Genesis norm. In their cases, God, rather than another human being, serves as this other to whom their lives are directed. But both Jesus and Paul insist that this is not a possibility given to everyone.¹ The Protestant reformers picked up on this point,

insisting that it is biblically unfaithful to try to impose permanent celibacy willy-nilly on whole classes of people.

Which brings us back to our unsettling questions: Is there something biblically questionable about a church that calls gay people to a solitary existence which God has declared “not good,” and in the process drives many away from Jesus in despair?

Now obviously as we seek to grapple with this or any pastoral dilemma, there are limits on how much church teaching can and should bend. In situations where you have a clear and consistent word spoken in the Old Testament that is subsequently taken up and repeated in the New, there is no question that Christians who take the Bible seriously must respect the plain meaning of the text. For that reason, I take it as a given that the church cannot in good conscience ordain people who violate the biblical commandment... by accepting interest payments on their money!

What... you don't like that? It is the clear testimony of Scripture! Five different passages in the Old Testament unanimously condemn lending at interest, and Jesus personally gives this tradition his stamp of approval when he commands his disciples to “lend, expecting nothing in return.”²

So how is it that Presbyterian Christians have come to see ourselves as exempt from this clear witness of both Scripture and time-honored Christian tradition? Presbyterian pastors are actually *required* to participate in the interest-paying Pension Plan administered by the church!

Responsibility for this unbiblical state of affairs falls squarely on the shoulders of that notorious liberal, John Calvin, who addressed himself to the question in a famous letter, which you can find translated in a little volume titled *Calvin's Ecclesiastical Advice*.³ Calvin argues that it is not enough to judge this matter simply “in accordance with a few passages of Scripture.” Rather, Calvin believes that in order to arrive at an accurate understanding of the biblical commandments, we must go beyond a mere surface reading of the texts and consider instead the *intention of the Lawgiver*.⁴ It's not enough to focus simply on what the commandments say; to interpret the biblical commands faithfully we have to think about what God is trying to accomplish in giving them.

Well what is God trying to accomplish with the commandments against receiving interest? Calvin notes that the context of the commands in the Bible is concern for the poor and destitute. In biblical times the reason you would give someone a loan is that he or she was a poor person who had run out of resources and was in danger of starving. Charging interest is heinous in God's eyes because it makes a profit on the backs of poor people and in the process makes their plight even worse.

By the time you get to the sixteenth century, however, you have a very different set of economic and social circumstances taking hold. Calvin notes how in his day you have people loaning money to wealthy merchants, who then use the loaned money to make more money. Under such circumstances, says Calvin, the applicable commandments are not the usury laws, but basic principles of fairness. And fairness requires that if a wealthy person uses my money to make a handsome profit, he or she must share some of the increase that my loan has made possible. Hence interest payments—sharing the increase—are not only permitted, they are required by the rules of justice!

Do you see what is happening here? Interpreting the commandments in light of the purpose of the Lawgiver has allowed Calvin to see that the commercial lending taking place in his day was *something fundamentally different* from the kind of interest payments that the biblical writers knew about and

prohibited. When the bank pays you interest on your savings account, that is not the same thing as the exploitative lending that the biblical writers were prohibiting, even though superficial descriptions might see them as one and the same. That is why the Presbyterian Church administers a pension fund in good conscience!

Does Calvin throw out the biblical commandments with this argument, or water down biblical morality or overturn biblical authority? Absolutely not! The Scriptural prohibitions are still fully in force—interest payments that take advantage of poor people are still absolutely prohibited by the Bible. But Calvin’s analysis of the purpose of the Lawgiver allows him to argue in his own context for a faithful exception to a set of biblical commands that appear on the surface to admit of no exceptions. If any of you think he was wrong in doing so, I trust you will quickly close out any interest-bearing investments you may own!

For those of us who seek to interpret the Bible as faithfully and carefully as Calvin did, this raises another unsettling question: Could it be that the disturbing pastoral situation we have described might result from a mistaken application of the biblical commandments on homosexuality?

The surface-level biblical case against homosexuality is almost as clear-cut as the case against charging interest.⁵ The difference is that we have no direct word from Jesus himself regarding homosexuality. But with that one exception, the two cases seem pretty similar: all the direct biblical references are disapproving of the practice in question.

But is it possible that new circumstances have arisen in our own day that would require us to say, along with Calvin, that while the biblical commandments remain fully in force, some of what we see happening in our own place and time is *not the same thing* as what the biblical writers rightly condemn? It is an unsettling question, but a reasonable and important one.

We do know that the cultural situation the church faces today as it wrestles with these issues is in some respects genuinely new. We have no evidence that the biblical world offered any generally available cultural space within which ordinary people could live out a same-gender orientation through a loving, faithful, egalitarian relationship analogous to heterosexual marriage.⁶ Indeed, the social worlds that were the settings for the Bible did not even have a word for “homosexuality” as we understand it.⁷

The biblical writers were obviously communicating a negative judgment about *something* in the oft-cited passages. But the historical evidence points to contexts, understandings and behaviors that are significantly different from the covenanted same-gender partnerships we are concerned with today. Same-gender behaviors in the ancient world tended to be either pederastic—reflecting a system in which upper-class adolescent males exchanged sexual favors in exchange for philosophical training and social patronage; or cultic—bound up with idolatrous pagan worship rites; or violent and exploitative—signaling one’s dominance over slaves, prisoners of war, or other social inferiors.

So the faithful, covenanted, same-gender relationships that we know of today appear significantly different from the predominant forms of same-gender behavior in the biblical world. Does that difference mean we are faced with something genuinely new today, which the Bible and the Christian tradition have never dealt with explicitly? Some scholars argue that this difference is irrelevant, claiming that the Bible condemns any and all forms of same-gender behavior including what we see today.⁸

Others argue that the difference is hugely significant, so that what we are dealing with today is not covered by the Bible's prohibitions.⁹ How would we decide which view is correct?

As a conservative evangelical who seeks to interpret the Bible faithfully and responsibly, I know of no better place to turn for help with this dilemma than to Calvin, who insists that we must interpret biblical commands with reference to the intention of the Lawgiver. In the presence context, that suggests that we cannot responsibly interpret isolated references to homosexuality without first having a clear understanding of God's purposes in giving the gifts of sexuality and marriage to human beings.

What we need, in other words, is a comprehensive biblical sexual ethics as the proper context for responsible interpretation of the bible's teaching about homosexuality. We haven't time for anything more than a very brief summary of such a project in this forum, but let me suggest some key features that I believe any responsible treatment would include. For a powerful, biblically profound example of such a project, I would commend to you The Theology of the Body, by the late Pope John Paul II.¹⁰

Throughout the Bible, marital imagery is used to describe the connection between God and God's people. God's relationship with Israel is described as that of a husband, and this imagery is carried over into the New Testament in depictions of Christ as the bridegroom, and the church as his bride. Ephesians 5:21-33 picks up on this pervasive theme of the biblical witness and uses it to describe what the marital bond itself is all about. Though the passage is bound up with some off-putting first-century assumptions about the properly submissive role of wives, even within the context of those cultural assumptions, we can see how marriage functions as a vehicle for divine grace. As Ephesians describes it, the marriage bond is meant to be a kind of image or icon of the self-giving love that unites Christ and the church. The nuptial bond is a means of grace for bringing forth the loving gift of one's whole self to another, in the pattern of Christ's self-gift to us. Over and over again in writings on biblical, sexual ethics, one finds this point repeated: marriage is a divinely-appointed means of sanctification, helping people to grow into the image of Christ's own self-giving love.

Now clearly procreation is part of the divine plan, too, but neither the Bible nor Christian tradition treat it as a make-or-break factor in establishing the validity of the nuptial bond. We do not consider it immoral, for instance, for people past the age of childbearing to have sex. We would be aghast at the suggestion that an infertile couple should refrain from marrying because it would be out of keeping with God's procreative intention for marriage. So the key factor in God's intention for nuptial communion seems to be its capacity for nurturing us in the total, Christ-like gift of self to another person.

A sign that we may be on the track with this conclusion is the way it starts to make sense of all the Bible's commands about sexuality. We can easily understand why adultery is prohibited, for instance, because we see how it divides our loyalties and undermines the total gift of self that God is seeking to cultivate. Similarly, we can see how premarital sex would undermine the intention of God, because it represents a total bodily self-giving that is not matched by a corresponding gift of life and promise and commitment, thereby falling short of the complete and loving gift of self that God intends. Sex with children or animals would also be inconsistent with God's intention, too, because in such situations you would not have the kind of free and responsible agent who could enter authentically into a mutual gift of self. This understanding of God's intention for sex and marriage is a powerful instrument for helping us understand the reasons underlying biblical sexual morality.

Now the unsettling thing about this understanding of God's intention is that the Bible's prohibition of same-gender relationships doesn't seem to fit with it. There appears to be nothing about a faithful, covenanted, same-gender relationship that would render it incapable of promoting the kind of Christ-like self-giving that God intends. Why then would the Bible prohibit it?

Well, the prohibition does make sense if it applies to the particular kinds of same-gender relationships that were predominant in the biblical world! Domination over slaves and captives, idolatrous pagan rituals, all of these things run absolutely counter to the mutual, loving gift of self that is at the heart of God's intention for our sexuality. It is completely obvious why the biblical writers would condemn such practices. All of them run counter to God's will and intention for us, and we can heartily affirm the Bible's condemnation of such behaviors. The Bible's witness makes perfect sense if we understand its prohibitions as referring to the exploitative and idolatrous sorts of same-gender behavior that were characteristic of the ancient world. That witness ceases to make consistent sense, however, if we assume the prohibitions also apply to covenanted partnerships that are perfectly capable of forming people in the kind of Christ-like love that is God's goal for marriage and sexuality.

Which returns us to Calvin's question: Is what we see in the faithful, marriage-like gay and lesbian partnerships of today *the same thing* as the same-gender behavior of the ancient world which the Bible rightly condemns? If we say yes, they are exactly the same thing and the biblical prohibitions hold across the board, then it's hard to see how we're going to be able to hold together the Bible's teachings about sexuality in any kind of unified, consistent framework.

If we say no, today's covenanted partnerships are not the same thing as the same-gender behaviors condemned in Scripture, then we will have a beautiful way of understanding the coherence and consistency of the Bible's teaching about sexuality. But we will also be faced with the deeply unsettling prospect of a church whose official policy toward gays and lesbians is urgently in need of revision in order to bring it faithfully in line with God's revealed intentions.

Well, there is much more we could talk about here, but that is a more-than-sufficient helping of unsettling questions for one day. I know full well how uncomfortable it can be when the Bible turns around and starts asking questions of us that cast a shadow over our established conclusions and customary ways of looking at things. But the Bible's questioning of us is also one of the clearest and most compelling signs I know that God has not abandoned the church, that Christ continues to be our ruler and head, and that the Holy Spirit continues to speak the word of life to us through the voice of Scripture.

God is at work among us. It is not our habitual conclusions or established ways of seeing things that are the final authorities for our lives. No, our final authority is "Jesus Christ, as he is attested to in Holy Scripture...the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."¹¹ May Christ continue to speak his unsettling Word powerfully in our midst!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Mat 9:17, I Cor 7:7

² Ex 22:25, Lev. 25:35-37, Deut. 23:19, Ez 22:12 and Neh 5:7; Luke 6:35.

³ Mary Beaty and Ben Farley, trans., Calvin's Ecclesiastical Advice. (Louisville: WJKP, 1991), pp. 139-143.

⁴ Calvin's exposition of this principle may be found in his Institutes of the Christian Religion II.viii.6-10

⁵ Scriptural passages commonly cited in support of the church's traditional teaching against homosexuality are: Genesis 19:1-29, Judges 19:1-30, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:18-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-17, and 1 Timothy 1:10.

⁶ For a scholarly survey of the very different forms same-gender behavior takes in the world of the biblical writers, see Martti Nissinen, Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). Shorter but still helpful treatments can be found in Stacy Johnson, A Time to Embrace: Same Gender Relationships in Religion, Law and Politics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 13-19, 48-52, 123-152.

⁷ See Nissinen, ch. 7. Also Richard Hays, "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies," in Jeffrey Siker, ed., Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate. (Louisville: WJKP, 1994), p. 7.

⁸ See for example, Robert Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). Also Richard Hays, The Moral Vision of the New Testament (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), ch. 16.

⁹ See Stacy Johnson, A Time to Embrace. Also Jack Rogers, Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality (Louisville: WJKP, 2006).

¹⁰ John Paul II, The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan. (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997).

¹¹ "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," Article 1. The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2002), paragraph 8.11.