

Gay is Good! Or Not?

A Challenge for Christians in the Nineties

Gay Nineties

by Steve Zeisler (SteveZ1034@aol.com)

How shall biblical Christians minister to homosexuals ?

Perhaps we should start by recognizing that *gay activists* who insist that historic Christian thinking must change are in line with similar arguments offered by *straights who have embraced the sexual revolution* of the last thirty years. That is, the 'gay agenda' is not a unique challenge to righteousness. Its portrayal as such by right wing organizations, Christian or otherwise (especially as a money-raising, election-winning technique), is likely to backfire. Our task is to teach what is true about sexuality in the plan of God. We must warn all opponents of the truth to the dangers of misleading those whom God loves, and lead sinners to forgiveness of sins and hope for the future in Christ. Christians, of course, should also act as responsible citizens, taking public stands and voting with the expectation that we have influence as salt and light in our communities.

Questions?
1. What does the Bible teach about homosexuality?
2. Do modern scientific findings require us to alter traditional Christian teaching?
3. Can orientation change? Does Christian faith lead gays to become straight?
4. How should we respond to the call for homosexual marriage?
5. How can we honestly carry out the call to reject lies and still love those who are tangled in lies?
6. How does the church compare to the 'gay community'?

Theological starting points

All Christian interaction with modern promotion of homosexuality must begin with a strong statement of the *positive* reason for our creation as sexual beings and a commitment to glorify God with our bodies.

The great work of God is "the summing up of all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10). Jesus prayed to his father that his followers might "be one even as we are one" (John 17:11). The uniting of persons (including, supremely, God with humanity) is the great goal. We were created sexual beings with that end in mind. Our sexuality teaches us of our need for another person, for community. Marriage is a frequent metaphor in the Bible for a profound relationship with God. The description of the creation of the first marriage proceeds from the observation, made by God, that it is not good to be alone (Gen. 2:18).

Sexuality is a deep element of our personhood (more than genital functioning alone) that God created to use in accomplishing his purposes in our lives. Paul's succinct statement in 1 Cor. 6:20, "glorify God in your body" makes the point. Desire for union with another, ultimately union with the Lord and being "one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28), comes from God and is often made plain to us by the longing to marry that proceeds from his creation

of our sexuality. Sexuality is given to us by God to serve him as he creates oneness and banishes loneliness. It is not an end in itself. Its existence does not confer the right to certain kinds of experience on us. It is not an irresistible force. Our sexuality teaches us these lessons and lays a foundation for union with God and other believers whether or not we marry or remain single.

The sexual revolution of the late twentieth century has had the good effect of allowing discussion and honest admission of realities (some of them completely honorable and approved by God), that were lied about and hidden from view in the general culture and especially the Christian culture of earlier eras. It has also set loose a monster. Sexual feelings and capacities have become masters and not servants. The experience of 'intimacy' is now conceived of as a right, not a gift given to those aiming at something greater. Modern observers and their conclusions have been elevated above scripture and the wisdom accumulated by those who have followed the Lord for centuries.

Consider this paragraph from the autobiography of Mel White, a long time evangelical pastor, writer, and seminary professor who is now divorced from his wife, living with a gay partner and working as a minister in the mostly homosexual Cathedral of Hope congregation in Dallas. These conclusions were written regarding his decision to end his marriage of eighteen years, "But I learned that my best didn't mean that I could make everyone happy. You can genuinely love and respect a person. You can enjoy that person's company and celebrate that person's friendship. You can share that person's values and determine to be loyal and committed to him or her for a lifetime. But when there is no sexual attraction, no erotic fascination, no potential for authentic physical passion, no sensual pull, no amorous play, no romantic component at the heart of it there can be no intimacy, at least not the kind of intimacy required to begin and to maintain a long-term, loving relationship, let alone a marriage" (*Stranger At The Gate* p.163).

A clearer word comes from Jesus about God's use of our sexuality: Mark 10:6-9 *"But from the beginning of creation, {God} made them male and female. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and the two shall become one flesh; consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."*

For a man and woman to become one flesh in marriage is a mysterious (Eph. 5:32) work of God. It is his use of our sexuality to a greater end - *oneness* (which exists on a more profound level than one's feelings about the relationship). We have no business serving "erotic fascination" and challenging God by separating what he has joined. Further, erotic adventuring and journeys of sexual self discovery lead us to dangerous misuse of the powerful instrument for oneness that God intended in creating our sexuality. There is no such thing as inconsequential sexual intercourse. Even emotionless, anonymous sex-for-money partakes of something profound. 1 Corinthians 6:15-16: *"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a prostitute is one body {with her}? For He says, 'The two will become one flesh.'"* Believing that erotic experience can create its own meaning, or that examining one's sensual feelings creates clarity that goes beyond the teaching of scripture is dangerous business.

The conviction that sexual urges must be obeyed and that our feelings define reality is widespread among our contemporaries both gay and straight. We should not be surprised that people with same-sex erotic desires defend sinful behavior from this world view, as do adulterers and other heterosexual rebels. Outrage and emotional opposition does little good if we don't challenge the lies that have been told so often and with such certainty that few of the world's sexual victims have real alternatives.

Apologists defending active gay life s t y l e s

What does the Bible teach regarding homosexuality?

1. As already noted, sex is God-given and intended to serve his purposes for humanity. Categories like right and wrong, natural and unnatural, etc. are related to these purposes. Human observation of what exists in a fallen world has value but cannot create the framework for making moral decisions regarding sex.

2. Monogamous marriage is the only God-intended context for genital sexual expression. Homosexual activity is found in lists of sinful behavior in both the Old and New Testaments (Lev. 18:19-23, 20:10-6; 1Cor. 6:9-11; 1Tim. 1:8-11). It is not given prominence among all sins or even among all possible sexual sins (adultery, fornication, incest, etc. are also found in similar contexts), but its inclusion supports the view of scripture from beginning to end that sexual expression belongs in the context of a lifetime, monogamous, heterosexual marriage and nowhere else.

3. Some scholars claim that references in the Bible to homosexuality refer narrowly to pederasty (men having sex with boys), prostitution or idolatrous rituals, but not to mature, loving homosexual unions. There may be some insight to be gained from these studies, but there is no justification for the massive leap in logic that often follows. Some of the heterosexual adultery that existed when the Bible was written was accomplished with ritual prostitutes in the service of pagan idols. Removing the idolatry would not have made the adultery appropriate. It is consistent with purposes of God in making us sexual to say that certain activity (e.g. genital sexual expression outside of marriage) is sinful in itself and not just because of its context. Love-filled emotions and mutual respect do not make adultery, fornication, nor gay sex righteous.

4. Romans 1:24-27 is a significant text. Paul's point in the last half of Romans one is to describe the descent into spiritual darkness that a society which refuses to acknowledge or thank God undergoes. Foolish hearts become darkened. What is valuable is replaced by what has no value. Truth is exchanged for lies. What is natural (in line with the creator's purpose) is rejected and what is unnatural is passionately sought out. The references to sexual sin here do not suggest that homosexuality is worse than other things, only that a society that grows more aggressive in rejecting the creator will aggressively reject his purpose for sexuality. It is sometimes claimed that verses 26-27 describe heterosexual individuals who one day go to a gay bar for the sinful thrill of it all (contradicting their nature). But in fact these verses describe a society that no longer can discern right from wrong, that grows instinctively to prefer and champion unrighteousness. Do modern scientific findings require us to alter traditional Christian teaching?

Do modern scientific findings require us to alter traditional Christian teaching?

1. It is claimed that the discovery of a homosexual *orientation* is new. Until the 1970's, we are told, neither psychiatrists nor religious teachers had a category that allowed for homosexuality as an ordinary way of being sexual - therefore all gay desires were seen as a form of twisted heterosexuality that was either sick or sinful. This argument goes on to assert that if biblical authors had modern insight they would have allowed for expression of homosexual love while condemning lust on the part of gays or straights.

2. However, it is not true that hard *scientific* data has led to the discovery of a homosexual orientation. There is no consensus on what makes a person have erotic desires of one sort or another. What has changed is the definition of mental health or normalcy or morality based mostly on the way outspoken gay people have claimed to understand their experience. It seems right to say that there is no good reason to claim that same sex desires indicate mental illness - mental illness being an arbitrary notion. But new, hard scientific data hasn't led to such changes of mind, only new interpretation of the same human experiences that are as old as recorded history. Modern views have been driven by a sexual revolution which has destroyed the such categories as normal, moral, natural etc. for sexual behavior. Contemporary social science and the wisdom of this age also view bi-sexuality, transvestitism, fetishism and many other things as normal variations on the theme: human sexuality.

3. Presumably the apostle Paul knew real people. He and the rest of the New Testament writers knew women and men (including some with same sex desires that weren't freely chosen) with life stories like those in modern churches and modern society - the Roman world being much like ours. What the biblical authors also had were sexual categories that included natural and unnatural. They understood certain behaviors to be contrary to the intention of God as creator and as having come about because of the Fall. They believed that everyone had a fleshly nature and that by the Spirit the deeds of the flesh could be put to death (Romans 8). The fact that something inside an individual feels like love, and suggests behavior that seems desirable was not, in their thinking, an indication that it was good or true. The writers of scripture do not differ with the findings of modern science, but with the option of determining an experience to be righteous or not based on

the way it feels.

Can orientation change? Does Christian faith lead gays to become straight?

1. Two observations: a) Miracles occur. Like the man born blind in John 9 anyone can be miraculously transformed by a sovereign act of God. These, of course, are out-of-the-ordinary cases by definition. b) Because the level of sex drive differs from person to person and because there is a continuum from exclusively same-sex to exclusively opposite-sex erotic desire we should expect a variety of results among Christians who attempt to change from gay to straight. Claims of 'always' and 'never' in answering this question are not useful.

2. People with less powerful sex drives, and/or those who are more toward the middle of continuum between same and opposite sex desires may readily leave behind a life of gay sex, consider marriage, and by daily trusting the Lord (as all Christians must) to "deliver us from evil" live as fulfilled heterosexuals. Many testimonies to this effect are available. Men and women who have strong sex drives and exclusively same-sex erotic desires may never, even by persistent prayer, counseling, and other efforts arrive at heterosexual desire and the possibility of marriage. This does not represent moral failure or indicate God's disapproval.

3. Some scholars argue that the rejection of homosexual practice in Romans 1 is actually about heterosexuals who contradict their orientation and engage in gay sex for sinful thrills. However, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 uses two words (*malachoi* and *arsenokoitai*) referring to homosexual sin that cannot be construed as straight people acting in rebellion. The word *malachoi* (which means *soft*) apparently refers to effeminacy and/or the receptive partner in anal intercourse. It is significant that Paul says of these non-heterosexual Christians, "*And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God.*" Forgiveness of past sins, cleansing, new purpose, and the presence of the Holy Spirit led to changed behavior (whether or not changed feelings also occurred). The power of the gospel has not diminished since Paul wrote these words.

4. There is no promise of scripture that God will remove inward pressure toward any sin. Temptation to sin is not sin. Desire for same-sex erotic experience may persist for a lifetime. No special rejection, nor accommodation needs to be applied to this situation.

5. There may be some analogy between sexual orientation and proneness to depression. Some believers, for reasons they didn't consciously contribute to, spend a lifetime fighting off waves of depression. They feel defeated by the biblical injunctions to bear the burdens of another, or to rejoice always. All the descriptions of Christian love and hope appear foreign to them during long stretches of their lives. It often seems to them as if only a handful of fellow believers understand their experience. Christian faith may take away lifetime patterns of depression, but there is no guarantee that it will. God's love is no less in such cases. He recognizes and will reward the great faith that is required for some of his children to accomplish what comes easily to others.

How should we respond to the call for homosexual marriage?

1. The notion that stable, monogamous, just-like-marriage unions of homosexuals are possible is a new idea. There are very old descriptions of homosexual desire, even idealization of some types of homosexual experience in ancient Greek and other writings. But gay sex has always been seen as something 'other'. Homosexuals have been treated with different levels of acceptance in different cultures, but no society has ever equated same-sex and opposite-sex marriages and households.

2. Long standing gay relationships are not new, but, at least among men, they have rarely been sexually exclusive. Before the advent of AIDS there was little inclination among gay leaders of thought to combine sex, love, and a lifetime commitment to monogamy - to live like straights who would promise on a wedding day, "to forsake all others and be faithful to you alone." In most gay literature relationships can be spoken of as having integrity, honor, honesty and deep emotional intimacy with no requirement that they be sexually exclusive. Even though many heterosexual couples fail to live up to standards of monogamy, 'open marriages' are rarely defended as appropriate, especially for Christians.

3. That the creator had in mind that two women or two men would become one flesh when he established humans as sexual beings has not been advanced by any student of scripture until recent years. Most efforts to defend homosexual practice as consistent with the Bible work hard to narrow the message of Romans 1:24-25, 1Corinthians 6:9-11, and other similar passages. However, even when it is argued that these negative statements have limited scope, nothing positive has been advocated. No one can find in biblical texts, written over centuries, a single reference to a homosexual union like marriage. Attempts to see such in the stories of Ruth/Naomi and Jonathan/David fail. These four people are all obviously heterosexuals who were successfully married during their lives.

4. There is nothing new under the sun. It seems extraordinary that God intended from the beginning for some of his children to live in homosexual marriages, but never made that possibility known until the last decades of the twentieth century. Those in the Christian community who advocate marriage for gays, having bought the notion that strong feelings must be acted upon, want to limit self destructive behavior. But successful marriages need a foundation to build on, and the concept of a marriage-like union of homosexuals is founded on thin air, based on nothing in either history or scripture. Life-long, faithful marriages are difficult enough to accomplish even when bolstered by the word of Jesus to his disciples that no one should separate what God has joined. Most cultures, at least those not in serious decline, have had strong societal support to help married couples and families stay together. Husbands and wives who call Jesus Lord have powerful impetus for being faithful to their vows, even during times when they don't feel love for one another and may, indeed, be attracted to someone else. Most Christian marriages are filled with tender feelings and mutual expressions of love, but these are gifts from a generous God, not the foundation for one-flesh union. Their absence is not sufficient reason to determine that a marriage is ended. The wonderful feelings of romantic, sexual love grow best on a strong foundation ("what God has joined . . ."). They cannot serve as such a foundation.

5. All of the arguments for positive regard of homosexual experience are based on giving supreme significance to an individual's longings or feelings. If feelings determine behavior why should a gay couple stay together if one partner falls in love with someone else? Should gay marriages be monogamous? Why? What scripture or tradition has the weight, in this context, to direct an individual to obey when he or she no longer wants to do what ought to be done? Does any reasonable person really think that marriage can be based on the pretext that feelings of love are not subject to change? The concept of gay marriage has nothing but feelings to depend on. It is a fragile notion, built on no foundation. It offers no help to believers who want to live righteous lives.

How can we honestly carry out the call to reject lies and still love those who are tangled in lies?

1. In the words of Kermit the Frog, "It ain't easy being green." It is wearing, often painful to live with thoughts and emotions that are significantly different from those of people all around, especially for early adolescents who are naturally insecure about issues of identity and acceptance. When these differences suggest behavior that is both very desirable and morally questionable the pressure and struggle grow greater. Confusion and hatred of oneself can occur whether or not family and friends actively condemn or demean "queers." There are many studies that report high rates of suicide among gay teens and alcoholism among adults. Most Christians with same-sex desires have wrestled with God regarding their lot in life ("Do my desires cut me off from the love of God? If I prayed harder would He make me straight? How will I be treated if my Christian friends find out?"). Real love of sinners has to recognize, and empathize with the isolation and battles for a sense of worth that most homosexual people have had to struggle with. Obeying God is hard enough when there is understanding, support and acceptance/encouragement in the wider Christian community.

2. Our ability to love homosexual strugglers is dependent on breaking down such isolation.

- Wider acknowledgment that *all Christians experience failure*, have secret battles, feel lonely, etc. will promote everyone's spiritual health and make it more likely that those with homosexual desires will escape despair.
- We should especially *help young adolescents* ask questions and get support before homosexual inclinations and thoughts are reinforced by erotic experience.

- We can *draw parallels to heterosexual Christians* who struggle with some form of brokenness brought about by the Fall. Like homoerotic desire, depression, behavior disorders, communication handicaps, learning disabilities, body image disorders (anorexia, etc.) all are experienced from within, welling up in the mind and emotions usually without having been caused by conscious rebellious choices on the part of the individual involved. Isolation, despair, self-hatred, thoughts of suicide and questioning God occur in all these settings. Any of these conditions can lead to sinful behavior, but they need not. None of them is a mark of God's special disfavor.
- Many *straight single folks long for a loving marriage* and fulfilling sexual expression, but despite prayer and years of seeking a mate find themselves unmarried and with little reason to hope they will be. At various times in history war, disease and population control methods have left some regions with ratios of women to men so unequal that marriage is impossible for many members of a particular generation. Economic pressures, military service, and even Christian ministry have required spouses to live apart for years at a time. There are husbands and wives whose marriages include no love-making and no feelings of love. None of these people have a God-honoring opportunity to experience sexual intercourse, though they may strongly wish for it. Homosexuality should not be put in a category by itself.

3. We should reject teaching which suggests that the sin nature can be healed and not require a lifetime of choices, "putting to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13)." It is right to pray for God to remove a particular spiritual struggle. But his answer may be, "my grace is sufficient for you (2Cor. 12:7-9)." We have no basis for concluding that because a sinful desire is deep and abiding that it is no longer sin. We cannot claim that because God does not remove a temptation after earnest and faithful prayer that he must intend for his child to give in to the temptation.

Questions?

1. How can we help early adolescents minimize self hatred and isolation if they feel same-sex attractions? The gay-sex-is-good point of view is increasingly advocated in the culture at large. What healthy, practical alternative views are available for young people today?

2. Many single adults (gay or straight) are not married nor expect that they ever will be. How can we foster living situations that allow for the fellowship of a home, provides a lasting community of friends, and significantly decreases loneliness?

How does the church compare to the gay community?

1. The church has the awesome responsibility to be a people who "speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15)" to each other, living transparently and "bearing each other's burdens (Gal. 6:2)" not denying weakness and need. We too often make it difficult for honest strugglers, subtly preferring relationships that are based on proper outward appearance and conversations that are filled with clichés. Those who battle with anger, lust, addiction, and various compulsive behaviors (even when they are winning the battle) find it easier to talk like 'normal' people, with 'conventional' ups and downs. Most homosexual adults have spent years struggling to understand why their patterns of thought are different from the majority; pretending to talk and act like people with heterosexual desires; hiding furtive sexual experiences or fantasies. As a result the Christian community, even when there is no special focus on the evil of homosexual sin, becomes a tension-filled place to be. In the church there may be sincere worship, caring hearts and good theology, but the perception remains that honesty about struggles with homosexuality will lead to misunderstanding and rejection.

2. Two contrasting observations:

- As an 'embattled minority' the gay community has achieved a form of closeness, an esprit-de-corps, that can be exciting to experience. Credit should be given to those who have shown great courage and self-sacrifice in homophobic settings and in the battle with AIDS. It is a tragic indictment that many individuals find homosexual esprit-de-corps more life giving than Christian fellowship.
- Tolerance is the reigning value in the gay community (as it is for most contemporary leaders of thought). All of the self destructive vices flourish in a world where any call to change for the better is shouted down as intolerant. Narcissism, petulance, jealousy, infidelity, blame-casting and excesses of all kinds are frequently encountered in communities of gay people.

3. We need to declare the truth about God's purposes in creating us as sexual beings, become more honest about our own failures and grow in understanding others who have lived long with self doubt, isolation, and pretense. People with same-sex desires often feel personal rejection in any discussion of righteous and unrighteous living, even when nothing personal is intended. We all have lessons of love to learn.

Steve Zeisler, March 1996
Email: (SteveZ1034@aol.com)