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The disputes in early Christianity over what was sinful and what was faithful were vigorous and extensive.

A Reconciling Study

But isn't homosexuality a sin?

Let's cut to the chase. The huge debate in the contemporary Church seems to center on the fact that the Bible says homosexuality is a sin! Is that true, or not true? Do we believe the Bible, or don't we?

The discussion of homosexuality and the Church is tied up with our knowledge of and interpretation of both human sexuality and the Biblical material. It is sad that people who answer the above question with absolute certainty ("Yes, it is a sin") may be deficient in their knowledge both of human sexuality and of what the Bible actually says. What does the Bible say about "sin"?

The challenging part of answering the question quickly is that all of the Bible's individual ideas, stories, events and teachings must be understood in the light of the whole of Scripture. Those who are anxious to "cut to the chase" and to get a bottom-line "final answer" seldom have the patience to back up and re-consider the whole of Scripture.

In a very perceptive analysis, Jeffrey S. Siker (a self-described heterosexual white male Christian, and Associate Professor of New Testament at Loyola Marymount University, sets out to answer our question about sin:

The traditional Christian approach to "homosexuality" has been to view homosexual behavior as a sin, based on the biblical witness and on Christian tradition. . . . The question, though, is what constitutes the sin of same-sex relations. As we will see, when looking at the pertinent biblical texts, it appears that the sin lies in embracing and hence idolatrous practices or in going against ancient notions of human nature. It is important to ask about the character of sin and what it is that makes homosexual practices sinful, rather than merely assuming the sinfulness of all homosexual expressions.

What does "sin" mean? I define sin as that which goes against our understanding of God's intentions for faithful human existence. While it is not difficult to define sin as a term, it is extremely difficult to describe its contours, for notions of sin have changed significantly over time. Jesus and Paul both redefined the character of sin in their day. For example, in Jesus' day it was sinful to touch a leper -- for then one became ritually impure and unable to participate in the religious cult that regulate the life of the Jewish people, including the ability to make sacrifice for sins. For Jesus, however, it appears that not to touch the leper is a sin of omission. To avoid the leper is to go against God's intentions for human relationality. So Jesus touches

the leper and in so doing both sins and redefines sin at the same time.

In Paul's day to eat non-kosher food was a sin for faithful Jews. And yet for Paul, who continued to see himself as a faithful Jew even after his call/conversion experience, anyone who mandated the eating of kosher food or mandated the observance of circumcision for Gentil

The disputes in early Christianity over what was sinful and what was faithful were vigorous and extensive. Passions ran very deep -- to the point that Paul sees as accursed those in Galatia who teach the need for circumcision (Gal. 1:8-9). We can only surmise that these rival teachers extended to Paul the same courtesy of being accursed. In short, for Paul, being truly faithful was for his opponents being truly sinful, whereas acting sinfully (from Paul's vantage -- by mandating ritual food laws and circumcision) was for them the truest act of faithfulness to God.

Siker is raising questions internal to the New Testament, to remind us that Jesus, Paul and the apostles not only changed the "list" of what was to be considered sinful by followers of Christ, but also changed the criteria by which Christians were to look at sin, at other human beings, and therefore at exclusion or inclusion. The Bible does not give us set answers; the Bible gives us a Gospel-centered vision for approaching questions, in the faith that the Spirit will guide us in our mission to bring all people to Jesus Christ. So Siker continues:

So how do we go about defining and describing sin and faithfulness? What does God intend for us and how do we know it? How do we go about discerning the Spirit? Apparently only with much conflict and disagreement. We trust and believe that we can perceive the Spirit of God at work....

Thus, according to Acts, were Christians in the early church moved and persuaded by the spirited testimony of Peter and Paul regarding God's inclusion of the Gentiles apart from law-observance: that is, as non-Jews? Thus, were Christians in the sixteenth century moved by Luther and Calvin as they testified amid great opposition to an understanding of the gospel that was different from what was commonplace in their day?

Siker admits that in the first and sixteenth, and twentieth centuries, other believers were persuaded otherwise. And so he sees the Christian's task of listening to and understanding Scripture about human sexuality to be a "journey", not a quick "answer."

In our time many of us who identify ourselves as Christians in the Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions have been moved and persuaded by the spirited testimony and prophetic lives of self-affirming gay and lesbian Christians to accept loving monogamous same-sex unions as a faithful expression of God's intentions for those people who are gay and lesbian, even though we used to consider such relationships inherently sinful and against God's purposes

for all humanity. However, most of the church today still sees such relationships as sinful, in much the same terms as the tradition has long held, so we are at a painful impasse. To those of us who accept the legitimacy of same-sex relations, to maintain a "neutral" (whatever that might be) or negative position vis-à-vis our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters in Christ would be sinful. It would be to avoid touching and embracing those the church and society have traditionally deemed not just lepers but sinful lepers, those we have come to know as fellow Christians empowered by God's spirit as we are, whose sexual relations are neither scandal nor sin but rather another expression of human sexuality created by God.

I wonder how long gay and lesbian Christians can wait to find vibrant communities of faith where they are accepted for who they are as God's children.

What is interesting about the views of Jeffrey Siker's and others on homosexuality and human sexuality is that they have changed -- not because they became less concerned about the Bible's teaching, but because they explored it more deeply and more faithfully than Christian and social tradition had expected. Prejudices or negative views may be pushed to the background by anyone who simply relaxes or ignores traditional ideas -- or who accepts some or wishy-washy liberalism. But when the Gospel itself is re-examined, understood anew at its very core and re-embraced, then prejudices which have no place in the Gospel are completely vanquished. Again, Jeffrey Siker's view of the current debate in the churches:

Is there a way beyond this impasse? I both hope and despair. I have some hope because I believe that as more Christians experience the faithful testimony of gay and lesbian Christians, they will slowly come to realize that all same-sex relations are not inherently sinful. And yet I despair at times, seeing many gay and lesbian Christians abandon mainstream churches as hopeless places where they will receive only more bashing, some of it vicious and some of it polite. I worry as I wonder how long gay and lesbian Christians can wait to find vibrant communities of faith where they are accepted for who they are as God's children.

But, did we answer the question?

"Isn't Homosexuality a Sin? ... Is that true, or not true? Do we believe the Bible, or don't we?"

Sometimes, questions are posed in such a way as to "trap" anyone who tries to answer. The Gospels are full of stories in which faithful, believing Jews used such questions in order to trap Jesus into saying something which could be used against him.

The traps of the contemporary debate about human sexuality and LGBT persons are obvious and, as a result, many LGBT Christians simply want nothing to do with others who craft such questions. Perhaps a better way to answer the pair of questions: "Yes, we believe the Bible has more to say about humanity and human sexuality than a simple yes or no answer to any one question."

It is important to remember that those who disagreed sharply with Jesus were not godless nor faithless. The same is true in the contemporary debate. The passionate disagreements about human sexuality and homosexuality in the church are not a win/lose division, unless Christians abdicate their calling to discern the Spirit of God at work in the dialogue.

Resources

Jeffrey S. Siker's article appears in [Brawley, Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture](#).

Also by Jeffrey S. Siker: [Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate](#)

Martti Nissinen, Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective. [Read an excerpt from the Resource Library](#).

William Pausell, ed., Listening to the Spirit: A Handbook for Discernment, answers the question, "What is the Gospel message to our church as we relate to gay and lesbian Christians?" [Read an excerpt from the Resource Library](#).

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