

Dave's Laptop

October 14, 2014

If you were to guess the moral, ethical, theological or ecclesiological subject about which I've studied more over the years than any other, what would you guess?

I haven't actually kept track, but I'm sure that the subject of homosexuality would be in the top several. Over the past thirty years, I've read book after book on the subject, whether as a chaplain, as a therapist, as a theologian, or as a pastor. I've read essays, written research papers, developed clinical decision trees, interviewed persons from various perspectives and life experiences, and anguished over the most accurate interpretation of the biblical texts.

Several recent events have come together to cause me to ponder this subject with you once more this week: (1) the Supreme Court's de facto allowing of eleven more states to enact laws enabling same-sex marriage; (2) Pope Francis's restatement of his views on the subject; (3) the "coming out" of one of the most brilliant, gentle, courteous, compassionate, God-honoring and theologically astute young adults in my extended family; and (4) the publication of a series of online articles by Christian ethicist David Gushee of Mercer University (David and I served on the same church staff at different times).

As a bit of background, it occurred to me many years ago that one of the reasons why the Church persisted in particular interpretations of Paul's writings that led to a certain view and understanding of "woman's place" in home and church was that there were not yet enough theologically-trained women with the ability to look at the Greek text and point out that "It doesn't say that." In instance after instance, Paul had very specific words in Greek that would have allowed him to say what English translators usually had him say . . . but Paul didn't use those words. Over and over again, Paul was very careful NOT to say what male translators "put in his mouth" about "women's place."

I think a similar dynamic may be at work with respect to the texts most frequently cited with respect to homosexuality. It has only been in the last few decades that a sufficient number theologically-trained and openly-homosexual theologians has been able and willing to make similar points: Paul had very specific words in Greek by which he could have said what English translators have "put in his mouth," but those are not the words he used.

In any event, I want to share a few semi-random thoughts with you that grow out of David's articles (most of what follows, even if not in quotes, grows out of those essays). His essays spend quite a lot of time examining the biblical texts, and he provides a good summary of current scholarship on the matter, but those considerations are more complex than a *Laptop* allows. I'll be glad to send them to you upon your request.

General Principles & Questions

What posture should one set of forgiven sinners take toward another set of forgiven sinners?

What does it say about our priorities that we will fight to the death over how 1/20th of persons handle their sexuality rather than take meaningful stands on poverty, genocide, clergy sex abuse, and a host of other destructive forces in our world?

It says something really terrible when the least safe place to deal with sexual orientation and identity issues is the Christian family and church.

Regardless of our views on Christian sexual ethics, perhaps we can agree that:

1. Gay people exist.
2. It is wrong to call them names or use slurs about them.

3. They should not be bullied.
4. They should not be stigmatized or treated with contempt.
5. They should never have to be afraid of violence as they go about their daily lives.
6. Their relationships should not be criminalized.
7. They should not be discriminated against in employment, housing, and public accommodation.
8. They should not be blamed for America's security problems or social ills.
9. The gay community contains a sizable population of professing Christians.
10. There should be no space in church life or culture for their dehumanization or mistreatment.

Principles of Interpretation

Over the centuries, Christians have had fundamentally different opinions about a host of issues, and Christians on every side of those issues have cited Scripture to support their opinions.

Christians have often been so passionate about "Truth" as they understood it that they have sought to exclude or to destroy their opponents, and have actually and repeatedly done so when sufficiently empowered.

Even so, the majority of Christians have changed their minds about many of these issues over time.

Humility and charity are called for when engaging in moral and theological argument. Every one of us "sees through a glass darkly."

While there are exceptions, a great many of the persons arguing for any particular understanding are sincerely trying to be faithful and obedient to God's Word.

Careful scholarship acknowledges that there are multiple ways to understand every one of the texts frequently cited on this issue.

Even if the "traditional" interpretation were to stand, we still choose to ignore or to overlook 95% of the behaviors that the Scriptures proscribe in the same way. What justification can be offered for enforcing this behavior to the exclusion of the rest? (For example, very few Christians who affirm that "practicing homosexuals" are "bound for hell" would also affirm that "practicing gossips" or "practicing greedy people" or "practicing gluttons" or "practicing pornography addicts" are "going to hell.")

We can deal with this dilemma by "throwing out" or "cutting off" one of its "horns" (the biblical witness or the scientific evidence) or by finding some way to integrate the two.

"A simple way to bring such integration is to say that *normally* gender identity is clearly male or female, *normally* gender identity matches gender assignment, and *normally* sexual orientation is heterosexual. That is to say, this is statistically what most people experience, and thus the way that most societies have structured their marital, sexual and familial expectations, and thus the account most likely to be reflected in ancient religious texts, including the Bible."

Choices Churches Have

1. "**Exclusionist**": Homosexual persons, even celibate ones, are rejected from the faith community. Many churches default to this option, but this option becomes much more problematic when members' children turn out to be gay; not to mention the fact that virtually every congregation has at least a few closeted gay members already.

2. **“Ask No Questions”**: If a congregation’s membership policy does not routinely involve moral examination across a whole range of biblically-relevant issues, there is no justification for singling out just one issue.
3. **“Who Are We to Judge”**: Recognizing that all of us are sinners and that the church “is a field hospital for sinners, not a country club for saints,” we withhold judgment on anyone except ourselves (Romans 14:4).
4. **“Dialogue & Discernment”**: Some choose to regard this matter as one of the “disputable matters” to which Paul refers in Romans 14, deciding to live together in forbearing and loving community despite significant differences of conviction.
5. **“Pastoral Accommodation”**: Recognizing that the church is always full of people (ourselves included) who fall short of God’s purposes in many ways (think of anger, greed, lust, gluttony, sloth, vengeance, divorce, etc.) we do our best to encourage one another toward holy living through increasing submission to God’s Spirit.
6. **“Normative Reconsideration”**: Given what we do and don’t know about the relevant biblical texts—or even which texts are most relevant—and given what we do and don’t know from scientific inquiry, we may decide that we need to rethink this whole issue.

A Way Forward

“Our conclusions mainly depend on whether, in light of all relevant factors known to us today, we can think differently about how to relate our Christian account of God’s design in creation with the existence of a particular small minority of our neighbors, some of whom are devout followers of Christ.”

We need to come to grips with the total failure of the “ex-gay” movement, as exemplified by the collapse of Exodus International, the best-known group purporting to help homosexuals change their orientation. In his apology, issued as Exodus closed up shop, their CEO noted that “99.9% of the persons we have tried to help have not experienced a change in their sexual orientation.”

The Creation Story in Genesis 1-2 is frequently cited as revealing God’s purposes for our sexuality. The Fall occurs, of course, in Genesis 3. Dr. Gushee points out that “We live in a Genesis 3 world, not a Genesis 1-2 world, and this means that *everybody’s* sexuality is broken and disordered, just like everything else about us. *Nobody* has Genesis 1-2 sexuality.”

“Traditionalists often speak as if heterosexual people’s sexuality is innocent while gay and lesbian people’s sexuality is broken/damaged/sinful. Revisionists often speak as if everyone’s sexuality is innocent. From the perspective of Genesis 3, *no one’s sexuality is innocent. Everyone’s sexuality is broken in ways known quite well to each of us in our own heart.*”

Finally, there are three broad approaches to sexual ethics in our culture today:

1. **The Mutual Consent Ethic**: Taught both implicitly and explicitly in our schools at many levels, this is a destructive ethic that results, among other things, in some 20% of college women reporting being sexually assaulted while in college.
2. **The Loving Relationship Ethic**: Taught in most of our “love songs,” this ethic lifts up relationships that are “monogamous as long as they last,” but it doesn’t expect them to last . . . and most of them don’t.
 - Half of all children in the U.S. are conceived accidentally.

- Forty percent of our children are born out of wedlock, and about one in five pregnancies ends in elective abortion.
- Even if they survive pregnancy, children have become increasingly expendable and “in the way” in our hedonistic, materialistic culture.

“The broad social collapse of the concept of lifetime covenant marriage is without question the greatest sexual-familial ethical issue of our time.”

3. **The Covenantal-Marital Ethic:** This ethic, taught by Christian tradition, largely collapsed during the 20th century into what is often little more than “serial monogamy.” Perhaps the desire of homosexual couples to enter lifetime covenants “offers all of us an opportunity for Christian moral renewal toward a much more rigorous practice of covenantal sexual ethics.”

It is far too often the case that we Christians are known only by what we’re against, rather than by our positive commitment to grace-filled living characterized by courage and compassion. Whatever your thoughts and convictions about these matters, I invite you to join me in the continued quest for Spirit-inspired wisdom for the living of these days.

Lots to think about.

Dave