Homosexuality & The Church: Scripture & Experience

Luke Timothy Johnson

Is the present crisis in Christian denominations over homosexuality really about sex? I don't think so. If it were, there would be no particular reason why homosexuals should be singled out for attention; there is more than enough sexual disorder among heterosexuals to fuel moral outrage. The church could devote its energies to resisting the widespread commodification of sex in our culture, the manipulation of sexual attraction in order to sell products. It could fight the exploitation of women and children caught in a vast web of international prostitution and pornography. It could correct the perceptions that enabled pedophilia to be practiced and protected among clergy. It could name the many ways that straight males enable such distorted and diseased forms of sexuality.

Instead, the relatively small set of same-sex unions gets singled out for moral condemnation, while the vast pandemic of sexual disorder goes ignored. In my view, this scapegoating of homosexuality has less to do with sex than with perceived threats to the authority of Scripture and the teaching authority of the church. For those opposed to the ordination of women priests and bishops, or of married people, deviation from the uniform and steady practice of the church (glossing over the fact that it has rarely been steady or uniform) means starting down the slippery slope toward rejecting church authority altogether. And accepting covenanted love between persons of the same sex represents the same downward spiral with regard to Scripture, since the Bible nowhere speaks positively or even neutrally about same-sex love (glossing over the relationship of Jonathan and David, see 1 Samuel 18–2 Samuel 1). For those who think this way, the world is becoming dangerously depraved; a line must be drawn in the sand somewhere, and homosexuality seems clearly to be the place.

Of course, Christianity as actually practiced has never lived in precise accord with the Scriptures. War stands in tension with Jesus' command of nonviolence, while divorce, even under another name (annulment), defies Jesus' clear prohibition. And which Christians have ever observed the exhortation in Leviticus to stone psychics and put adulterers to death? But make this point to those opposed to same-sex unions, and you're liable to find it turned back against you. *See how far down the slippery slope we have already come?* many will ask. *This has to stop somewhere!* For them, the authority of Scripture and tradition resides in a set of commands, and loyalty is a matter of obedience. If the church has always taught that same-sex relations are wrong, and the Bible consistently forbids it, then the question is closed.

It is not difficult to understand these positions; indeed, they were probably held by many of us at some point until our lives and the lives of those we love made us begin to question them. So we can—and should—understand the mix of fear and anger that fuels the passionate defense of such positions. For those who hold them, something sacred is at stake. And something sacred *is* at stake. The authority of Scripture and of the church's tradition is scarcely trivial. A real challenge confronts those of us who perceive God at work among all persons and in all covenanted and life-enhancing forms of sexual love. That challenge is to take our tradition and the Scripture with at least as much seriousness as those who use the Bible as a buttress for rejecting forms of sexual love they fear or cannot understand.

The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to *do* with what the text says? We must state our grounds for standing in tension with the clear commands of Scripture, and include in those grounds some basis in Scripture itself. To avoid this task is to put ourselves in the very position that others insist we already occupy—that of liberal despisers of the tradition and of the church's sacred writings, people who have no care for the shared symbols that define us as Christian. If we see ourselves as liberal, then we must be liberal in the name of the gospel, and not, as so often has been the case, liberal despite the gospel.

I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us. By so doing, we explicitly reject as well the premises of the scriptural statements condemning homosexuality—namely, that it is a vice freely chosen, a symptom of human corruption, and disobedience to God's created order.

I will say a further word about "experience," a term that without careful discernment may become simply an excuse for irresponsible behavior. First, though, it is important to acknowledge that terms like "sexual orientation," and even "heterosexual" and "homosexual" are themselves distorting oversimplifications of complex human realities. One reason for paying attention to specific human stories, in fact, is that they so often prove more complex and obscure than the categories that polarize debates and block discernment.

Implicit in an appeal to experience is also an appeal to the living God whose creative work never ceases, who continues to shape humans in his image every day, in ways that can surprise and even shock us. Equally important, such an appeal goes to the deepest truth revealed by Scripture itself—namely, that God *does* create the world anew at every moment, *does* call into being that which is not, and *does* raise the dead to new and greater forms of life.

Our situation vis-à-vis the authority of Scripture is not unlike that of abolitionists in nineteenth-century America. During the 1850s, arguments raged over the morality of slave-holding, and the exegesis of Scripture played a key role in those debates. The exegetical battles were one-sided: all abolitionists could point to was Galatians 3:28 and the Letter of Philemon, while slave owners had the rest of the Old and New Testaments, which gave every indication that slaveholding was a legitimate, indeed God-ordained social arrangement, one to which neither Moses nor Jesus nor Paul raised a fundamental objection. So how is it that now, in the early twenty-first century, the authority of the scriptural texts on slavery and the arguments made on their basis appear to all of us, without exception, as completely beside the point and deeply wrong?

The answer is that over time the human experience of slavery and its horror came home to the popular conscience—through personal testimony and direct personal contact, through fiction like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and, of course, through a great Civil War in which ghastly numbers of people gave their lives so that slaves could be seen not as property but as persons. As persons, they could

be treated by the same law of love that governed relations among all Christians, and could therefore eventually also realize full civil rights within society. And once that experience of their full humanity and the evil of their bondage reached a stage of critical consciousness, this nation could neither turn back to the practice of slavery nor ever read the Bible in the same way again.

Many of us who stand for the full recognition of gay and lesbian persons within the Christian communion find ourselves in a position similar to that of the early abolitionists—and of the early advocates for women's full and equal roles in church and society. We are fully aware of the weight of scriptural evidence pointing away from our position, yet place our trust in the power of the living God to reveal as powerfully through personal experience and testimony as through written texts. To justify this trust, we invoke the basic Pauline principle that the Spirit gives life but the letter kills (2 Corinthians 3:6). And if the letter of Scripture cannot find room for the activity of the living God in the transformation of human lives, then trust and obedience must be paid to the living God rather than to the words of Scripture.

For me this is no theoretical or academic position, but rather a passionate conviction. It is one many of us have come to through personal struggle, and for some, real suffering. In my case, I trusted that God was at work in the life of one of my four daughters, who struggled against bigotry to claim her sexual identity as a lesbian. I trusted God was at work in the life she shares with her partner—a long-lasting and fruitful marriage dedicated to the care of others, and one that has borne fruit in a wonderful little girl who is among my and my wife's dear grandchildren. I also trusted the many stories of students and friends whose life witnessed to a deep faith in God but whose bodies moved sexually in ways different from the way my own did. And finally I began to appreciate the ways in which my own former attitudes and language had helped to create a world where family, friends, and students were treated cruelly.

These are significant recognitions, ones that arise from hard-fought daily experience. It is extraordinarily important, however, that those of us who base our convictions on experience do not make the category of experience a form of cheap grace, as though whatever feels good is morally acceptable. By "experience" we do not mean every idiosyncratic or impulsive expression of human desire. We refer rather to those profound stories of bondage and freedom, longing and love, shared by thousands of persons over many centuries and across many cultures, that help define them as human. The church cannot say "yes" to what the New Testament calls porneia ("sexual immorality"); but the church must say yes to the witness of lives that build the holiness of the church.

The challenge, therefore, is to discern what constitutes the positive and negative in sexual behavior. A start would be to adapt Galatians 3:28 and state that "in Christ there is neither gay nor straight"—and on that basis, to begin to ask serious questions concerning the holiness of the church, applying the same criteria on both sides. If *porneia* among heterosexuals includes promiscuity, violence, and exploitation, then the church must condemn similar forms of homosexual activity. If the church condemns the bath-house style of gay life, it must also condemn the playboy style of straight life. Similarly, if holiness among heterosexuals includes fidelity, chastity, modesty, and fruitfulness, we can ask whether and how the same elements are present in same-sex love.

Such discernment is difficult, but it is necessary. I believe there is the deepest sort of consonance between such an approach to God's revelation and the witness of the New Testament. Indeed, the New Testament compositions owe their existence to the struggle to resolve the cognitive dissonance between a set of sacred texts that appeared to exclude a crucified messiah as God's chosen one ("cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree," Deuteronomy 21:23) and the powerful experience of Jesus' new and exalted life as Lord through the Holy Spirit—an experience that empowered the first believers.

In this interpretive struggle, brave witnesses like Paul refused to force their experience of God in Christ into the frame of their previous understanding of Scripture. Instead, they followed the witness of the experience of God in Christ among them, and in light of that experience began to reread and reinterpret all of their Scripture as prophecy that disclosed Christ in ways they had not perceived before—and could not have perceived before. In short, we would not have the New Testament as Scripture if the first believers had not been willing to obey the living God disclosed in their own bodies more than the precedents provided by the writings—writings they also, by the way, considered holy and inspired by God.

In my book *Scripture and Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church*, I have discussed how the New Testament provides another important witness to the same process of faithful obedience to God's direction in human stories. I refer to the account of the Acts of the Apostles (chapters 10–15) concerning the church's decision to include Gentiles in the church without requiring them to be circumcised or to observe the Mosaic law. Luke's narrative shows how God moved ahead of the human characters in accepting Gentiles as righteous, and how difficult it was for the church's leaders to learn what God was up to. It shows, however, that Peter and Paul and James were open to the truth God wanted them to learn. They paid attention to human narratives—testimonies—that spoke of God at work among Gentiles in ways that not even Jewish believers in a crucified messiah could appreciate. The apostles had to be shown how the same Holy Spirit who had come upon them also came to those very unlike them, people whom they regarded as unclean by nature and evil in their practices. When shown the evidence of transformed lives, they saw and accepted what God was doing.

Accepting Gentiles as beloved of God was, to be sure, but one step, however dramatic and difficult. Harder still was finding a way for Jews and Gentiles to live together, sharing table fellowship in a world that took the body symbolism of eating at least as seriously as that of sex. Compromises on both sides were required for the church to remain united despite such important differences (Acts 15:20–21). Acts provides an example for us of the church discerning God's activity in human lives, being obedient in faith to God's self-disclosure in such stories, and then reinterpreting Scripture in light of the experience of God.

I suggest, therefore, that the New Testament provides impressive support for our reliance on the experience of God in human lives—not in its commands, but in its narratives and in the very process by which it came into existence. In what way are we to take seriously the authority of Scripture? What I find most important of all is not the authority found in specific commands, which are fallible, conflicting, and often culturally conditioned, but rather the way Scripture creates the mind of Christ in its readers, authorizing them to reinterpret written texts in light of God's Holy Spirit active in human lives. When read within the perspective of a Scripture that

speaks everywhere of a God disclosing Godself through human experience, our stories become the medium of God's very revelation.

Along with Scripture, the teaching of the church on sexuality is based on what is called "natural law." By no means do I want to dismiss this tradition. Indeed, in its positive dimensions, the natural-law tradition is compatible with my argument that moral thinking should begin with what God discloses to us in creation. But I add three cautionary points: (1) appeals to what is "natural" are often in fact appeals to what is culturally constructed (Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 11 on the veiling of women comes to mind), and must always be challenged on the basis of actual human experience; (2) determining what is "natural" or the "order of creation" is often—as in recent Vatican theology—far removed from the analysis of actual human existence, and instead represents a form of essentialist thinking on the basis of Scripture; (3) appeals to the order of creation need to be chastened—as Paul himself recognized in 1 Corinthians 11—by the recognition that the "new creation" brought about by the Resurrection of Jesus has real implications for our understanding of the body and sexuality (see 1 Corinthians 6–7).

Still another New Testament story holds exemplary significance for us today, from the part of the Gospel of John that has come to be called "the Book of Signs." All of John 9 is taken up with the story of Jesus healing a man born blind, and the controversy with parents and Jewish leaders that follows that healing. Significantly, the story begins with Jesus rejecting the notion that the man's blindness was the result of anybody's sin, either his or his parents. His body was simply an opportunity for Jesus to show the "outward sign" of God's presence and power in the world—what John calls his "glory," through Jesus' transformation of his life. Jesus is the light of the world, and his touch brings the man's body into the light, so that he is no longer simply the object of other people's gaze, but one who himself sees, perceives, and assesses his own life and that of others. This specific man's body becomes the place where God's action in the world is revealed (9:1–7). Though neither his acquaintances nor his family understand how he has received his sight, they believe him when he tells them that Jesus was the one who gave him this great gift (9:8–12). But those John calls "the Jews" and "the Pharisees" do not accept his story, informing him that Jesus "is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath" (9:16). When the man insists that Jesus is the one who healed him, they reject his account and admonish him: "Give glory to God; we know that this man is a sinner." But the healed man is steadfast. "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; what I do know is that I was blind and now I can see." And: "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." The man's experience and testimony stand against the authorities' insistence that God can only act within the framework of righteousness as defined by traditional piety.

The Pharisees' sin has come to be called "scotosis," a deliberate and willful darkening of the mind that results from the refusal to acknowledge God's presence and power at work in human stories. If the neglect of Scripture is a form of sin, John suggests, a blind adherence to Scripture when God is trying to show us the truth in human bodies is also a form of sin, and a far more grievous one. Both our own sense of integrity as Christians, and our hope of entering into positive conversation with those who disagree with us, obligate us to engage Scripture with maximum devotion, love, and intelligence. If it is risky to trust ourselves to the evidence of God at work in transformed lives even when it challenges the clear statements of Scripture, it is a far greater risk to allow the words of Scripture to blind us to the presence and power of the living God.

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