

*Guest commentary*

## Church ought to suggest that God may have something better for our LGBT brothers and sisters

By Jake Horner

Special to The Layman

Homosexuality has been the major issue debated within the PC(USA) during the last 30 or 40 years. The discussion actually began, before the denomination came into being in 1983, within the two denominations which merged to form the PC(USA), the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The General Assemblies of the each of the respective denominations adopted an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of ordination standards in 1978 (UPCUSA) and 1979 (PCUS). The two AI's, which used essentially the same language, state

We conclude that homosexuality is not God's wish for humanity. This we affirm, despite the fact that some of its forms may be deeply rooted in an individual's personality structure. Some persons are exclusively homosexual in orientation. In many cases homosexuality is more a sign of the brokenness of God's world than of willful rebellion. In other cases homosexual behavior is freely chosen or learned in environments where normal development is thwarted. Even where the homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a state nor a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world.<sup>1</sup>

The difference between pastoral care and theology has often been muddled during the many years of debate on the degree of inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) persons within the PC(USA). Complicating the discussion are what might be called cultural liberals and conservatives at either end of the continuum. At one end are cultural conservatives who are desperately afraid of opening the closet door and finding a "queer;" at the other end are cultural liberals who are desperately afraid of opening the closet door and finding a conservative. Similarly, within the theological spectrum are many whose focus is on the glory of Jesus Christ in the Church and are concerned that sound theology is being sacrificed for a matter of social justice; and many whose focus is on the glory of Jesus Christ in the Church and who are concerned that a matter of justice for an oppressed portion of society is being lost to theological rigidity. The challenge to the church is to do both equally well – to welcome the "stranger" in our midst in the full embrace of the love of Jesus Christ, and also to maintain a theology faithful to the apostolic tradition that has been handed on to us.

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<sup>1</sup> *Policy Statement and Recommendations* (Minutes, General Assembly of the UPCUSA, 1978), 1:57. This AI was set aside by the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 2010.

Though theology and pastoral care are inextricably interwoven, and in practice cannot be separated, for the sake of discussion I am going to begin with the pastoral concern of the church before turning to theology. The command of Jesus Christ is clear: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:4-5); and love your neighbor as I have loved you (Lev. 19:18; John 13:34).<sup>2</sup> I'd like to suggest three words that ought to characterize loving our neighbor.

### **Tolerance**

Since the fall, God has tolerated sinners every day for the sake of Jesus Christ; we can do no less. In fact, the church needs to do much more than “tolerate” at arm’s length. The church ought to throw her arms wide and embrace every sinner – and we are all sinners – with the full measure of the extraordinary love of Jesus Christ: the deep, rich, wide, all-encompassing love of Jesus Christ that creates a safe environment wherein the pain of personal transformation can be endured under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Every single one of us is in desperate need of that transformation into the image of Christ – “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from *porneia*<sup>3</sup>” (1 Thess. 4:3).<sup>4</sup> Sex outside of marriage? That’s *porneia*! Sex before marriage? *Porneia*! Lewd pictures on the internet? *Porneia*! Looking at a woman [who isn’t your wife] lustfully (Matt. 5:28)? *Porneia*! And God tolerates us all for the sake of Jesus Christ and His coming kingdom.

### **Inclusivity**

God includes all kinds of repentant sinners in His kingdom. As a matter of fact, every person in the kingdom was once a sinner. Every church leader was once (and still is) a sinner. Every minister. Every elder. Every deacon.<sup>5</sup> All stand condemned by sin; all have been given the opportunity to repent and believe the Gospel and submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Indeed, every person who is a member of the church universal is a sinner redeemed by the grace of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

### **Diversity**

God includes a diverse array of repentant sinners in His kingdom. This is one of the truly beautiful things about the church; it is something to be celebrated. God’s grace knows no bounds when it comes to the population of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, who “by His blood ... ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and ... made them a

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<sup>2</sup> Deut. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27; John 13:34.

<sup>3</sup> *Porneia* is a transliteration of the Greek word *pornei,a*. In the Pauline corpus, *pornei,a* is generally the most inclusive term related to sexual immorality, see also 1 Cor. 5:1, 6:3, 6:18, 7:2; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; also Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:3.

<sup>4</sup> Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> These are the three ordained offices in the PC(USA).

kingdom and priests to our God” (Rev 5:9-10). Every race, ethnicity, language group, age group, and, indeed, sexual orientation is represented in the church. All are sinners redeemed by grace. This is the incredible beauty of God’s eternal purpose to sum up all things in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10): “... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”(Rom. 3:23, 24). God does not discriminate against repentant sinners, neither should the Church.

### **Toward a theology of human sexuality**

The mandate of the Church is to love our neighbor, be tolerant of one another, recognize the inclusion of one another in the Church, and celebrate the diversity of human beings God has called into His Church. The question then becomes: How are we to love our neighbor? What does Christlike agape-love look like? We turn to theology to discover an answer.

Most of the proposed answers from the theological right are concerned with the great historical doctrines of the reformed Church: the Authority of Scripture, Christology, Ecclesiology, etc. or, as Matthew L. Camlin put it in his response to the “White Paper:”<sup>6</sup> “... differing understanding(s) of Scripture, authority, Christology (both the person and the work of Christ), the extent of salvation (creeping universalism), and a broader set of moral issues around which fracture lines appear.”<sup>7</sup> The theological left has responded to the social inequity suffered by our LGBT sisters and brothers by seeking to establish the justice of full inclusion in the life of the Church for them.<sup>8</sup>

Assuming that sexual orientation is morally neutral,<sup>9</sup> what are the theological issues important to understanding homoerotic praxis in light of God’s revelation? Both the right and left point to the same scriptural passages and arrive at opposite conclusions. Let us briefly examine some of the relevant Scriptures.

“In the beginning God created...” The pinnacle of His creative effort was the creation of the image bearer: “Let us make man in our image ... in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:26, 27). In both the Greek and Hebrew the word for *man* used in Gen. 1:26, 27 is generic to humankind, whereas the words for *male* and *female* are gender specific. In Gen. 2, there is more detail provided about the making of the image bearer: God

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<sup>6</sup> Fellowship PC(USA), “Time for Something New,” Fellowship PC(USA), <http://www.fellowship-pcusa.org/wp-content/uploads/White-Paper.pdf>, published January 7, 2011 [accessed March 28, 2011].

<sup>7</sup> Matthew L. Camlin, “White paper is a symptom of ‘Christological amnesia,’” The Presbyterian Outlook, [http://pres-outlook.com/component/content/article/44-breaking-news/11182-white-paper-is-a-symptom-of-christological-amnesia.html#\\_ftn1](http://pres-outlook.com/component/content/article/44-breaking-news/11182-white-paper-is-a-symptom-of-christological-amnesia.html#_ftn1), published March 21, 2011 [accessed March 28, 2011].

<sup>8</sup> This work has been led by organizations such as More Light Presbyterians, That All May Freely Serve, and The Covenant Network of Presbyterians within the PC(USA).

<sup>9</sup> Harold Lewis, *Christian Social Witness*, The New Church’s Teaching Series, Vol. 10 (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2001), 136. “We do not condemn heterosexual persons for *being* heterosexual, although we may well raise questions about how they express their sexuality. We decry inappropriate or immoral heterosexual *acts*, not the orientation of the actor” (*italics original*). Some may find this statement challenging. The way we are “wired” isn’t the issue. All of us are broken in our sexuality as a consequence of the fall. This is understood in the doctrine of the Total Depravity of Man. Nevertheless, each of us is responsible before Holy God for our sexual practice.

made an *Adam* (Gen. 2:7), and declared His covenant with it (Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:15-17). I say “it” because there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that the *Adam* was sexually differentiated. We can say that the image was complete at this point because God declared His covenant. We can also say that both masculine and feminine were present in the *Adam*; for if masculine and feminine have their origin in God and if the *Adam* bore the image of God, then both masculine and feminine were present in the *Adam*.

An astonishing statement in the creation story follows in Gen. 2:18: “it is *not good* that the man should be alone (*italics added*);” again the word for *man* is generic. Up to that point God had pronounced of all His work “good.” God sets about to rectify what He had described as *not good*: He built<sup>10</sup> from the *Adam*’s side a counterpart. We can safely assume that the human body has nothing to do with the image of God, for God is Spirit (John 4:24); therefore the image must refer to something else. If a human being is comprised of body and soul, then we must look to the soul to discover the image of God. What did God do then, when He made the woman?

Two options present themselves: either He built the woman’s hypostasis<sup>11</sup> *ex nihilo* and left the hypostasis of the *Adam* untouched or He separated the *Adam*’s hypostasis into what we now refer to as masculine and feminine. Scripture appears to support the second alternative: “she shall be called woman, because she was *taken out* of man” (Gen. 2:23, *italics added*). So then, the image that was complete in the *Adam* is now fully complete only when both the masculine and feminine are present, but each in its own distinct body. Yet the image is still manifested in either the masculine or feminine hypostasis, for both are comprised of the same three elements: intellect, affections, and will, as are each of the three hypostases of the Trinity. The human hypostasis was designed for the express purpose of being “inhabited” by God in the Second Person of the Trinity; or, put another way, the human hypostasis is “God shaped.” So, the human hypostasis of necessity bears the image of God.

God gave the man and woman the “sacrament” of sexual intercourse by which what He had separated was *sacramentally* reunited. The Reformed church recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Eucharist, yet sexual intercourse has many of the characteristics we associate with them, to wit: “it was instituted by God Himself,”<sup>12</sup> and “outwardly represents, and, as it were, offers unto our sight those things which inwardly he performs for us.”<sup>13</sup> The “inward reality” brought about in the outward sign of intercourse is a mystery—the reunification of masculine and feminine into “one flesh.”

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<sup>10</sup> Gr. oivkodome,w

<sup>11</sup> My working definition of hypostasis: a distinct real occurrence of intellect, affections, and will. This is the classical understanding of person. In light of current sociological or psychological theory it may be a bit simple, but it still holds, at least as a simplifying assumption.

<sup>12</sup> Chapter XIX, Second Helvetic Confession, *PC(USA) Book of Confessions*, C-5.169 (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2004), 96.

<sup>13</sup> Chapter XIX, Second Helvetic Confession, *PC(USA) Book of Confessions*, C-5.169 (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2004), 96. Also, the Westminster Shorter Catechism Q. 163. What are the parts of a sacrament? A. The parts of a sacrament are two: the one, an outward and sensible sign used according to Christ’s own appointment; the other, an inward and spiritual grace thereby signified (BoC, 2004, 223).

The author of the letter to the Ephesians extends this mystery to Christ and the Church: “for this reason a man shall leave (his) father and (his) mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:31-32 NAB). Edith M. Humphrey describes this union well in her recent book *Grand Entrance*:

Here a double unity is envisioned—our unity with the Godhead through Christ, our unity with each other. Such a unity amounts to glory for the followers of Jesus. ... This glory comes at the initiative of the Father and because of what the Son and the Spirit have done, are doing, and will do for us. The unity of the Holy Trinity is to be wonderfully mirrored in His people, who are to become “perfectly one,” even as they feed upon Christ and gaze upon the Three-in-One who is/are unity personified.<sup>14</sup>

This union between Christ and the church, wrought by the Holy Spirit, is so intimate that Paul describes the church as Christ’s body. Just as the Holy, Eternal, Almighty God YHWH is Three and One, so the church is many and yet one body through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is the mystery of the *imago Dei* in its fullest expression.

So then, the image of God in humanity is seen in the human hypostasis, in the “one flesh” union of masculine and feminine, and in the union of Christ and the Church.

I now turn from the positive implications of God’s purpose in creation to the negative. Leviticus 18:19-23 is a statement about human sexual practice. It contains five prohibitions, with the prohibition concerning child sacrifice in the middle, which is the place of emphasis. The two statements preceding it are prohibitions against inappropriate intercourse with women; the two following are prohibitions against intercourse with creatures other than women. There is a clear movement from the most appropriate partner to the least appropriate;<sup>15</sup> each statement introduces a new element of dissimilarity from the ideal sexual partner, which was one’s wife at the point of maximum fecundity.<sup>16</sup> The most grievous offense is presenting “seed” in service to an idol.<sup>17</sup> A legitimate interpretive question is whether “seed” refers literally to semen [*i.e.* having sex with a temple prostitute] or figuratively to one’s children. Either way, the patriarch is prohibited from sacrificing the future of the family to an idol, and service to an idol is put in company with certain sexual practices; the inclusion of these practices associates them with idolatry.

The Apostle Paul made this association in his letter to the Romans. In vv. 1:18ff St. Paul takes idolaters to task, and associates idolatry with four judgments that lead to homoerotic

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<sup>14</sup> Edith M. Humphrey, *Grand Entrance* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011), 72-73.

<sup>15</sup> I am assuming this was written from a male/patriarchal point of view.

<sup>16</sup> In the kinship culture of the ancient mid-east the primary social concern, and the primary responsibility of the patriarch, was the transfer of the family’s/clan’s land and traditions to the next generation, and providing enough men to defend and tend the land (Dr. Ron Tappy, OT01 lecture, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, fall, 2009-10).

<sup>17</sup> The passage in Leviticus 18:21 has some complexity to it in the Greek that usually gets missed in the English committee translations. The LXX reads literally: “you shall not give from your seed to serve/worship an *archon* (gen. ruler, usu. trans. Molech; Molech in the Hebrew).” A detailed exegesis of Lev. 18:19-23 is beyond the scope of this article.

practice.<sup>18</sup> The passage has an intertextual echo with Lev. 18:22 which describes “lying with a male as with a woman” as an “abomination”<sup>19</sup> – “men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men” (Rom 1:27).

There are also intertextual echoes with Gen. 1 and Ex. 20 present in Romans 1:23-27. Those verses state that human beings, especially Gentiles,

... exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling *mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things*. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error (*italics added*).

“Mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (1:23) appear in the opposite order to the creation story on days five and six, but in the same order as in the second commandment found in Ex. 20.<sup>20</sup> The implication of the intertextual echo with Gen. 1 is that homoerotic practice violates the created order. The intertextual echo with Ex. 20 forms the basis of Paul’s association of idolatry with homoerotic practice.

So then, the image of God in humanity is manifested in the human hypostasis, more completely in the ‘one flesh’ union of the masculine and feminine hypostases, and most completely in the union of Christ and the Church. Paul connects homoerotic practice with violating the created order by drawing on the passage from Leviticus that describes homoerotic practice as an abomination and the creation story from Genesis 1, and associates idolatry with homoerotic practice. Why does Scripture have such a strong reaction to homoerotic practice? I submit that homoerotic practice violates the image of God displayed in humanity, which is intended to manifest His glory.

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<sup>18</sup> “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ... God gave them up to dishonorable passions. ... God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” (Rom 1:24-28 ESV)

<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew word translated as “abomination” here has a fairly wide semantic field, and includes sodomy (HALOT). The word is also frequently associated with idolatry.

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, *Romans* (lecture notes, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Term 2, 2009-10).

### **The central issue of the theological debate**

The primary theological issue beneath the *presenting issue* of LGBT inclusion, is this: What is the nature of the God whom we worship and serve?

Let us consider this proposition: *God approves of and, therefore, blesses homoerotic practice.*

One of the basic tenets of logic is that something can never equal its opposite, so the proposition above and its opposite represent two mutually exclusive gods. Therefore, either this proposition or its opposite describes the Holy, Almighty, and Eternal God YHWH; the other, then, describes an idol, a lie of the Liar, an abomination that makes desolate standing where he ought not to be (*i.e.* in the Holy place).<sup>21</sup>

If the proposition that *God approves of and, therefore, blesses homoerotic practice* is true, then those on the theological right need to reconsider their attitude towards the LGBT community, and embrace the new thing that the Holy Spirit is doing. The entire contemporary church needs to change its beliefs and practices regarding LGBT persons; for all of historic Christianity from the first century until now, and all Judaism before it, were mistaken. By maintaining that God does not approve of and, therefore, does not bless homoerotic practice they are worshipping and serving a false god.

If the proposition that *God approves of and, therefore, blesses homoerotic practice* is false, then those on the theological left need to reconsider their attitude towards the LGBT community, and embrace the working of the Holy Spirit from of old. By maintaining that God approves of and, therefore, blesses homoerotic practice they are worshipping and serving a false god.

Regardless of how one views homoerotic practice, the message of Scripture regarding idolatry is abundantly clear:

You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Ex. 20:1-6).

The mainline denominations in America, including the PC(USA), are faced with a choice. The stakes in making this choice are the highest imaginable, for "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for [that person] to have a great millstone fastened around [their] neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). The words of Joshua the son of Nun have come rushing down through the ages to confront the Church again today: "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15).

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<sup>21</sup> Dan. 11:31, 12:11; Mark 13:14.

The outcome of whether we choose the *God who approves of and, therefore, blesses homoerotic practice* or the *God who does not approve of and, therefore, does not bless homoerotic practice* will direct us to the proper manner of Christ-like love, and will also have implications for doctrine, praxis, and unity. The consequences of choosing whom we serve are eternal at a personal level. Whether we are serving God or an idol will also have consequences at a denominational level: choosing the idol will bring about judgment and destruction, or God is going to have to apologize to Israel.

### **Loving our neighbor**

Given the devastating consequences of choosing to serve the idol, and given that homoerotic practice violate the image of God, our manner of loving the LGBT community becomes clear. The church ought to gently, respectfully, and, with fear and trembling (for we are all sinners), suggest that God may have something better than accommodating their sexual desires in mind for our LGBT brothers and sisters, even though what they experience may seem ‘very good’ to them. It isn’t simple; it isn’t easy; it will cause some pain; but Scripture makes the same requirement of homosexual persons that it does of unmarried heterosexual persons, that is, to live in celibacy. The God who is faithful can be expected to manifest His transforming grace in their lives through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit; and through it enable them to live into the image of Jesus Christ, just as in all of his children.

If we shy away from gentle confrontation and reproof, and say to our LGBT sisters and brothers, “Go on your way, and May God bless all that you do,” then we have practiced the worst form of hatred imaginable, because we have, in effect, withheld the light of the Gospel from our brothers and sisters.

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