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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how to teach tolerance of homosexual persons in a manner that is not threatening to those with religious scruples about homosexuals. It contains an example of a presentation for college students that is designed to teach them to respect their peers and future coworkers regardless of their sexual orientation. The presentation makes the essential point that there is no single Christian position on the moral issue of homosexuality. While some Christians believe that homosexuals threaten the fabric of society, others see homosexuals as but one thread in the tapestry that represents the diversity of the world. The presentation describes the concrete ways Christians approach homosexuality and links the approach taken with the approaches various Christian churches take toward the Bible. Students are reminded that equal rights for homosexuals, whether one holds homosexuality incompatible with "Christian" beliefs or not, do not threaten anyone's religious beliefs. (Contains 19 references.) (SLD)

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Teaching Tolerance of Homosexual Persons
While Addressing Religious Fears

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American Association for Higher Education
2000 National Conference: To Form a More Perfect Union: Diversity & Learning
Anaheim, CA, March 31, 2000
PJ Levesque, California State University, Fullerton

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Promoting Communication: Teaching Tolerance of Homosexual Persons While Addressing Religious Fears

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The objective of our short time together is to address strategies to teach tolerance of homosexual persons in a nonthreatening manner. To accomplish this goal, we will offer a fact-based presentation which is part of my Religions of the World course in which we discuss the compatibility of Christianity and homosexuality. The hope is that through such presentations college students can learn how to respect their peers and their future co-workers, regardless of their sexual orientation. This paper is a short example of furthering dialogue by presenting facts, challenging religious convictions, yet remaining respectful.

I.

Let us start with a statement from the Alliance Defense Fund, which was founded by leading members of the New Christian Right. Here is the quotation: "The number one threat to faith, freedom, and family today is... the homosexual legal agenda."

What is the homosexual legal agenda? (Of course, "agenda" is probably used here in a pejorative way. But let us look at it from a value-neutral perspective—as best as we can: What are the legal issues that involve homosexual persons?) It includes: same-sex domestic partnership laws, which afford the same legal rights given to married heterosexual couples to homosexual couples; health benefits for same-sex partners; hate crimes legislation to include sexual orientation along with race, religion and sex; job security against being fired (or not hired) because of one's sexual orientation; equal access to rent and housing; student safety and equal access regardless of sexual orientation.

We need only look to our newspapers and televisions to appreciate the scope of the issues. For example, pick up last week's *Newsweek* (March 20, 2000). Its cover story is entitled: "Gay Today: How the battle for acceptance has moved to schools, churches, marriage and the workplace." From Hawaii to Vermont—and let's not leave out California's recent Proposition 22—recognition of the dignity and rights of homosexual persons is a hot topic.

Equality for homosexuals is a serious issue for many leaders and members of the New Christian Right. The Alliance Defense Fund was founded by prominent leaders of this movement: Bill Bright, Founder and President, Campus Crusade for Christ International; Larry Burkett, Founder and CEO, Christian Financial Concepts; James Dobson, Founder and President, Focus on the Family; D. James Kennedy, Senior Minister, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church; Marlin Maddoux, Host, Point of View radio talk show; Don Wildmon,

Founder, National Federation for Decency, renamed American Family Association. These men had a wide constituency of influence.

Everyone is more than welcome to belong to these organizations and espouse their viewpoints. It is not the intention of this paper to promote one religion over another (or any religion at all). This presentation centers only on Christianity, and it is not the intention of this paper to promote one view of Christianity over another.

However, an essential point of this presentation is the following: there is no single Christian position on the moral issue of homosexuality. It would be a mistake to assume that all Christians believe that the number one threat to their faith and family is “the homosexual legal agenda.” In fact, many might not even see it as a threat at all. Instead, they might view it as an issue of social justice in which homosexual persons should be respected as others without discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, disability—or sexual orientation.

Some, however, may seriously worry that the very fabric of society will be torn apart, or that traditional families will disappear, or that the institution of heterosexual unions will be undermined, or that a child or young person would be coerced into desiring homosexual intimacy.

Others may not view their homosexual neighbor as a threat at all, but as one of the threads of the multi-colored tapestry which represents the diversity of our world. In this view, homosexuals do not pose a threat to the existence or even the primacy of place of traditional society, family and marriage. Homosexuals are not viewed as a threat, but are seen as only asking to be part of the picture. This group has always been part of the picture, just not in focus.

II.

Let us take a brief look at the concrete ways Christians approach the issue of homosexuality. The official positions of Christian churches vary greatly, but have been classified into four groups (Nugent & Gramick).

The first group has been called: Rejecting-Punitive. This view holds that homosexuality is a sin. “Even desire to engage in a homosexual relationship is always sinful, impure, degrading, shameful, unnatural, indecent and perverted”(Resolution on Homosexual Marriage, Southern Baptist Convention, June 11-13, 1996). The homosexual person is to remain celibate or “change” one’s orientation through “reparative therapy.”

The second group takes a Rejecting-Nonpunitive approach. According to this group: “Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, CCC #2357). Yet, while sexual acts between individuals of the same sex are condemned, there is no need to punish a person because of his/her orientation—as long as it is not acted upon. “This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided” (CCC #2358). Still, even the orientation

itself is considered to be “objectively disordered” and chastity is required. “Homosexual persons are called to chastity” (CCC #2359).

The third group embodies Qualified Acceptance. This view holds that homosexual activity may be acceptable for Christians, in some instances, but it is always inferior to heterosexual unions. This is an attempt to reconcile traditional teachings against homosexuality with modern research which indicates that homosexual orientation is not a matter of choice. This opinion can be found in position papers presented by certain members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The fourth group advocates Full Acceptance. In an almost ironic twist, this group takes the question which has become popular in fundamentalism today and provides an answer which is in direct opposition to the one provided by its original inquisitors. They ask: “What would Jesus do?” and answer that he would accept and not merely tolerate. Homosexual persons should be treated no differently than heterosexual persons. This is promoted by churches such as the United Church of Christ, Quakers (Society of Friends), Metropolitan Community Church, Moravian Church, and certain non-denominational churches.

III.

We must now ask: Why do the official positions of Christian churches vary so greatly? The answer is: Because of the different ways they approach the Bible. I would like to propose that there are three main methods of approaching the Bible: literal, exegetical, and hermeneutical. Each methodological approach yields a distinctly different interpretation.

With the literal approach, a text means whatever it obviously means and is applied without deviation over time and place. In its strictest form it is embraced by fundamentalism as the only possible way to read the Bible. Everything the Bible says is deemed to be strictly factual. The Bible is considered to be truthful and correct (inerrant) on all topics, whether historical, scientific, moral, doctrinal, etc. This is not interpretation per se (i.e., exegesis), but an attempt to accept and directly apply everything that the Bible contains.

There are advantages to a literal reading: “It is easy. It has no elaborate guidelines; it appeals to common sense and requires no detailed study” (Helminiak, 29). There are also difficulties in advocating a purely literal approach. The largest quandary that literalists must face is that they are inconsistent in applying their methodology. Even though fundamentalists spend a great deal of energy arguing for the literal seven days of creation as scientific truth and homosexuality as morally wrong, there remain key ethical passages which are not literally accepted.

For example, in one way or another slavery is acceptable in the entire letter of Philemon, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22-4:1, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, and 1 Peter 2:18, yet, it is not morally acceptable today. Jesus himself explicitly condemns divorce (Mark 10:1-12, Luke 16:18, Matthew 5:32, in Matthew divorce is allowed in cases of infidelity), but some of the advocates for literalism are themselves divorced. Today, women are usually allowed to teach in Sunday school or to speak in church even though 1 Timothy 2:11-14 clearly forbids it. Further, women wear expensive clothes, gold jewelry, and pearls to church, or

come without hats, even though passages oppose these things (1 Timothy 2:9-10; 1 Corinthians 11:1-16). Many of the laws in Leviticus are ignored, including sexual laws, except the restriction against homosexual acts. In Matthew 5:29-30 Jesus prescribes self mutilation (gouging out one's eye, cutting off one's hand) as a remedy for temptation—hardly an action encouraged at today's pulpits.

With these few examples it should be clear that the "literal approach is almost forced to pick and chose as it applies the Bible. Otherwise some very unacceptable situations would arise" (Helminiak, 30). Another difficulty with taking a strictly literal approach is that it does not allow the Bible to give any input on contemporary issues such as nuclear energy, environmental pollution, the use of outer space, genetic engineering, organ transplants, etc.

A second approach to the Bible is an exegetical reading: a text means whatever it meant to the people who wrote it long ago. This is an exegetical method (the science of textual interpretation) which understands the text by placing it within its historical and cultural context. One major difficulty with this method is that we do not always know the historical and cultural context, but scholars continue to investigate and debate these issues.

Following an historical-critical reading a variety of interpretations have been proposed. Some maintain that the Bible opposes homosexuality, but it is just one sin among many. There is no justification for singling it out as more serious than other sins castigated in the Bible (Scroggs). Others hold that the Bible opposes homosexuality but is so time-and culture-bound that its injunction may and should be discarded if other considerations suggest better alternatives (Scroggs). In other words, understood in its own terms, the Bible in its original historical and cultural context was not addressing our current questions about sexual ethics (Helminiak). Thus, the Bible does not condemn homosexuality as we know it today (Helminiak).

A third methodological approach to the Bible can be called hermeneutical. Here, a text means whatever it means as it is applied to today's multicultural world. It takes into consideration the historical and cultural context of the text and takes another step in asking how applicable is this for us today. The Bible is culturally conditioned and not a list of moral absolutes. Thus, Biblical morality changes over time (Fagan).

A serious difficulty expressed against this approach is whether too much freedom is then given to the interpreter. Is there any action which remains universally approved or rejected, or are we becoming God?

Given these three divergent approaches to the Bible, it should be clear why different Christians come to opposing views of homosexuality as they invoke the Bible. At a deeper level, what is at issue is not the moral question as to whether homosexual acts are good or not, but the essential doctrinal issue of what methodology is acceptable in Biblical interpretation and if it is applied consistently.

IV.

Even among Christians who agree that homosexual acts are sinful, there is no single response. While the first two groups mentioned above (rejecting-punitive and rejecting-nonpunitive) view homosexual acts as sinful, this does not mean that all members of these groups perceive the rights of homosexuals as a threat.

The question must be raised: If you believe on religious grounds that engaging in homosexual activity is sinful, how should this influence your relationship with homosexuals? Kill them? Ridicule them? Try to change them? Avoid them? Legislate against them? Deny them rights accorded to everyone else? Tolerate them? Accept them?

Try the question on other issues: If you believe on religious grounds that interracial dating is a sin, how should this influence your relationship with interracial couples?

If you believe on religious grounds that remarriage after divorce is a sin, how should this influence your relationship with divorced and remarried persons?

If you believe on religious grounds that artificial contraception is a sin, how should this influence your relationship with those who use artificial contraception?

If you believe on religious grounds that blood transfusions, are sinful, how should this influence your relationship with people who allow blood transfusions?

If you believe on religious grounds that life-long celibacy is against God's plan, how should this influence your relationship with people who choose to practice life-long celibacy?

If you believe on religious grounds that servile work should not be done on Sundays, how should this influence your relationship with people who perform servile work on Sundays?

Kill them? Ridicule them? Try to change them? Avoid them? Legislate against them? Deny them rights accorded to everyone else? Tolerate them? Accept them?

V.

One final word: Christian churches have rarely been on the forefront of promoting social change. Christian Churches have not been the initial leaders to combat a host of issues, including: slavery, race inequality, sex inequality, anti-Semitism, discrimination against the disabled, exploitation of the environment.

For example, "America abolished slavery not through moral or religious persuasion but through political and military means" (Shanaberger, 24). In fact, in some instances the Christian Churches have been the leaders in preserving these injustices. The largest Protestant denomination in the U.S., the Southern Baptist Convention (15 million baptized believers), split from the Baptist Missionary Convention in 1845 in order "to promote slavery" (Quoting the words of the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, William B. Johnson; Goen, 286).

It should come as no surprise, then, that the Christian churches offer a variety of responses to homosexuality. The homosexual legal "agenda" understands itself as being in union with Christian principles and not at odds with them. Equal rights for homosexual persons need not be seen as a threat to religious beliefs. As we relate together as students, co-workers and neighbors, we must reflect on how we should respond to our religious convictions. Even if one personally holds to the incompatibility of homosexuality with Christianity, there remains the wider issue of how one might share and implement this view in a multicultural, multireligious world—a world where even other Christians hold an opposing view.

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ONLINE RESOURCES:

Bridges Across the Divide.

www.bridges-across.org. "Bridges-Across is a cyberspace initiative providing models and resources for building respectful relationships among those who disagree about moral issues surrounding homosexuality, bisexuality and gender variance."

Carleton University On-Line Courses.

<http://ia1.carleton.ca/52100/m21/m21/contents.html>. Prof. Steve Hick "Introduction to Social Welfare and Social Work." Module 21: Social Work and Sexual Diversity.

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network.

www.glsen.org. "Teaching respect for all in our schools."

Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance.

www.religioustolerance.org/homosexu.htm. "Our eventual goal is to help people value religious diversity. But that is for the future. Now, we have to settle for just promoting tolerance."

PBS Viewer's Guide: Frontline "Assault on Gay America."

www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/diversity/assault. This film was first broadcast on PBS on February 15, 2000. It examines the murder of Billy Jack Gaither and explores the roots of homophobia in America.

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