

# Wading River Congregational Church

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## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 "Homosexuality"

Today's question in the "Ask the Pastor" series is without doubt the most challenging one I have tried to answer: *"How are we to deal with homosexuals? Exactly what does the Bible say? Is it right or wrong? Is it a medical problem?"* (as I hope you realize, I am in all cases quoting the questioner's exact words). I realize that this is a topic on which everyone here will probably disagree with or dislike something I say! I would also remind you that I cannot say all there is to say on this topic in a 20-minute sermon!

Why today is this an issue for discussion? Because the increasing social acceptance of homosexuality in our culture means we all now *know personally* many more gay and lesbian people than we did – and that includes people in our workplaces, in our churches, and in our own families. Personal knowledge of people with same-sex orientation gives us all a stake in the highly controverted public debate over how far acceptance should extend. So what are we to say about homosexuality?

#### 1) Biology

Let me take the questions in reverse order, starting with biology. This matters because the surveys show a strong correlation between whether or not people believe homosexuality is "biologically determined" and how "accepting" they are.

We are talking here about the very new field known as "behavioral genetics." It's important first to recognize that only very

rarely do individual genes "determine" even physical traits - something like eye color would be an example. There are a handful of single gene defects that predispose people to "genetic diseases" – cystic fibrosis, Lou Gehrig's disease, Huntington's disease. Most major disease susceptibilities are caused by the *interactions of multiple genes and their environments. That is even more true for behaviors.*

There are four areas in which research has suggested biological markers for same-sex orientation. One is genetic study of families; twins, brothers, sisters; which suggest that homosexuality is in part "heritable" – that this orientation "runs in families." Second is a report of anatomical differences in the hypothalamus – the region of the brain that connects the nervous and endocrine systems - between men, women, and male homosexuals. Third is a correlation of same-sex orientation with a gene variant on the X-chromosome, which would tie in with the family studies that suggest maternal transmission. Fourth is a correlation of male homosexuality with birth order and the number of older brothers, which could be due to progressive maternal immune responses to male fetuses. All these studies are of small populations, and have not always been reproducible.

What should we make of these biological connections? Not too much, according to the authors of these studies. None of them claim to have found a "biological basis for homosexuality." Every author would agree

with the statement that *all behaviors are the result of the complex interactions of many genes with the unique environment of each individual* – with “environment” understood to mean everything from the cells in which the genes are expressed, to the hormonal, nutritional or disease conditions that an organ experiences in life, to the social environment in which each person lives, to the choices each person makes. So here is a truism of biology: *no gene “makes” you be or do anything; “nature and nurture” are always inextricably entwined, with their relative contributions varying.* There is no “gene for homosexuality,” but undoubtedly there will prove to be heritable genetic predispositions.

Although you may not like the comparison, consider for a moment the now rather less emotionally charged issue of *alcohol dependence*. There are clear genetic predispositions to alcoholism, but nobody doubts that that these are complex and interact with equally complex environmental cues and personal choices. The same is true of all behaviors.

## 2) Biblical

Let me turn then to the moral issue: “Is it right or wrong?” – for Christians, that must include the question, “What does the Bible say?”

Three main biblical passages speak directly of homosexual behavior – though others allude to it indirectly. One is in *Leviticus 18-19*, part of the Law of Moses, a section often called “the Holiness Code.” Its theme is “Be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy... you must not do as they do in Egypt... nor as they do in the land of Canaan; you must obey my laws.” Some of God’s laws are devoted to sexual relations: the LORD’s people must not indulge in adultery, incest, homosexuality, bestiality. The punishment for any of these is death.

What do we do with Levitical laws? Some argue that these laws have to do with avoiding idolatry and the depraved sexual practices at pagan shrines and temples. But

to reduce the “holiness code” to prohibition of idolatry makes a nonsense of these texts; which, for example, spell out in great detail all the degrees of sexual relationship that constitute incest. This has nothing to do with “temple prostitution” of same- or opposite-sex varieties.

In the New Testament, Paul in *Romans 1* emphasizes male and female homosexual practice as evidence of the pagan world’s rejecting the knowledge of God that Creation provides – other evidence includes idolatry, evil, greed, envy, murder, deceit – and Paul says all this deserves God’s wrath, as does the smug Jewish attitude that condemns others without seeing their own depravities.

In *1 Corinthians 6*, Paul warns the Christians in Corinth not to lapse into the behaviors that characterize “the wicked” pagan world they used to belong to, including “sexual immorality” (that is, sex between unmarried people; what used to be called fornication); idolatry, adultery, theft, greed, drunkenness, slander, swindling; and two terms for homosexual behavior that are hard to translate: what the NIV calls “male prostitutes and homosexual offenders.” Most scholars think these likely refer to the participants in pederasty; the homosexual and nurturing relationship between men and adolescent boys which flourished in Greco-Roman culture.

Are Paul’s strictures confined to pederasts? Some argue that the long-term monogamous gay and lesbian relationships of today, and the concept of “sexual orientation” as opposed to sexual activity, were unknown in Paul’s day, and that his “vice lists” therefore have nothing to say to us today. I think that is untrue: long-term monogamous homosexual relationships were undoubtedly present in Greco-Roman society, and were celebrated as far back as Socrates, who believed for “a man to fall in love with a beautiful boy” was one of “the best and noblest things.”

So I conclude that the Bible condemns homosexual acts in the same way as adultery and other forms of “sexual immorality,” and

we cannot get away from the force of the condemnations by pleading special cultural circumstances for the biblical writers, or for us.

### 3) *Social*

This view of biblical teaching led, of course, to the more-or-less uniform rejection of homosexuality by Jews and Christians for millennia, down to the present day. That it was still practiced at times is also clear, but nobody seriously doubted that homosexual behavior was a sin that the Bible and the Church condemned, along with fornication, adultery, rape, incest and bestiality. If you had to extend that list to 21<sup>st</sup> century behaviors, you would probably want to add sexual abuse, especially of children; pedophilia, and pornography in all its forms. Nobody doubts that in some people these behaviors are deeply embedded; that they probably have biological roots; that changing them is very difficult and perhaps impossible.

What has changed in the past 40 years is that we have become more tolerant of, and no longer punish, some of these behaviors. In the Western world, we do not give adulterers the death penalty (tho' there are still states in the US where it remains illegal) – but death for sexual misconduct of all kinds (even being the victim of rape!) is still common in Muslim countries.

Our changed social attitudes mean that, for example, fornication is a word that has disappeared from our language. The practice is now so widespread we no longer even feel the need of a special word for it; we just call it "*having sex.*" Inside a generation, we have become accustomed to the fact that 2 out of 3 high schoolers have had sex by the time they graduate. The average age of first marriage is now about 28, up from 21 a few decades ago, so hormonally active young people are not waiting from 17 to 27 for their first sexual experience – certainly not in a culture that depicts "having sex" as being as frequent and normal as eating a meal.

So anyone who has raised children in the past 25 years has watched their teens "sleep over" at their boy- and girl-friends' houses, and by the time they are through college, they have moved into an apartment together. They don't even consider marriage at that point. I don't think any parent likes this pattern, but we have learned to be silent about it in order to remain on good terms with our children!

Let's not even go into how widespread adultery has become! – although there is still, thank God, a taboo here, as there is even more strongly with incest. It is in this social context that homosexuality has "come out of the closet," and demanded the same level of acceptance as heterosexual relationships. How should individuals, families, churches, society in general, respond?

### 4) *Responses*

As more gay and lesbian people have become visible, it's clear that we have all learned a lot about their feelings, about their experiences, and have discovered that they are, for the most part, "just like us." Most of us have probably worked at some time with male or female homosexuals without knowing it, until some social situation reveals their orientations. What we learn is that there is more to them than their sexuality – as indeed there is to all of us!

Some segments of our society now contain large numbers of gays and lesbians – the fine arts in general; music, dance, theater, design. How far that reflects combinations of different genetic predispositions, how far it represents a safe form of socialization, nobody knows, and most don't care. But clearly being gay or lesbian in our culture is moving beyond toleration and acceptance to affirmation and celebration, especially in "elite culture." Demands for legislation that will allow "civil unions" and "gay marriages" is only the entirely expected next step.

It is here, I think, that most people in the Judeo-Christian tradition become uneasy, knowing that the Bible, the Church, the synagogue have until very recently uniformly

condemned homosexual practice. They have quietly accepted that different people have different inclinations to sin in different ways, but that is not the same as acting out those inclinations and demanding acceptance for them.

So how should Christians and churches deal with homosexuals? As we would anyone else who lives a fallen life in a fallen world. Welcome them and accept them as we do all kinds of people, hoping and praying that everyone will come to a relationship with God through Jesus Christ which will open them to the work of the Spirit of God within them. We do not need to challenge anyone at the church door to discover what their favorite sin is; we do not need to know in advance what their inclinations are, sexual or otherwise.

We would draw, I think, the normal everyday distinction between inclination and action. We are all inclined to various kinds of mischief, but only when we start acting them out does the issue of approval or disapproval come up. (Of course, we know that Jesus teaches that inclinations are in God's sight as morally culpable as actions – “whoever looks on a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her *in his heart*” – but we are not in general aware of people's hearts, and should not act as though we were).

So there will always be people with gay and lesbian orientations in churches, as there are those inclined to fornication and adultery. When these inclinations are acted out in public, when they demand a response, when they request acceptance, when they ask for approval, blessing, celebration, the church has to say “no.” So I do not think we should be ordaining church leaders who are active homosexuals, any more than we should ordain active adulterers. Church leaders are expected in some sense to be exemplary – and hard as that is, it is not a license for deliberate and repeated public sinning.

So I would not agree to celebrate a “gay union” in the church, and I also believe that legalizing “gay marriage” would be bad for our society - not least because marriage is

what used to be called a “Creation ordinance”: something God laid down at the beginning, monogamous lifelong marriage between a man and a woman as his design for humans. Every culture has discovered this, including our own – and as social scientists will tell you even today, there is no better place to raise children than with a father and a mother, who model adult maleness and femaleness and how these relate.

Let me leave you one more thing about *becoming* gay or lesbian. I was intrigued to discover that the American Academy of Pediatrics in a 2004 report reminded pediatricians that “especially during adolescence, individuals may participate in a variety of sexual behaviors” (that is, early teens are very likely to develop a “crush” on another teen of their own sex); that “strong same-sex feelings and even sexual experiences can occur at this age and do not define sexual orientation;” and the Academy warns pediatricians that “labeling as homosexual an adolescent who... is questioning his or her sexual orientation... could be premature, inappropriate, and counterproductive” (strong words in our day in a medical journal!).

That ought to remind us how little we understand the development of sexual orientation; that to rush to judgment is unwise; that for the Church to throw away millennia of teaching on sexuality is premature; that for society to redefine marriage would be foolish.

As Christians we must love people who need Christ's love, and embrace people who come our way, in whatever need, or stage of life. In “bumper-sticker” language, to “how should we deal with homosexuals?” I would reply “*welcoming but not affirming.*”

Let us pray...