

**The Church and Homosexuality:  
A Preliminary Study**



**Office of the Stated Clerk**

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in the United States**

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“In studying the following paper it should be remembered that the General Assembly may issue a statement (or pronouncement) for any one or more of the following purposes: to express its own judgment on an issue; ...to influence the conscience of the Church; ...to recommend particular actions by individual members, congregations and lower courts; ... to identify priorities for the denomination; ... to establish goals for the General Assembly’s own agency; ... to direct, request, or authorize its own agency or staff to take certain actions; ... to commend, petition, or express concerns to the government, ...(and) to help shape public opinion.

In light of this, it is evident that the General Assembly addresses itself to ‘a wide variety of audiences’. However, it must be remembered, that while the General Assembly may speak to these issues and audiences. ‘it ... speaks (only) for itself’. ‘(It) does not .. speak for God ... for all individual members of the PCUS, (nor even does it) necessarily speak for the majority of Presbyterians, ... and must meet specific constitutional requirements in order to ‘speak for the denomination as a whole.’ ... A General Assembly statement is just that—a paper or statement by a particular assembly. These statements or papers may take the form of ‘declarations of conscience, ... moral appeals ...(or) policy or program directives’. As such they should be considered in light of the form in which they are sent and for the purpose to which they have been directed. ‘Declarations of conscience have authority ... only to the degree—that they conform to the Word of God.... Moral appeals possess only such authority as those to whom they are addressed recognize.’ Policy and program directions pertain to the agency created to perform that function.

It is hoped that you will study the following paper, bearing in mind both the importance and boundary of a General Assembly paper or statement.” (PCUS General Assembly *Minutes*, 1974, p. 176)

The 112th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States referred to the Council on Church and Society the attached resolution which the 113th General Assembly referred to the Council on Theology and Culture (Appendix A).

The 116th General Assembly referred to the Council on Theology and Culture the following overture from the Presbytery of Fayetteville (attached, Appendix B).

The paper which follows, with its recommendations, is the response of the Council on Theology and Culture to these referrals.

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If we are to think responsibly about homosexuality today, we must learn what the science of human behavior can teach us about its causes and character. We must engage in careful biblical and theological reflection. In our time, when many homosexual persons, some of them committed Christians, are speaking out for themselves, we must listen with compassion and openness to what they have to tell us. The task is not easy. The scientific data are incomplete and inconclusive; psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists interpret them in different ways. Biblical scholars and theologians committed to the authority of Scripture disagree in their interpretations of Scripture. Homosexual persons themselves do not speak with one voice. There is great variety in their experience, and they are as subject as anyone else to error in the interpretation of their experiences and in their understanding of themselves. Moreover, all of us have trouble thinking clearly about homosexuality because we approach it with various degrees of fear, anxiety, guilt and prejudice based on culturally stereotyped views of masculinity and femininity and sexuality in general. All these complications and difficulties mean that even when we have done the best we can to achieve a faithful and intelligent Christian understanding of homosexuality and homosexual persons, we must be modest about our conclusions and open to let ourselves be corrected as we are led to deeper understanding in the future.

Since the referrals to the Council on Theology and Culture deal with the question of the Church's attitude toward homosexuality, this paper does not deal with the problem of the civil rights of homosexual persons (but see VI. 3h below). The selected bibliography at the end of this study (*editor's note: the referenced bibliography is not available to us.*) is representative of the various scientific and biblical-theological points of view discussed here.

## **I. The Definition of Homosexuality**

Homosexual means literally "the same sex." In its most general sense it refers to all activities and associations between persons of the same gender. Thus any all-male or all-female club, church group, school, military organization, athletic team, business or recreational association is "homosexual" in this broad sense. In popular usage the word is restricted to explicitly sexual attraction and/or activity between members of the same sex, and it is in this sense that we shall use it. But reflection on the significance of any sexually segregated activity or group could be instructive for people who consider themselves heterosexual, and especially for those who believe that God created male and female for each other.

Even in a specifically sexual context homosexuality is not easy to define. The following considerations show what a very complex phenomenon it is:

1. Homosexuality involves both motivational and behavioral factors. A homosexual person is not only one who engages in physical sexual acts but one with homosexual feelings, wishes, fantasies and desires, not only one whose homosexuality is expressed in doing but one whose homosexuality is expressed in seeing, hearing, thinking and dreaming. Not every homosexually oriented person engages in overt homosexual activity. The absence of overt homosexual activity does not necessarily mean that a person is not homosexually oriented. In defining homosexuality it is thus important to distinguish between but not separate a homosexual "orientation" or "condition" and homosexual activity.

2. Isolated or occasional homosexual experiences at certain periods of life or in unusual circumstances do not necessarily mean that a person is fundamentally homosexual.

3. There is as much variety in the expression of homosexuality as in the expression of heterosexuality. Homosexual

persons, like heterosexual persons, may be promiscuous or not, concerned only for physical self-gratification or concerned for loving personal relationships. Homosexual persons may or may not display the physical or behavioral characteristics popularly identified as homosexual (“feminine” men or “masculine” women). Pedophilia (sexual attraction to children) is no more characteristic of homosexual persons in general than of heterosexual persons in general. Some psychiatrists believe that homosexual persons in general are no more lonely, anxious, depressed, lacking in self-acceptance, unproductive, irresponsible in personal and social relations and generally unhappy than are heterosexual persons. In short homosexual persons are as different from each other as are heterosexual persons.

4. Homosexuality may be unconscious as well as conscious. It may be repressed below the level of awareness and then unknowingly expressed in various apparently non-sexual ways. An exaggerated hatred or fear or repulsion in relation to homosexual persons may sometimes be a symptom of such repressed homosexuality.

5. There are degrees of homosexuality. Relatively few people are exclusively either homosexual or heterosexual. Most people fit into a continuum between the two, with varying degrees of both in their psychosexual make-up. Most of us are thus to some extent both homo- and heterosexual. This continuum is an important factor in answering the question whether a homosexual person’s sexual orientation can be changed: possibility of change becomes increasingly more difficult the further he or she is from an exclusively heterosexual orientation and the closer he or she approaches an exclusively homosexual orientation.

All these considerations should lead us to be very careful about making simplistic statements about homosexuality, about who is and who is not homosexual, and about the character of homosexual persons in general.

## **II. The Causes and Character of Homosexuality**

There are various theories about the causes of homosexuality. Some authorities believe

that it is the result of hormonal or genetic or other biological factors. Others believe that people become homosexual because of distorted relationships early in childhood with either one or both parents. Some sociologists believe that cultural prejudices about what is masculine and feminine may result in the rejection and alienation of a person who does not “fit in” or “measure up” and lead him or her to find acceptance and self-worth in homosexual relationships. Like heterosexual patterns of sexuality, homosexual patterns vary, and both can probably be accounted for only by a combination of psychological, medical and sociological factors.

As behavioral scientists do not agree on what causes homosexuality, so they disagree in their evaluations of it.

Some believe that it is a sickness or perversion or emotional disorder and that the attempt should be made to “cure” homosexual persons (though there is disagreement about the possibility of curing those with an exclusive or near-exclusive homosexual orientation).

Other authorities believe that homosexuality is not so much a disease as an arrest in psychosexual development which prevents an individual from growing into the capacity for mature heterosexual relationships. What the homosexual person needs is not so much to be cured as to be “unblocked” so that the normal process of psychosexual development can continue (although there is disagreement here too about the possibility of overcoming the crippling effects of past experiences in the lives of some homosexual persons)

Still other authorities take a more neutral position: homosexuality is simply a variation in sexual orientation. They grant that some homosexual persons may be emotionally disturbed but do not believe that the reason is that they are homosexual. If homosexual persons have unique problems, the reason lies in social, economic and religious prejudice and discrimination against those whose way of life is different from that of the majority. Homosexual persons may need to learn to adjust to the difficulties of being a minority, but what needs changing is not homosexual persons themselves but society’s attitude toward them.

Finally, some behavioral scientists take an openly affirmative position: homosexual persons should claim, honor and responsibly live out their homosexuality. It is just as natural for them as heterosexuality is for others. For them it would be sick or abnormal to deny or repress their homosexuality

Whether they tend to be negative, neutral or positive in their attitudes, most researchers qualify their evaluations by acknowledging the limitation of their research and the data it has produced, and by emphasizing the fact that one cannot make broad generalizations which ignore the great variety in the experiences and lifestyle of homosexual persons.

### **III. Some Fundamental Ethical and Theological Presuppositions**

Scientific research into the causes and character of homosexuality cannot answer for us the theological and ethical questions we must ask on this issue. Christians are called not to be conformed to the world and its wisdom but to be transformed by the renewal of their minds through the will of God in Jesus Christ. As we cannot let our moral decisions on other issues be determined by the society and culture in which we live, so we cannot make our decisions about sexuality in general or homosexuality in particular on such a basis. What seems “natural” and “normal” and “right” to behavioral scientists and/or the great majority of people may need to be rejected by Christians. And what seems “unnatural” and “abnormal” and “wrong” to behavioral scientists and/or the great majority of people may need to be affirmed by Christians. Nevertheless the behavioral sciences can help us to be more realistic and responsible in our theological and ethical reflection and decisions. It is especially important to remember the following points:

1. *The individuality of homosexual persons.* The complexity and variety of homosexuality means that it is as wrong to say what “all” homosexual persons are like as to say what “all” black or white, rich or poor, male or female people are like. We can deal responsibly with homosexual persons as with all other persons only when we rid ourselves of stereotyped presuppositions about them and treat each one as the unique human being and

child of God he or she is, with his or her unique problems and needs, limitations and possibilities, strengths and weaknesses.

2. *The Church’s involvement.* Scientific research into the causes and nature of homosexuality raises questions not only about homosexual persons themselves but also about those individual persons (parents, teachers and others) and the common cultural values and attitudes which helped shape their sexual orientation. It therefore leads us to ask also what the Church in particular has done or not done to influence those persons and our society. When moral judgments are made in this sphere, they are inevitably moral judgments on ourselves also. The question cannot only be “Why are they like that?” It must also be “What have we the Church done or left undone that has contributed to what they are?” In this sphere as in others we will be more just and more compassionate if we remember the warning of our Lord that we ourselves will be judged with the judgment we pronounce.

3. *The relation between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity.* The distinction and connection behavioral research makes between a homosexual orientation and homosexual activity warns us of the theological and ethical inadequacy of any judgment about homosexuality which ignores either.

On the one hand, any judgment based only on homosexual acts would be not only psychologically but also theologically superficial. Christians believe in a God who judges all men and women not just on the basis of external deeds but on the basis of what is hidden (sometimes even from themselves) in the secret depths of their hearts. Any responsible judgment about homosexuality has to be a judgment not only about homosexual activity but also about homosexual feelings, thoughts and desires, whether or not they are acted out. (Although we are concerned here especially with people who are more or less consistently homosexual, this is true of course also with regard to those for whom such urges are more or less occasional and fleeting.)

On the other hand, we must distinguish between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity. While it is true that God judges all people on the basis of what he sees

in their hearts, it is also true that it is dangerous for us who are not God and cannot see into the hearts of any other person to make judgments about him or her on any other basis than what he or she does. Moreover, while it is to a greater or less extent true that none of us can help what we feel or the thoughts that enter into our heads, it is also true that all of us can make decisions about what we will do with those feelings and thoughts. Like heterosexual persons, homosexual persons are responsible for their actions and how they affect others as well as themselves.

A responsible Christian position must thus avoid both a legalistic (and perhaps self-righteous) concentration on explicit homosexual activity and an over-emphasis on homosexual orientation. It must include those who are homosexual “in their hearts” but it must also realistically distinguish between feelings, thoughts and desires on the one hand and actions on the other.

4. *The possibility of change.* We have seen that homosexual persons (like heterosexual persons) are responsible for what they do. Are they also accountable for what they are—for their homosexual orientation? One way to get at this question is to ask whether they can change their psychosexual condition.

The behavioral sciences teach us that most homosexual people do not simply “decide” to be homosexually oriented, nor can they simply “decide” to be homosexually oriented. The psychosexual orientation of many if not all homosexual persons is shaped by influences they did not choose and over which they had little or no control. And the possibility of their changing their psychosexual orientation appears to be increasingly remote the closer they come to an exclusively homosexual orientation.

When we reflect on these clinical and sociological conclusions as Christians, we must avoid the error of the simplistic assumption that homosexual persons can change their psychosexual orientation if they just “want to” or “try hard” (the error of indeterminism). But we must also avoid the error of the resigned assumption that homosexual persons are so completely shaped by external influences that any real change is impossible (the error of determinism). Against indeterminism not only the behavioral sciences

but also Scripture teaches us that people can be so dominated by the external influences that shape their lives that they cannot do what they will and cannot help doing what they do not want to do (Rom. 7:18ff). Yet we cannot surrender to psychological or sociological determinism. The behavioral sciences have not proved and Christian presuppositions about human nature do not allow us to accept the claim that human beings are totally the victims of external influences and totally unable to take responsibility for the kind of persons they are and can become. Moreover, Christians who know about the power of God’s grace know that what with human beings is (or seems to be) impossible is possible with God. If he so wills, God can enable any person to become what that person cannot become by his or her own efforts.

A responsible Christian position on homosexuality must therefore find a way between determinism and indeterminism. To believe that homosexual persons can simply “give up” their homosexuality and “decide” to become heterosexual is both unrealistic and lacking in compassion. But on the other hand, to believe that the homosexual orientation is an inexorable fate imposed on some people is faithless and equally lacking in compassion.

We have now reached the point where general theological and ethical reflection on what we can learn from the behavioral sciences can carry us no further. They can help us recognize the complexity of homosexuality. They can help us avoid simplistic answers which are theologically as well as psychologically superficial. They can suggest some criteria for formulating a responsible Christian position. But, as we acknowledged at the beginning of this section, they cannot answer for us the most crucial theological and ethical questions: What is responsible ethical behavior for homosexual persons? Should they change—or at least try to change—their psychosexual orientation? What should be the Church’s attitude toward them? For help in answering these questions we must turn to the Bible.

#### **IV. Interpretations of Biblical Teaching about Homosexuality**

Scripture does not give us as much help as we would like to have with this issue. The biblical texts which are most relevant are Genesis 19.1-11 (perhaps), Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13, Romans 1.18-27, 1 Corinthians 6.9-11 and I Timothy 1.8-11. In none of these texts is homosexuality the major topic; biblical writers mention it only in the context of discussions of broader themes, suggesting that they have little interest in homosexuality for its own sake. All these passages (with the possible exception of the first) refer to homosexual acts only; none of them deal with the questions raised by what we have learned in our time about the complex relationship between homosexual acts and a homosexual orientation. Nevertheless, within the limited scope of their interest in and understanding of homosexuality, all these passages agree in condemning it.

On the basis of these texts, supported by an interpretation of the biblical understanding of sexuality in general, the whole Hebraic-Christian tradition has consistently rejected homosexuality as unnatural and sinful. In our time, however, this traditional position has been challenged. Some interpreters suggest that a different understanding of homosexuality results from an examination of the relevant texts in light of the time and place in which they were written, in light of a fresh look at the biblical understanding of God's intention for human relatedness in general, and in light of the new insights of the behavioral sciences into the complex causes and nature of homosexuality.

In this section we will summarize this contemporary debate as fairly as possible without attempting to defend or refute any position. The biblical discussion will then form the basis for a discussion in the next section of the alternatives before the Church today as we seek to deal with homosexuality and homosexual persons as faithful and responsible Christians.

##### *A. Old Testament*

Genesis 19.1-11 tells the story of the men of Sodom who came to Lot demanding that he

let them "know" the two visitors in his home. "Know" here has been traditionally interpreted to mean to know sexually and thus to imply a demand for homosexual acts (thus our word "sodomy"). Sometimes the word unmistakably means this in the Old Testament; more often it does not. Some biblical scholars (including Calvin in his commentary on Gen. 19.5) deny that it has this connotation here. They interpret the story to mean that Lot exceeded his rights as an alien in the city (v.9) when he entertained two unknown men without presenting them to the permanent residents. The men of the city then came demanding literally only that Lot introduce these strangers to them. (This is also Calvin's interpretation, though he combines it with the traditional interpretation, arguing that the men of the city were really using this legitimate demand as an excuse to capture the visitors for homosexual purposes.) Other Old Testament passages which mention the destruction of Sodom (such as Is. 13.19, Jer. 49.18, 50.40) do not identify the practice of homosexual acts as the sin for which it was destroyed. Ezekiel 16.49f. mentions that the people of Sodom did "abominable things." Some interpret this as a reference to homosexuality, but others point out that in other Old Testament passages it is a common description of idolatry. In any case, this passage mentions specifically another reason for Sodom's destruction: "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." In short, the weight of Jewish and Christian tradition (cf. Jude 6-7) is on the side of interpreting the Sodom story as a condemnation of homosexuality, but it has also been argued that the story does not deal with this issue at all.

No such uncertainty exists when we come to Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13. These passages explicitly condemn male (but not female) homosexual acts, the second prescribing the death penalty as punishment. These texts are part of the Levitical Holiness Code which lay down rules for maintaining the ritual, moral and religious purity of ancient Israel and its separation from its pagan neighbors. Homosexual activity is not singled out as an especially terrible sin but along with other practices it is specifically condemned. These

texts express the consistent position of ancient Israel.

Some contemporary interpreters question the relevance of these texts for us today, using arguments such as the following: (1) The Holiness Code contains ceremonial and judicial laws which Christians believe may have been important in that time and situation but which are no longer binding on us—laws for instance which forbid the eating of meat with blood in it (Lev. 17.14) and laws which require the death penalty for those who curse their parents (Lev. 20.19) and for mediums and wizards (Lev. 20.27). Is it not arbitrary to isolate the law forbidding homosexual activity as permanently binding and to dismiss other laws as no longer authoritative? If other parts of this ancient code are outdated, why not this particular also? Does not such arbitrary selection indicate simply the use of Scripture to confirm prejudices we bring to it? (2) Those who emphasize the Levitical condemnation of homosexual acts do not take it seriously themselves. Few today would insist that the death penalty should be prescribed for such acts. Is it not inconsistent to insist on the divine authority of the prohibition but to ignore the penalty imposed by God? Does not such inconsistency also indicate that the real motivation of those who emphasize these texts is not so much concern for the authority of Scripture as their use of Scripture to confirm their prejudice against homosexual persons? (3) When we ask *why* homosexual practices are condemned in the Holiness Code, we see the irrelevance of this prohibition today. In ancient times homosexual activity was practiced in connection with temple prostitution and thus with idolatry. Perhaps ancient Israel was also opposed to homosexuality because it prevented the fulfillment of the covenant promises of God to increase the numbers and political power of the people. But no one today connects homosexuality with religious sex rites, and Christians understand that the covenant relationship with God is not connected with procreation. God's people today as in ancient Israel still need to be set apart from their pagan environment and there are certainly some expressions of homosexuality which should be condemned, but when we understand the Holiness Code in its historical context, it gives us no reason to

condemn homosexuality as such. (4) Christians base their understanding of the laws given in the Old Testament on what Christ has done both to free us from the law and at the same time to fulfill its intentions in a new way. A Christian position on homosexuality cannot be based on a legalistic use of the Old Testament. This last argument leads us to consider how those who question the contemporary relevance of Leviticus 18.22 and 20.30 interpret the New Testament.

Other interpreters believe that these passages cannot be so easily missed: (1) It is true that some of the ceremonial and judicial laws of the Holiness Code are no longer authoritative for Christians (see Westminster Confession XXI.3-5). But it also contains God's permanently binding "moral law"—the prohibition of adultery (Lev. 18.20) and incest (Lev. V 20.13) for instance. Moreover, while some parts of the Holiness Code are abrogated by the new covenant in Christ (eating of bloody meat for instance), the New Testament is as firm as the Old in its condemnation of homosexuality. (2) It is true that most Christians today do not believe that those who engage in homosexual activity should be put to death as Leviticus 20.30 prescribes. This is an indication precisely of the fact that they take the Old Testament seriously without using it legalistically. It may also be an indication of the fact that Christians have learned from the Gospel to be more compassionate than those who did not yet know the Gospel. Less severe treatment of homosexual persons in any case does not mean that homosexual practices themselves should not be condemned. (3) We are not told in Leviticus why homosexual practices are condemned there. It may be that the connection of homosexual practices with ancient temple prostitution or with Israel's covenantal expectations were involved. But even apart from this particular historical situation the Holiness Code expresses the fundamental insight of the whole of both the Old and New Testaments that homosexuality is contrary to God's intention for human sexual relationships. Moreover we can learn from the Holiness Code precisely when we do understand it in the historical context in which it was written that God's people today are to be set apart from other people are not to order their lives, including their sexual relationships,

by the standards which are popular or seem normal to the wider environment in which they live.

How we evaluate all these arguments for and against the authority and relevance of the condemnation of homosexual acts in Leviticus depends not only on the convincingness of their interpretation of this Old Testament material but on whether these interpretations are confirmed or refuted by the study of the New Testament material relating to homosexuality.

### *B. New Testament*

There are three references to homosexuality in the New Testament. In Timothy 1.8-10 and I Corinthians 6.9-10 homosexual persons are mentioned along with murderers, kidnappers, liars, idolators, adulterers, thieves and drunkards. As in the Leviticus passages, homosexuality receives no special attention here and there is no suggestion that homosexual persons are more sinful than other "immoral persons." I Corinthians 6.9 does, however, include homosexual persons in the list of those who cannot "inherit the kingdom of God."

Romans 1.18-28 deals more specifically with homosexuality, although here too it is not treated as a special problem but is dealt with in the context of a larger question. Paul identifies it here not as *a* sin but as the *result* of sin, namely the sin of idolatry. The fundamental sin of the gentiles who are being considered here is that "although they knew God they did not honor him as God" but "exchanged the glory of immortal God for and served the creature rather than the Creator." For this reason God "gave them up." He gave them up "in the lust of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their own bodies among themselves." He gave them up to "dishonorable passions." Both women and men exchanged "natural relations for unnatural" with others of the same sex. Paul's argument is thus that when people's relation with God is wrong, their relationship with each other, including specifically their sexual relationships, will also be wrong. Homosexuality is not just amoral but a profoundly religious problem.

It is important to remember the broader context in which this condemnation of

homosexuality occurs. In the first chapter of Romans Paul is dealing with the sinfulness of gentiles. (Homosexuality may be included here because he shared the Jewish conviction of his time that it is especially characteristic of gentiles.) Chapter two deals with the sinfulness of Jews. (There is no suggestion that the hypocrisy and moral pride of those who "rely on the law" is any less sinful than the sinfulness of the gentiles with their homosexuality.) Chapter three then says of both gentiles and Jews (i.e. of all people) that no one is righteous and that Jews and gentiles alike (those guilty of all the sins mentioned in the first two chapters) are justified by God's grace in Jesus Christ through faith. No one is qualified by his or her righteousness or disqualified by his or her unrighteousness to inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 6.9). That inheritance is a gift of undeserved and unearned grace offered to all (including those guilty of the homosexual acts condemned in chapter one) despite the nature and extent of their sinfulness.

Paul's position on homosexuality as it is stated in I Corinthians and Romans and reflected in I Timothy has been interpreted by contemporary scholars in both a critical and an affirmative direction (similar to the two lines of interpretation we identified in discussing the Leviticus passage).

#### *1. The Critical Interpretation of Paul*

Some interpreters believe that Paul's condemnation of homosexuality is not an essential and permanently authoritative part of his apostolic witness but an expression of a traditional Hebraic attitude which shaped the way in which he bore his apostolic witness. They argue that when we respect the witness of Paul to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, we must question and correct his lingering Jewish understanding of homosexuality in light of the Gospel he himself proclaimed. Moreover, to the extent that Paul's view is shaped not by the Gospel but by the limited knowledge and biases of his time and place in history, that view must be questioned and corrected also in light of what we have learned from modern psychology and sociology. The claim that such a critical evaluation of Paul's position on homosexuality

is legitimate and necessary is based on at least four considerations.

(a) In the first place, Paul's lists of vices in Romans and I Corinthians (like the list in I Timothy) are very similar to other categories of vices in Jewish and Graeco-Roman literature of his time such as the writings of Philo, Josephus and the Stoics. This similarity suggests that his condemnation of homosexual acts is rather an unexamined acceptance of the highest Jewish and secular morality of his day than the result of careful reflection on the Gospel he proclaimed and is thus subject to criticism in light of that Gospel.

(b) Secondly, in Romans 1.24 ff. Paul connects homosexuality with idolatry. He says that it is the consequence of worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. There is no question that in our day as in Paul's many women and men do make gods of other women and men or of sexual pleasure itself. But are homosexual persons any more prone to such idolatry than heterosexual persons? Why could not homosexual as well as heterosexual love be characterized by a proper acknowledgment of the creatureliness of other human beings and of the creaturely limitation of sexuality in the context of true worship and service of God? Perhaps Paul himself did not witness such non-idolatrous homosexual relationships. Perhaps the prevailing degenerate homosexuality of his time and his ignorance of what we have learned about the causes and nature of homosexuality prevented his conceiving the possibility of such. But do not the witness and lives of Christian homosexual persons in our time as well as our deeper understanding of homosexuality itself lead us to see more clearly than Paul at this point?

(c) Contrary to Paul, Jesus himself did not condemn homosexuality or make heterosexuality a condition for entering into the Kingdom of God. Moreover, Paul's own understanding of the Gospel in Romans 1-3 leads him to proclaim the Good News of God's saving grace to all people, without any discrimination according to sexual orientation.

(d) Finally, Paul argues that homosexuality is not only idolatrous but also "unnatural" (Rom. 1.26 f.). Two kinds of arguments are used in evaluating this judgment, one criticizing Paul's understanding of what is

natural, the other criticizing not so much Paul himself as the traditional interpretation of him.

Some interpreters criticize Paul's understanding of "natural" sexuality in Romans 1.26f. by relating it to his view of the natural in I Corinthians 11~ They point out that in the latter passage Paul expresses some strange ideas about what "nature teaches" (I Cor. 11.14) regarding proper dress and hair styles for women and men. Most Christians today believe that such views reflect not the will of God revealed in nature but social conventions for preserving order, decorum and the good reputation of the Christian community in the near East in the first century. These conventions may have been important for Christians in that time but they are no longer meaningful for us. Paul's acceptance of slavery and his view of the inferior status of women have been criticized the same way. May not Paul's view of the unnaturalness of homosexuality be just as culturally conditioned as his view of the unnaturalness of unveiled women or long-haired men? Are we not just as free—and just as bound—to question his assumptions about homosexuality as his assumptions about slavery and the inferiority of women—especially in light of his own teaching about the full knowledge of God and his will which are given in Jesus Christ and not in what we can figure out for ourselves by observing nature or creation?

It has also been argued that the people Paul is denouncing in Romans 1.26f. are people who are fundamentally heterosexual but with deliberate perversion choose to "give up" or "exchange" heterosexual for homosexual relationships. For such people homosexual acts are unnatural. Paul does not speak about—and probably did not know about—true homosexual persons who have never been attracted to the opposite sex and for whom it would be unnatural not to have homosexual relationships. He thus leaves room for us to understand unnatural sexual activity to be that which is contrary to one's sexual orientation, whether it is heterosexual or homosexual sexual. Or to put it positively, Paul leaves room for us to believe that natural sexual activity is that which expresses one's true sexual orientation, whether homosexual or heterosexual. This interpretation is of course contrary to the traditional interpretation, and

Paul himself may not have envisioned it, but a strict reading of his argument nevertheless allows us to think in this direction.

Those who argue in one way or another for natural homosexuality base their arguments not only on their analysis of Paul's theology but on an interpretation of the broader biblical witness to God's purpose of the life of human beings together as we see it in the Genesis creation narratives and in Jesus Christ. We will return presently to this more general theological argument.

## *2. The Interpretation in Defense of Paul*

Most interpreters in the past have so taken for granted the condemnation of homosexuality in the New Testament that they have not felt it necessary to argue for its validity. In response to contemporary attempts to take a less critical attitude toward homosexuality, the following arguments are made in defense of Paul's and the traditional Christian position:

(a) The fact that the catalogues of sins in the New Testament which condemn homosexuality are similar to those in some Jewish or GraecoRoman literature of the same period is not an argument against but for their validity. Paul's position gains rather than loses authority because it confirms and is confirmed by non-Christian ethical wisdom. Such agreement proves that all ethically sensitive people are aware that homosexuality is a distortion of right human relationships.

(b) There may indeed be homosexual relationships that are not idolatrous or the consequences of idolatry. But that does not mean that they are legitimate or that Paul's basic argument is wrong. A wrong relationship with God results in wrong human relationships. Even when homosexual people do not worship sexuality as such or sexual partners, homosexuality is still an indication of refusal to honor the Creator and the order he has established for human sexual relatedness.

(c) Jesus did not condemn homosexuality, but his silence does not mean that he approved of it or accepted it. He only spoke of human sexual relationships in the context of marriage between men and women. Moreover, it is of course true that the gospel of God's grace in Christ is offered to all people, including homosexual people. But it is offered to

homosexual people as to all others with the requirement of repentance and turning away from sin. Interpreters who argue this way do not always agree in their judgment about what repentance means for homosexual persons. Some seem to say it has to do only with homosexual practices; others, that it has to do with both homosexual activity and homosexual orientation; others speak only of homosexuality in general without making a distinction between practice and orientation. They all agree in emphasizing that in one way or another homosexuality is unnatural and sinful and that the gospel of God's grace in Christ for homosexual persons cannot mean acceptance or approval of their homosexuality.

(d) Paul was right when he said that homosexuality is unnatural. His argument about what is natural in dress and hairstyle may sound strange to us (through we may still learn something from it concerning the importance of preserving order, decorum and the good reputation of the Christian community). But that issue is clearly of a different nature from the issue of homosexuality. The social conventions of his time may have influenced his ideas about styles of dress and hair arrangement, but his position on homosexuality is based on God's intention for human sexual relationships in all times and places.

Those who support Paul on homosexuality do not agree in their evaluation of the parallel drawn between his position on this issue and his position on slavery and the inferior status of women. Few would want to argue for the acceptance of slavery today, but some believe that his view of what is the natural and God-willed place and conduct of women in the Church is as authoritative for us today as his understanding of what is natural and God-willed in sexual relationships. Others believe that we can distinguish between these issues. Paul's own statements about slavery and women in other passages (as well as the attitudes and actions of Jesus himself) give us ground for rethinking the issue of slavery and women, but neither Jesus nor Paul gives us ground for such re-evaluation of the rejection of homosexuality.

In opposition to the argument that Romans 1.26 f. says that the practice of homosexuality is unnatural only for those who are

heterosexually oriented, the argument must be that Paul means to say that homosexuality itself is unnatural and against the united biblical witness to the purpose of God's created order.

Those who defend as well as those who criticize Paul's position on homosexuality appeal to the broader base of God's creative and redemptive purpose for human sexuality in general. We turn now to summarize their arguments on this more general level.

### C. The Total Biblical Witness

The differences of interpretation which emerge from reflection of those passages in the Old and New Testaments dealing specifically with homosexuality are not resolved by asking what Scripture as a whole teaches about human sexuality in general. On the contrary, the same differences of opinion emerge in this broader context. What reflection at this level can do is help us articulate the fundamental biblical-theological issue which underlies all the individual texts and various interpretations we have discussed. The fundamental question is whether or not God's creative and redemptive purpose for human sexuality relates exclusively to male-female relatedness.

1. The argument for exclusively male-female relatedness. The classical Christian position is that God created human beings with a biological (and perhaps also psychological) sexual differentiation so that the distinction between male and female is an essential part of every person's human identity. But God also saw that it is not good for human beings to be alone (Gen. 2.18). His purpose in creating them male and female was not only to distinguish them from each other but to enable them to fulfill their humanity in mutually loving relationship with each other. This God-created sexual differentiation and sexual relatedness is most profoundly expressed in the faithful and monogamous marital union of men and women (though even apart from sexual intimacy and marriage men and women are still distinguished from each other as male and female and should relate to each other as such). Sometimes the Church (especially in Protestantism) has spoken and acted as if unmarried people (whether never married, divorced or widowed) are less than fully human beings. Sometimes it has spoken and

acted as if men and women who do not produce children are also less than fully human beings and are perhaps even guilty of disobeying God's command "to be fruitful and multiply." When the Church has thus made marriage and parenthood a condition of human fulfillment, it has contradicted its own orthodox theology which asserts that the humanity of Jesus is the perfect norm of all genuine humanity though he was neither married nor a parent. Even when the Church has avoided tying genuine *humanity* to marriage and parenthood, however, it has maintained that according to God's creative purpose the physical expression of human sexuality can properly take place only in the heterosexual relationship of marriage.

When we move from the Genesis account of creation to the New Testament, we see that Jesus did not describe new life in the Kingdom of God in terms of the male-female relationship. He suggested that marriage (though not necessarily sexuality) will end with the coming of the Kingdom (Mk. 12.25). He taught that the decisive relationship for life in the Kingdom is the relationship of people not with the opposite sex but with God and neighbors. Nevertheless Jesus affirmed God's original intention for males and females to be united in monogamous, faithful marriage (Mk. 10.2 ff). He blessed marriage (John 2.1 ff.). In the context of a discussion of homosexuality it is noteworthy that he did not reject or avoid contact with women but counted women as well as men among his close friends and followers.

For Paul too the new humanity or new creation we hope for in Christ and already experience in the present by the power of the Holy Spirit, is not tied to the male-female relationship. In Christ all are one; there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3.28). In I Corinthians 7 Paul expresses the opinion that in view of the coming end of all things it is better to be unmarried because sexual desire and the responsibilities of marriage make it difficult to be concerned about the "affairs of the Lord." Nevertheless, even in this chapter Paul affirms the legitimacy of sex and marriage, recognizing that whether married or single "each has his own special gift from God," and should "lead the life which the Lord has assigned him." In Ephesians 5.21 ff. he

chose the husband-wife relationship to speak of the relationship between Christ and the Church. We have already noted how he views heterosexuality as the “natural” expression of physical human relatedness.

According to the traditional interpretation, then, the New Testament as well as the Old recognizes only male-female relatedness as the proper expression of human sexuality. Especially in the New Testament physical sexual activity is considered good (within the bounds of marriage) but not necessary.

2. The argument for sexual relatedness not limited to the male-female distinction. Some contemporary theologians and many homosexual Christians believe that biblical teachings about the male-female relationship should not be narrowly interpreted as the expression of God’s will for heterosexual relationships only. The biblical understanding of the distinction and relationship between male and female is the prototype and example of all truly human relationships, non-sexual as well as sexual, homosexual as well as heterosexual.

From the biblical teaching about the distinction between male and female we learn to acknowledge and respect the God-created uniqueness and individuality—the “otherness”—of every human being. We also learn that truly human relatedness is possible only when this distinctiveness of the other is honored and preserved, not dissolved into an undifferentiated sameness. True relatedness means the togetherness of people who are *different* from each other. This distinctiveness in relationship is indeed reflected in the male-female relationship. But why should it be *limited* to male-female relatedness? Is it not also the prototype of the right relationship also between people of different races, cultures, nationalities and the like? Why should it not also be the prototype of right homosexual relationships? Homosexual relationships are admittedly relationships between people of the same sex, but the sexual distinction is not the only way in which people are distinguished from each other. So long as (and to the extent that) a homosexual relationship is not in fact the attempt to deny or escape but the attempt to realize encounter with someone recognized to be genuinely “other,” why could it not be authentically human? Cannot there be mutual

honor and respect of the uniqueness and individuality of the other in homosexual as well as in heterosexual relationships, and thus in one way as well as the other the realization of the unity-with-distinction which reflects God’s creative purpose for the life of human beings together?

Those who argue that the God-intended distinction between the partners in male-female relationships can also be preserved in homosexual relationships also argue that the quality of God-willed relatedness in the one can also be expressed in the other. “It is not good that man should be alone” means that God created human beings so that they cannot be human in lonely isolation, self-sufficiency and autonomy. He created them to be persons-in-relationship whose essential human humanity is expressed in mutual need for one another and fulfilled in mutual commitment to love and help one another. Moreover, since God created human beings as physical creatures, not as disembodied souls or spirits or minds, he intended this mutual need, commitment, love and help to be expressed in physical intimacy. The biblical account of God’s creation of male and female *illustrates* and *manifests* this being-in-relationship. But why should we conclude that such being-in-relationship can be fulfilled only in a male-female relationship? Is it any better for homosexual than for heterosexual persons to be alone? May not homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships express the mutual need, commitment, love and help God intended for all human beings? If homosexual persons too have been created physical sexual beings, why should not their mutuality also be expressed in physical desire and love-making? If we deny homosexual persons the only kind of deep personal relatedness possible for them, do we not cut them off from the very thing that constitutes their God-created and God-willed humanity? Those who argue this way emphasize that they are not arguing for “only” physical relatedness, or for casual or promiscuous sexuality, any more than those who speak of God-willed male-female-relatedness argue for such. Standards such as permanence, unreserved self-giving and faithfulness which apply to right heterosexual relationships also apply to right homosexual relationships.

If God created human beings so that their humanity is being-in-relationship, and if this relatedness can be expressed homosexually as well as heterosexuality, what then does Christ mean for homosexual persons? Just what he means for heterosexual persons. He died and rose again and lives for homosexual persons too. He is also their Savior and Lord. To them too are directed all the warnings and promises, judgment and grace, of the Gospel. They too are called to faith and repentance. They too are forgiven, accepted, justified by grace through faith. They too are given new life in Christ by the Holy Spirit and are called to live it out faithfully and obediently in every area of life. They too are invited to participation in the community of God's people—to hear the Word, receive the sacraments, share in the fellowship, join the Church's mission in the world. In short, they too may participate in and hope for the new humanity Jesus Christ brings and promises to all those who follow him and live in his company. And all this happens not as homosexual persons are called out of their homosexuality but as they learn to live faithful and obedient Christian lives within it.

The fundamental theological issue underlying the Church's discussion of homosexuality is whether this is a legitimate and convincing interpretation of the meaning of creation and redemption for human sexuality. When the discussion reaches this level, our problem is no longer one of understanding but one of decision. The alternatives before us are clear. Which should we choose?.

## **V. Alternatives Before the Church**

At least three broad positions (with variations in the first two) for understanding homosexuality and dealing with homosexual persons emerge from the clinical data we have summarized in sections I and II, from the theological and ethical presuppositions we have summarized in section III and from the interpretations of the biblical material we have summarized in section IV. It is clear? that while some of the elements in the three positions can be combined, we are presented here not with equally valid options but with real alternatives which call for decision.

1. *Some Christians believe that homosexuality is a sickness or arrested*

*psychosexual development.* (For the purpose of our discussion we can combine these two clinical diagnoses though they are different and result in different attitudes toward homosexual persons.) Homosexual persons should be understood as sick people who need to be cured or as immature people who need to be enabled to grow into the capacity for mature heterosexual relationships. The Church should encourage (require?) homosexual persons who want to participate in its fellowship and ministry to seek psychiatric help and the help of God's grace to be healed of this sickness, or to be freed from the crippling influences which have retarded their psychosexual growth, so that they might become heterosexual. The Church should also offer its support and help to people who are struggling to overcome their homosexuality.

If the Church should adopt this position and carry it out responsibly, it would be aware of the increasing difficulty of overcoming this disease or handicap the closer a person is to an exclusively homosexual orientation or condition. It would also take into consideration the distinction between homosexual activity and homosexual orientation. It would then have three possible ways of implementing this basic stance:

(a) The Church could refuse to accept into its fellowship and ministry those who cannot or will not change their abnormal sexual orientation. In this case it would have to be prepared to answer the question why and to what extent psychological health or wholeness or maturity is a prerequisite for participation in the Church's life and work, and on what grounds it excludes people with this psychological problem when it is willing to include those who are psychologically sick or retarded in other ways. It would also have to come to terms with Jesus' statement that he came precisely for those who are sick and not for those who are well (Mk. 2.17).

(b) The Church could accept into its fellowship and ministry those who give up all homosexual activity, even though they cannot or will not change their homosexual orientation. In this case it would have to struggle with the problem of requiring a split between what homosexual persons are and how they live, and with the consequence of

asking them to give up the only expression of sexuality possible for them

(c) Having encouraged or required homosexual persons to seek to be cured of their sickness or freed of their handicap in every possible way, the Church could receive into its fellowship and ministry those for whom heterosexuality is impossible on the condition that they live out their homosexuality in an ethically responsible way within the limited possibilities of their psychosexual orientation. (See 2.c below.) Both for its own protection and for the protection of homosexual persons themselves, the Church could then consider whether it would be wise (with proper discretion and sensitivity to the feelings and needs of all involved) to make some policies about the kinds of responsibilities and opportunities which should be open to homosexual people in its fellowship. If it chose this alternative, the Church would have to be careful that it did not prematurely encourage homosexual people to accept their sickness or crippled condition and cease the struggle for psychosexual health, wholeness and maturity.

The fundamental assumption behind all three of these alternatives is rejected by those who do not accept the clinical diagnosis of homosexuality as abnormal in one way or another, by those who believe on biblical-theological grounds that it is not primarily a manifestation of psychological disorder but of sin, and by those who believe that responsible homosexuality may be both psychologically and theologically justified as one form of healthy and whole sexuality.

2. *Some Christians believe that homosexuality is sinful.* Homosexual people need to repent of and give up their homosexuality. They may indeed have psychological problems, and when they do they should be encouraged and supported as they seek appropriate psychological help. But even if some homosexual persons are or become well-adjusted in the homosexuality and even if behavioral scientists should reach the consensus that homosexuality in itself is not a sickness or the manifestation of psychosexual immaturity, the Church must still understand it as a sinful distortion of the sexuality God intends for human beings. The Church, therefore, cannot under any circumstances

approve of homosexuality. Its task is in word and deed to enable homosexual people to hear the gospel of Christ which at once condemns their sinfulness, assures them of God's forgiveness, and promises them new life according to God's will in the area of sexuality as in all other areas of life.

Responsible application of this position would also involve awareness of the increasing difficulty of change the closer a person is to an exclusively homosexual orientation and consideration of the distinction between homosexual activity and homosexual orientation. It would then have three possible procedures of implementation similar to those mentioned above, though the problems connected with them are different when the point of view is theological rather than merely clinical. (In principle the clinical and theological positions are not necessarily mutually exclusive but could be so formulated that they mutually support and supplement each other.)

(a) The Church could refuse to accept into its fellowship and ministry those who do not repent of and give up their sinful homosexual orientation to become heterosexual. In this case it would have to be willing to accept responsibility for rejecting from participation in its life and work — and excluding from the promises of the Gospel not only those who willfully refuse to become heterosexual but also those who with all good will and in dependence on every resource of divine and human help cannot become heterosexual. It would also have to be prepared to answer the question why it rejects and excludes people with this sinful disposition when it accepts and includes people with other sinful dispositions — people, for instance, who are envious, greedy, covetous, haughty, filled with malice, etc. (sins which in Romans 1.28 ff. and I Corinthians 6.9 ff. Paul mentions along with the sin of homosexuality without suggesting that it is more sinful than these other sins). Finally, the Church would also have to acknowledge that at the same time it is also rejecting and excluding from the promises of the Gospel those in its membership who are unrecognized and non-practicing homosexual persons.

(b) The Church could accept into its fellowship and ministry those who repent of and give up homosexual activity even though

they may not be able to change their homosexual orientation. Leaving to God judgment about what lies in the hearts and minds of people, the Church would concern itself only with what they do. In this case it would have to be careful that it did not fall into a very superficial view of sin and repentance, which the New Testament teaches us involves not only external deeds but also the internal motivations and desires of the heart. It would also have to be careful that it did not give the impression that it encourages and approves of hypocrisy both on the part of homosexual persons themselves and on the part of a Church satisfied only with external change. It would have to be very careful not to encourage legalistic self-righteousness (or perhaps unexpressed hopelessness) on the part of others in the Church who may be homosexual "in their hearts" but have never engaged in homosexual activity. Finally, it would have to be willing to stand by the serious consequences of demanding celibacy of those for whom homosexual love is the only possibility of sexual expression.

(c) Having encouraged and helped homosexual persons in every way to repent and become heterosexual, the Church could receive into its fellowship and ministry those for whom heterosexuality is an impossibility if they commit themselves to the Christian faith and life within the limitations of the kind of human sexuality and sexual expression that is possible for them. It would consider both the homosexual orientation and homosexual practices to be sinful, but practicing homosexual persons (like those guilty of other sins) would not be excluded from the Church and promises of the gospel. They would be urged to continue to struggle with their particular temptations in the fellowship and with the support of other Christians in the Christian community, depending just like other sinners in the Church on God's forgiving and renewing grace. The Church would not approve of homosexuality but would accept homosexual persons, inviting them and requiring them to live out their form of sexuality in an ethically responsible way. So, for instance, homosexual persons would be encouraged to avoid situations in which the danger of temptation is great, to develop the non-sexual sides of life and keep sexual

activity in proportion to other parts of life, to relate to other people of the opposite sex and of the same sex in a human (not just genital) way, to reject promiscuity and to develop a permanent relationship with another person which is not exploitative and impersonal but involves mutual respect and love.

If it chooses this alternative, the Church would have to struggle with the problem of accepting in practice what it rejects in theory. It would have to be careful that it did not too easily give up on the renewing power of God's grace, thus allowing the condemned homosexual persons to settle into a sexual orientation and way of life less than the fully human sexual relatedness God wills for all people. It would also have to deal with the practical and pastoral problems involved in integrating homosexual persons into the life and work of the Christian community, exercising realistic and compassionate concern both for homosexual persons themselves and for others.

The fundamental assumption behind all three of these alternatives is rejected by those who for psychological and/or theological reasons do not believe that homosexuality and its practices are sinful in themselves. The last alternative, which at first glance seems most open to compromise, is as objectionable as the first two to homosexual persons (and others who agree with them) who cannot accept a position which they believe patronizingly only "allows" them "nevertheless" to participate in the Church and thus condemn, though benevolently, a way of life they consider good, natural and God-willed for them.

3. *Some Christians believe that homosexuality is a legitimate variety of human sexuality.* For homosexual persons it is just as natural, normal, and pleasing to God as heterosexuality is for heterosexual persons. Those who hold this position believe that the Church must therefore accept homosexuality as a legitimate form of sexuality and welcome homosexual persons into its fellowship and ministry without any reservations or qualifications except those concerning faith and obedience which are applicable to everyone else.

If the Church should responsibly adopt this position, it would acknowledge also in this case that a homosexual orientation is

increasingly difficult to change the closer one comes to an exclusively homosexual orientation, and also in this case it would support the efforts of homosexual persons who want to and are able to become heterosexual. But it would not consider such change either necessary or desirable for those who cannot or will not change their homosexual orientation. Moreover, the Church would also in this case take into consideration the connection between homosexual orientation and sexual expression. It would consider homosexual activity by people who are not genuinely homosexual in orientation to be sinful and/or sick or distorted, and help such people to overcome the self-destructive contradiction between their true psychosexual orientation and their sexual activity. It would further acknowledge that genuinely homosexual persons may express their particular form of sexuality in sinful and/or sick or immature ways, and help to free them of their sin and/or heal their psychologically disordered lives. But that would mean to help them become not heterosexual but homosexual persons who live out their homosexuality in a healthy Christian way.

If the Church should take this affirmative attitude toward homosexuality and homosexual persons, it would have to be sure that it is able to recognize and define "genuine" homosexuality. It would have to be certain that the most accepting attitude toward homosexuality is the most living and helpful attitude toward homosexual persons and that it would not be encouraging a way of life that handicaps or destroys the possibility of homosexual persons achieving the full humanity they quite properly seek for themselves. In other words, it would have to be sure that it could justify its position theologically and psychologically. Finally, it would have to struggle with the educational and pastoral problems involved in taking a position so radically different from the traditional Christian position on this issue.

This position is of course rejected by those who do not believe that the scientific clinical evidence warrants such an unreserved affirmation of homosexuality and by those who do not believe that even a non-legalistic historical and theological interpretation of Scripture supports it.

## VI. Guidelines

Variations of each of the three basic positions we have outlined are chosen by faithful Christians who find the problems involved in their particular position easier to deal with than those of other positions. Since homosexuality itself is such a complex phenomenon and since every homosexual person is a unique human being, it may be that no one theoretical position could be formulated which would be adequate to deal with every form of homosexuality and every homosexual person. All serious Christians will be compelled to reject one or another of these positions. But in view of the complexity of the issue, the disagreement among Christians and the variety in the character and experience of homosexual persons themselves, it seems unwise at this time to propose any one position as the position of our Church. We therefore offer some general guidelines which have merged from our study. They do not solve the problem but they should help individual Christians, church sessions and presbyteries make their decisions with more understanding, compassion and responsibility as they deal with particular homosexual persons in concrete situations.

### 1. *Concerning those who make decisions about homosexuality and homosexual persons*

(a) Informed and responsible decisions can be made only with the help of experts in the behavioral sciences who have insight into the psychological and sociological influences which cause homosexuality and shape the psychosexual orientation and behavior of homosexual people.

(b) Sincere desire to know the will of God for homosexual persons means openness to the possibility that what we think we already know may need to be corrected by a fresh listening for God's will as it is made known in Jesus Christ by his Spirit both through Scripture and through brother and sister Christians who may hear a different word when they seek the will of the same God in the same Christ through the same Scripture, guided by the same Spirit.

(c) Genuine concern to understand and minister to homosexual persons requires open and compassionate listening to what they have to say about themselves, their experiences,

their feelings and their way of life. Like all other persons, homosexual persons are best known and understood through personal encounter, not through theories, second-hand reports and speculation.

(d) The “homosexual problem” is also a heterosexual problem, the problem of the ignorance, fear, anxiety and prejudice of heterosexual people when they encounter homosexual people. Genuine concern to understand and minister to homosexual persons requires willingness on the part of heterosexual persons to let themselves be instructed, judged, corrected, called to repentance and given a new spirit of justice and love in dealing with those who are different from them.

(e) Those in the Church who make judgments about homosexuality and homosexual persons will make their decisions with more compassion and humility when they examine themselves and the Church to discover what part they have played in the psychological and cultural conditioning that helps create homosexuality. What has the Church done or not done to influence right relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children? In its ministry to children and youth to what extent has the Church left unchallenged or itself encouraged distorted views of masculinity and femininity, created or paid no attention to the loneliness and insecurity of those who do not fit the expected masculine or feminine roles of our culture?

## *2. Concerning homosexual persons as human beings*

(a) There is as much diversity in the expression of homosexuality as in the expression of heterosexuality. It is as false to say what “all” homosexual persons are like and how they live as to say what “all” heterosexual persons are like and how they live. Like every heterosexual person, each homosexual person can be understood and ministered to only as the unique human being he or she is, with his or her unique problems and needs, limitations and possibilities, weaknesses and strengths.

(b) Like heterosexual persons, homosexual persons cannot be understood exclusively in terms of their sexual orientation. Sexuality is no more “all there is” to a person in one case than in the other. Like heterosexual persons, homosexual persons may be responsible in

their chosen vocations, generous and loving in personal relationships, diligent in striving for justice and peace in the social order, committed to the Christian faith and life. Because they have often experienced being hurt, rejected and discriminated against, homosexual persons may in fact be especially sensitive to the needs, hurts and feelings of others, and especially aware of their need for comfort and strength offered by the Christian gospel.

(c) Homosexual persons in general are no more threatening to the welfare of society and the Church than are heterosexual persons in general. Society and the Church legitimately seek to protect their welfare from those homosexual persons as from those heterosexual persons who do threaten their welfare. For the sake of those who are sexually attracted to young people as well as for the sake of the young themselves, children and youth are especially to be protected from homosexual as from heterosexual pedophilia.

(d) Whether homosexuality is understood as sin, psychological disorder or simply a variation of sexuality, all homosexual persons are to be respected as human beings created in the image of God. Persecution, contempt, mockery and condescending pity are inhuman and unchristian in relation to homosexual persons as in relation to all other human beings. Jesus’ command that we love our neighbors applies to our neighbors who are homosexual as well as to those who are heterosexual.

## *3. Concerning theological and ethical judgments*

(a) Scripture teaches us that all of us are not only what we do but also what we feel, desire and think. A legalistic concentration on external actions which ignores internal motivations and dispositions is as wrong in dealing with homosexuality as in dealing with any other ethical problem. Those who make responsible judgments about homosexuality and homosexual persons cannot assume that only those are homosexual who engage in homosexual activity or that those who no longer engage in it have forsaken homosexuality. On the other hand, human beings, who cannot see into the hearts of others, must be careful about judging anyone on any other basis than what he or she says

about himself or herself and how he or she acts.

(b) Homosexual persons are as responsible as heterosexual persons for their sexual behavior and the quality of their relationships with other people. Promiscuity, sexual self-gratification which uses another person as an object, sexual seduction which manipulates another and sexual violence are as wrong for homosexual as for heterosexual persons.

(c) Full humanity and genuine personal relationships do not require explicit sexual activity either for heterosexual or for homosexual persons.

(d) The psychosexual orientation of homosexual persons (like that of sexual persons) is not simply the result of their deciding and choosing but to a smaller or greater extent the result of complex and deep-rooted psychological and sociological factors which shaped their sexual orientation long before they were able to choose, and which continue to shape their choosing. Homosexual persons therefore cannot simply "decide" to change their sexual orientation even if they will. Such change becomes increasingly difficult the closer they approach an exclusive homosexual orientation and may be impossible for some.

(e) Homosexual persons (like heterosexual persons) should not use "nature or "fate" or

"chance" or "my parents" or "society" as an excuse for hopeless or self satisfied resignation which refuses to take responsibility for the kind of persons they are and can become.

(f) When the possibility of change in psychosexual orientation is considered the power of God's grace must be taken into account as well as the power of psychological and sociological influences and the power of self determination. It must be remembered that God is free and not compelled to do what we think or earnestly desire that he should. Moreover, God's grace may mean his comforting and sustaining people in the given circumstances of their lives as well as his delivering them from those circumstances

(g) The Church should require no more moral perfection or psychological health and maturity of homosexual than of heterosexual persons.

(h) The Church is called to bear witness to the justice of the Kingdom of God by standing for justice in human society. Whether or not Christians accept or approve of homosexuality itself, they should stand for just treatment of homosexual persons as well as all other persons in our society. They should advocate and defend for homosexual persons also the civil liberties, equal rights and protection under the law from social and economic discrimination which are due all other citizens.

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Editor's notes (added September, 1998)

The "southern church" which commissioned this study, Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), merged in 1983 with the northern thread, United Presbyterian Church (USA), to become the present Presbyterian Church (USA). The study report you have before you dates from ca. 1979.

Jim Tiefenthal transferred this document from paper to electronic format in September, 1998, at Rochester, NY. Betty Iwan proofread the text. Although loving care was taken to preserve the original text, MLCN cannot guarantee accuracy.