

There are many ways to present Christian Ethics: Feminist theology, Post-modern Theology and Liberal Theology are some ways to approach them. The different theologies service the different issues in Christian ethics. Biblical ethics and Biblical interpretation concerning Christian ethics are one kind of methodology for approaching them. In general, we see the Bible as a guide book for a Christian concerning how they may live according to God’s law. Often questions arise which may appear to negate the validity of this belief such as “Does the Bible give us guidelines about genetically altered food?” “Do we stone the adulterer and adulteress to death according to the Bible?” “The Bible makes no clear statement on birth control ?” When hermeneutics and biblical interpretation and careful exegesis are overturned by source and form criticism and at the same time, we face post- modern, destructive philosophy in the contextual approach of ethics. “Can the Bible serve as the ultimate authority for Christian Ethics?”

This essay is attempting to discover how synonymous Biblical ethics are with Christian Ethics. We use a case study of “the homosexual issue” to examine the methods of Christian Ethics and Biblical ethics in dealing with this issue. This essay, finally leads us to a conclusion about the strength or weakness of the view that the Bible carries an eternal weight of authority in Christian ethics. It is suggested in the Christian Ethics hand out that there are four sources namely: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. So the essay will be based on that structure. We will look at Experience first, then Reason, Tradition and Scripture in this order.

I. Experience:

Homosexuality is of course not a new issue in the human history; we could look back on the Biblical period in Canaan and the Roman Empire. Homosexuality is practised by the minority in the society. Human history shows us that human society is

based on heterosexuality, in other words In a predominantly heterosexual population, homosexuality is by definition a minority issue. Humanity procreates as a basic unit through the marriage of one man and one woman (although of course there are still polygamous and polyandrous pagan communities). Can we use our experience to define Christian Ethics in Homosexuality?

According to the Christian institute, *“the age of homosexual consent was reduced to 16 and the age at which girls could be subject to buggery was also reduced to 16 in January 2001”*. If we look at the health risks associated with homosexuality, we would have to be extremely cautious about promoting the view that our experience demonstrates that homosexual practice is good for humankind. *“In the UK 72% of all male HIV infections are through homosexual intercourse. Heterosexuals (other than those already in a high risk category such as syringe users) make up only 4% of those infected.”*¹ *Men who have ever engaged in any homosexual sex are banned for life from giving blood in the UK, even if it was “safe sex” with a condom.*² We cannot avoid the recognition therefore that the homosexual lifestyle carries great health risks. This reason leads us to question the view “we can rely on our experience to define Christian ethics”. It may not be that simple.

In a Gallup Poll³ in 1957 little more than a third of the population (38%) thought that homosexuality should be de-criminalised for adults. The divide between Anglican laity and clergy was again suggested by a Guardian survey⁴ of newly elected General Synod members in 1996 which found that 45% of laity and 70% of clergy agreed that the Church could not approve homosexual acts. The Francis-Kay survey

¹ Public Health Laboratories, Communicable Disease Report, 25 July 1997, vol. 7 No. 30, page 272, table 2. The 4% figure given in the text assumes that all “unknown” categories are heterosexual.

² Do not give blood without reading this leaflet, The UK Blood Transfusion Services, Department of Health, December 1995

³ Robin Gill, Churchgoing and Christian Ethics, Cambridge university press, 1999, p163.

⁴ Guardian 8 July 1996.

shows the most striking evidence of changing attitudes: less than a third (30%) of Anglican teenagers who went regularly to church thought that homosexuality was wrong. This provides persuasive evidence of what is termed ‘cultural shift’. Analysing the responses of those who answered that homosexuality can ‘never’ be justified, it was found that across the nation less than two-fifths (39%) of those aged 18-24 responded in this way, whereas almost three-quarters (73%) of those aged 65 or over did. We see therefore that experiential views are subject to dramatic changes according to cultural influences and therefore could not be said to provide a consistent framework for defining behavioural ethics.

II. Reason:

In this section, we will examine the different *mythologies* to see whether we can justify making reason our sole or primary basis for Christian ethics.

(i) Augustine: Augustine deals with both God’s prescience and human free-will as given and simply accuses his opponents of ‘profanity’ and ‘impudence’, ‘potential atheism’ and ‘blasphemy’⁵. Augustine has confidence in the prescience/ omnipotence of God and that God gives free-will to humanity. Could it be that God did not design homosexuality for humankind, and some of us have used our free-will to decide that homosexuality is suitable as it is pleasurable? Could it be that the *law of nature* tends to define our way of life for us? Can we merely follow the law of nature, if the person is homosexually orientated? So can we accept that he/she has his/her human free-will which justifies homosexuality as an acceptable part of Christian Ethics. Or we shall submit to the Divine law and allow it to *override the law of nature that is defiled by humanities fall*.

⁵ Robin Gill, A textbook of Christian ethics, new Revised (2nd)Edition, T&T Clark Edinburgh, 1995, p.65

(ii) Aquinas: *Aquinas said: ‘the law of grace is more powerful than the law of nature. It can be wiped away by sin, and this therefore, and with all the more reason, can happen to nature’s law.’*⁶ Paul described this battle in the human mind. “ *For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.*” (Romans 7:22-23) Even though we might justify by reason what is best for humanity, surely we can not merely live out what we decide. So this may grant homosexual orientated person his/her own right to justify the law of nature operating in his/her body, because he/she was born in this way. This gives me a great deal of doubt regarding the reliance on reason alone to define Christian ethics.

III. Tradition:

Most Christian denominations throughout the world still uphold Biblical teaching on homosexuality. In the UK, Roman Catholic leaders have been particularly firm, although liberalism has made many inroads into the church. Gay rights campaigners have urged Churches to change their stance. They have succeeded within sections of the Methodist and United Reformed denominations and amongst some liberal Bishops in the Church of England. If we are depending upon the church tradition, could it be that homosexuality therefore will become acceptable and justifiable in the generations to come ?

Krody (1979) and Blix (1979) have pointed many of the issues that challenge the churches in studying homosexuality. Krody said:

“A central concern in the religious debate on human sexuality is the issue of biblical authority and interpretation. Persons who hold to an inerrant view of the

⁶ Robin Gill, A textbook of Christian ethics, new Revised (2nd)Edition, T&T Clark Edinburgh, 1995, p.85

Bible will not be likely to come to the same conclusions as those who accept biblical ‘higher criticism.’ Tradition holds a much more important place in some churches than others. For some, only the scripture and tradition are to be used as norms; for others empirical scientific data and personal experience take precedence over what are seen to be culturally bound interpretations of the Bible and church history. The moral absolutist’s rules and regulations do not square with the situation ethicist’s approach to individual decision making”.⁷

John Struzzo suggests that the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition has generally been mistrustful of sexuality, wherein homosexuality is not even provided with a legitimate discussion.⁸ House of Bishops (1991) comments in “Issues in Human Sexuality”, with a soft voice that *‘Christian tradition also contains an emphasis on respect for free conscientious judgement where the individual has seriously weighed the issues involved. The homophile is only one in a range of such cases. While unable, therefore, to commend the way of life just described as in itself as faithful a reflection of God’s purposes in creation as the heterophile, we do not reject those who sincerely believe it is God’s call to them. We stand alongside them in the fellowship of the Church, all alike dependent upon the undeserved grace of God.’*⁹

Yes, the Church needs to have a pastoral sensitivity before practicing the discipline of exclusion from the community. But we need to strongly emphasise that the self-defined homosexual Christian needs to reshape their identity in conformity with the Gospel. It should not run the other way round-i.e. that the Gospel would be re-shaped to be more inclusive!. Dr. Williams Said: *‘If we are afraid of facing the reality of same-sex love*

⁷ Krody, N.E. (1979, October), Human sexuality and the Christian churches. Ecumenical Trends, 8(9),

page129

⁸ Richard Hasbany, Homosexuality and Religion, Harrington Park press, New York,1989, p195

⁹ David Clough , Authority in the Church, Cranmer Hall, 2004

*because it compels us to think through the process of bodily desire and delight in their own right, perhaps we ought to be more cautious about appealing to scripture as legitimating only procreative heterosexuality.*¹⁰ I am very concerned that the Church tradition of one man and one woman’s procreative heterosexuality will shift to support the adoption of children by homosexuals. It is a violation of God’s creation.

Dr, Williams continues to say: *‘In a church that accepts the legitimacy of contraception, the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous biblical texts, or on a problematic and non scriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures.’*¹¹ To respond to this comment, I would like to quote Hay’s writing. *‘Those who follow the church’s tradition by upholding the authority of Paul’s teaching against the morality of homosexual acts must do so with due humility... those who decide that the authority of Paul’s judgment against homosexuality is finally outweighed by other considerations [empirical investigations and contemporary experience] ought to do so with a due sense of the gravity of their choice.’*¹² Can Church tradition carry the ultimate authority to define Christian Ethics? I have many reasons to doubt it.

Although, for Anglicans, the Lambeth Conference in 1998 firmly restated that homosexual practice is incompatible with the Bible, some liberal Bishops from the UK and USA opposed Lambeth Resolution 1.10, the vast majority agreed with its statement that:

¹⁰ Williams, Rowan, ‘The Body’s grace’, in *theology and sexuality*, ed. Eugene Rogers, Blackwells, Oxford, 2002 page319-320

¹¹ Williams, Rowan, ‘The Body’s grace’, in *theology and sexuality*, ed. Eugene Rogers, Blackwells, Oxford, 2002 page320

¹² Hay, R.B. *Relations natural and unnatural: A response to John Boswell’s exegesis of Romans 1*. *The Journal of religious Ethics*, 14 (1) 1986, p211.

“Homosexual practice is incompatible with the Bible;

Christians can experience same-sex attraction and that the church should seek sensitively to minister to such people;

For those not called to marriage, sexual abstinence is the right course; and Same-sex unions are to be rejected.¹³”

Recently, the Windsor report brings up the issue of the consecration of Dr. Gene Robinson which has caused many divisions in the Church. Dr. Oakley’s summary reports the church position in this way in ‘Church of England: Issues in Human Sexuality. *Church teaching is that homosexuality is not in accordance with God’s will, but lay individuals may exercise freedom of conscience.*’¹⁴ If we compare the Lambeth Conference 1998 with the Windsor report 2004, we could easily understand that Church tradition may not be sufficiently consistent to serve as an ultimate authority to define Christian ethics.

IV. Scripture:

Liberal theology has sought to argue throughout its history that homosexuality was badly treated by Biblical interpretation. Ronald M. Springett said in his book ‘Homosexuality in History and the Scripture’:

‘Nowhere has homosexual activity been viewed with as much abhorrence as in the Judeo-Christian West. Neither Islam nor Hinduism sees it as taboo. Primitive peoples like the Eskimos, Malaysians, and North American Indians had no difficulty accepting it; ancient Greece institutionalized it. In some primitive cultures, a homosexual was even seen as a kind of shaman or holy man, certainly not as a criminal. The only adequate explanation for the profound, even phobic, animosity of

¹³ www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/lambeth/lc093.html as at 1 March 2001

¹⁴ Nigel Oakley, relationship, Cranmer hall, Seminar 1st November 2004

the Judeo-Christian West is the fact that homosexual behaviour is viewed in the Bible as a crime worthy of death (Lev 18-22; 20:13), a sin "against nature" (Rom 1:26), which excludes one from entry into the kingdom of God (I Cor 6:10). Even more ominous was the punishment visited by God upon Sodom for the assumed sin that was named after that ill-fated city (Gen 19:1-29). If these acts called to heaven for Vengeance, how could a people and their rulers tolerate such behaviour except at the risk of divine displeasure for themselves as well?’

It seems to me that liberal theology does recognise the authority of the Bible to a degree, but they are not happy with the conservative and traditional Biblical interpretation. It seems to me that they are questioning the attitude of Biblical Criticism approach of the exegesis of scripture concerning Homosexuality. So we will look at those vital scriptures both in the Old and New Testament which may help us to examine how we view the significance of the authority of the Bible in defining Christian Ethics.

(i) Genesis 19:1-29: The narrative story of Sodom and Gomorrah often is connecting with homosexuality. *"The Genesis passage is very clear, that the sin of Sodom that brought on the destruction of the city was indeed linked to homosexuality."* R. Albert Mohler¹⁵ Genesis 19 is one of the most commonly cited anti-homosexual passages in the Bible. It is so frequently used that the term "Sodomite" that once referred to an inhabitant of Sodom, became a legal term for criminal sexual acts, and has now become a derogatory synonym for a homosexual. So Hays said it is actually irrelevant to the topic.¹⁶ Inge Anderson¹⁷, *"Saying that the last recorded acts of the Sodomites -- the demands for same-gender sex -- are proof that*

¹⁵ Fred Tasker, "What does the Bible say about homosexuality?", Philadelphia Inquirer, 1997-JUL-13.

¹⁶ Richard B. Hays, The Moral vision of the New Testament, HarperCollins Publishers 1996, London, P381.

¹⁷ Inge Anderson, "Sins of Sodom," at: <http://glow.cc/isa/sodom.htm>

they were destroyed for homosexuality is like saying that a condemned man cursing his guards on the way to his execution is being executed for cursing the guards.

Sodom was judged worthy of destruction before the incident with Lot and the angels.”

We may have a reference from Jude 7 to suggest that the term the sin of Sodom could be applied to sexual misconduct of any kind. Hays indicates that the sin of Sodom is found in an oracle of the book of Ezekiel: “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” (Ezek. 16:49)

(ii) Leviticus 18:22, 20:13: Hays explain the verse of 18:22 in the holiness code in Leviticus explicitly prohibits male homosexual intercourse¹⁸. The verse 20:10-16 is a list of a series of sexual offences including adultery, incest and bestiality that are subject to the death sentence. Hays notes Daniel Boyarin’s article (1995) and concludes, *“this unambiguous legal prohibition stands as the foundation for the subsequent universal rejection of male same-sex intercourse with Judaism.”*

Brueggemann views the Levitical law as relevant to contemporary theology and ethics, *“There is a tension between justice and purity in the Bible. We can hold that the Levitical rules are not rules for us, such as that those who commit adultery will not be stoned to death in public. But this conclusion does not foreclose the question as to whether they carry weight for the church’s life and witness at some level of the rule’s purpose”*¹⁹. Gagnon points out that’ the Levitical proscriptions make clear why: first and foremost it is sex with “one’s own flesh”. The same-sex intercourse is proscribed because it is sex with a non-complementary sexual “same” or “like”. In my personal view Gagnon offer the better view of this verse. Because he uses the New Testament

¹⁸ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral vision of the New Testament*, HarperCollins Publishers 1996, London, P381.

¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 1997, page 193-196.

to interpret this verse with a deep understanding of what Jesus has offered to each person. *“Capital punishment for sexual immorality is differed in the new covenant not because sexual immorality is regarded as a light matter but because a dead person can not repent and so be saved for God’s coming eternal kingdom²⁰.”* How much time have we given so that a person has an opportunity to repent before implementing church discipline?

(iii) 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy: These verse show that the early church did consistently adopt the Old Testament’s law on the matters of sexual morality, including homosexual acts. Gagnon suggest that Paul’s view of same-sex intercourse is that persistent unrepentant sexual behaviour can put a believer at risk of not inheriting the coming kingdom of God.

(iv) Romans 1:18-32: Hays suggests that the most crucial text for Christian ethics concerning Homosexuality remains Romans 1. He points this is the only passage in the New Testament expounding the condemnation of homosexual behaviour in an explicitly theological context. Cosgrove²¹ suggests that Paul probably regards the prohibition of homoerotic behaviour as an absolute rule. Gagnon affirms that *‘ the Bible’s opposition to homosexual practice is pervasive (with no dissenting voices in Scripture), absolute (with no exceptions for certain alleged non-exploitative forms), and severe (with no indication that the behaviour is anything less than an egregious form of misconduct).’²²*

We have examined those vital scriptures about homosexuality as a preparation for a case study of Hays and Pronk’s different view of Biblical interpretation. If we

²⁰ Robert A.J. Gagnon, The Authority of scripture in the “Homosex” debate, South eastern ELCA synod in Atlanta on June1,2002.

²¹ Charles H. Cosgrove, *Appealing to Scripture in Moral Debate*, Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2002, page 38

²² Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Theology, analogies, and Genes*, *Theology Matter* Vol7, No6, Nov/Dec 2001

take the Bible as inspiration from God (2Tim3:16), if we trust that Jesus came to fulfil the Law and the prophets, not to destroy it (Matt5:17), If we want to demonstrate our love to our Saviour by keeping His commandments (John14:15), then I would like to point out that the law of nature should agree with the Divine law. Paul treats the unnatural sexual exchange as an expression of the exchange of God’s glory for the glory of ourselves. When the glory of God ceases to be our supreme treasure, that distortion will be expressed in distortions of our sexual pleasure. When humankind rejects the Creator’s design, it shows humanity’s deep down and primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the Creator. What is it really to be against nature? It is basically to be against God’s pattern of design (Genesis ch1-2)

In conclusion, I don’t feel that the real issue lies around the question of whether Biblical authority can serve as the source of Christian Ethics. If we are considering whether it “*can*” or “*can not*” serve as the source of authority then obviously this implies that we are doubting Biblical authority. We should, I believe, rather ask ourselves “**shall we**” or “**shall we not**” accept the ultimate authority of the Bible? Surely a genuine Christian is a person following the Christ and submitting to His kingship. Can he/she choose another other king’s law? So the ultimate question is: Am I as a Christian, willing to submit to the Bible as the ultimate authority in ethical issues?