

Letter from Russ and Anita Calhoun

The Homosexuality Debate (A Parent's Perspective)

Our story is not unlike that of many families who are dealing with the homosexuality issue. We pray that by sharing this difficult time in our lives, it serves in some way to broaden your own experience and that you are encouraged to continue in a positive dialogue. We are the proud parents of three wonderful children; one of which, by the grace of God, is gay. We have been married for over thirty years and are both Ordained as Elders in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Our relationship with God has been an important part of our lives for as long as either of us can remember.

The Startling Realization:

One evening, after several months of prayer and soul searching, our son was finally able to garner enough courage to tell us that he was "gay." We were grossly unprepared to hear those words and although we sought to reconfirm our love to him that evening, our words were more judgmental than we would like to admit.

When a gay child comes out of the closet it is not uncommon for their parents to go in. This was true in our case. The reason for this behavior was primarily fear. Fear for our child's physical safety and fear of rejection by the extended family and friends. This fear is debilitating and becomes a serious obstacle within even the healthiest of families. Parents also deal with a tremendous amount of guilt - Guilt because perhaps you failed as a parent - Guilt because you were not there for them when they were emotionally abused by others - And guilt because you were ignorant of their needs as they felt more and more estranged from society.

There are at least two things that help many parents to eventually come out of the closet. One is an increased knowledge of the realities of homosexuality, which in turn breaks down stereotypes and biases. The second is an inability to remain silent as you become increasingly aware of the rigid intolerance many people have towards sexual minorities. It took more than two years before we were prepared to share about our son with close friends and family. We are happy to say that most of these people remain very supportive.

As we examined our own unrealized prejudices we were also forced to reexamine our

concept of Christianity. It was the process of trying to understand our son's "choice" between his faith and homosexuality, which helped us gain a deeper understanding of our relationship with God. We learned how truly difficult it is to filter out cultural biases from theology. As a result, our relationships with God, our son and longtime friends have all grown stronger; but at the same time we found ourselves feeling estranged from our home church.

The Difficult Road To Learning:

Initially we did not discuss the issue with our pastor since he had been verbally critical of homosexuals from the pulpit; comparing them with alcoholics and deviants of society. In the church library we found books that primarily addressed homosexuality from a religious fundamentalist perspective. These books quoted surveys of prison populations from the 1940s; the statistical validity of which is not even recognized with today's collective body of knowledge. They told us that homosexuality was a mental illness; that all gay people are promiscuous; that most come from non-functional families and typically have a lack of religious training. But this stereotype did not fit our family experience. It became obvious that we would have to continue our search elsewhere if we were going to be able to relate to our son's experience. So we began to study. We prayed. We read Scripture. We sought the wisdom of theologians and scientists. We listened to the voices of tradition and of friends.

Our son helped us gain a connection with PFLAG (Parents Family & Friends of Lesbians and Gays). This gave us the opportunity to better understand the homosexual point of view. We were introduced to a community of people that we had previously ignored but would soon come to love. We will always be grateful for the open, non-judgmental discussions and the information that PFLAG helped us to gain.

Eventually we did spend time with our pastor. Unfortunately this was not a positive experience for us. Even though our pastor expressed his love for our family, he was unable to relate to the profoundness of our situation. Perhaps the most important thing that came from those meetings was the fact that he was able to put a significant face from the congregation on the homosexual issue. It is particularly disheartening to us that he continues to provide leadership in the campaign against inclusiveness of homosexuals in our denomination. As the gap between us widened it became impossible for us to give credence to his sermons; finally reaching a point where we could no longer sense the Holy Spirit when entering the sanctuary of that church.

As we continued to investigate the issue of "choice," we learned there is general

agreement in the scientific community that sexuality is forged at an incredibly early age; long before puberty. We also learned that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of abnormalities in 1973. These realities strongly support the position that none of us actually "choose" our sexual orientation. Our "choice" is whether to honor what is naturally us or to honor what is natural to the majority of society. Can any of us, as heterosexuals, pinpoint the time in our lives when we made the "choice" to be straight? Our son put it in perspective for us when he said, "Why would I 'choose' a life of discrimination and pain if I really had a 'choice'?"

Homosexuality is a many faceted issue. False stereotypes and unwarranted prejudices make "coming out" (for the individual and the family) an extremely painful and emotional process. As parents we had an additional issue to deal with. After finding out that our child was gay; we initially experienced an extreme disappointment that all the dreams and expectations we had for him were gone; things like marriage, children and job opportunities. As we challenged that belief we came to realize that the opportunity to have a committed relationship, family, and employment worthy of his talents could still be a reality. However, it would now take on a new dimension. The love and respect parents provide is absolutely critical for any child to achieve their dreams.

We have learned that hate crimes against people who are gay (or perceived to be) continue to rise. A University of Washington study of 500 community college students reported to an August 1998 American Psychological Association meeting that 10% of those surveyed admitted to some level of abuse toward homosexual people and felt it was socially acceptable to do so. Government statistics confirm that lesbian and gay youths are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide and that they account for 30% of completed suicides among teens today. One in four homosexual youths are kicked out of their homes and are forced to live on the streets.

Theological Issues From a Lay Perspective:

We have learned that mature Christians can and do disagree on the Biblical position of homosexuality and can still remain faithful to God. It is noteworthy that scholars from both perspectives ethically debate the few texts referred to as condemning homosexuality. It seems unwise for us to accept these few passages as "God's Position" on the subject when they are so diversely interpreted. On the other hand, Jesus had a great deal to tell us about how to treat people who are different from the majority. Because human beings in whatever shape, form, race, or sexual orientation are made in the image of God: they are always to be treated with love and respect.

John Robinson, in his book Pilgrim Forebears, makes the point,

"God has yet more light to break forth from his word." For example, the earlier confessions of our faith did not explicitly draw the conclusion from scripture that women and men are equal. The practice of their culture obscured their vision of this Biblical truth; just as for so long the equality of people of all races have not been understood and practiced. Changes in our world and the growth of our body of knowledge have forced us to look again at scripture and understand more clearly the liberating direction to which it points. The pattern of bringing our new problems to scripture is one that every generation must follow.

Richard Wyatt (Executive, Rocky Mountains synod, PCUSA) reminds us:

"At whatever theological or political end of the table we are sitting - Jesus has (also) invited those of our opposites to sit at the same table. We are to be united in more than just the invitation. We are also united in the Great Commission ... to tell the good news and make disciples. But that is a lot harder than protecting our table against the 'enemy' on the other side ... And so we expend our energy and resources in fighting against one another, siding with Satan to destroy Christ's community, instead of doing the evangelism and witness a true faith demands."

Yet many of us are unable to tolerate a liberal perspective. However, by definition, Christianity is a "liberal" religion. Certainly Jesus was considered to be "liberal," as well as all the other great reformers. Martin Luther's position on being "saved by grace" directly opposed the Roman Catholic position of "good works" and was at the very heart of the Protestant Reformation of four centuries ago. But as far-sighted as Luther was, he was still confined by the limits of the existing base of knowledge of his day. Copernicus had claimed that the sun, not the earth, was at the center of the universe. Luther condemned Copernicus referencing Joshua 10:13 and saying; "This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy."

The point here is that each generation, with the help of the Holy Spirit, must search the pages of the Bible to answer the unique issues of its day. The beauty of the Reformed faith is that we will always have differences of opinion as to what each of us believe God's plan to be and we must remain in dialogue. One result of such dialogue is that on Oct 31, 1999 (Reformation Sunday) Lutheran and Roman Catholic officials came to full agreement on the doctrine that "grace alone," leads to salvation. This does not mean that the two churches are ready to merge or agree on all matters, but God has to be smiling at this kind of progress.

The peace of the Holy Spirit came for us through reading the 9th chapter of John. Jesus and the disciples come upon the man who was blind from birth. The disciples

ask, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" And Jesus says, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life." Jesus places mud on the man's eyes and tells him to go wash in the pool. The man obeys and gains his sight. It is encouraging to us that here is a man who also is considered to be a sinner according to the traditions of his day. But Jesus assures us that no one sinned but that the man was born this way so the works of God would be made manifest in him.

It has been our experience that God doesn't always answer prayers the way we expect. Sometimes we are refocused. We think back on two of our parents and two very close friends. All had very different Christian walks and each served God marvelously according to their talents. The other common thread between them was that each succumbed to cancer. It is doubtful that any four people have every been prayed for harder than these - Prayers that their bodies would be made whole again and for their pain to subside. But God said no; reminding us He makes our spirit whole, our bodies are only temporary. Similarly, our son prayed and we prayed, that his affliction would be taken away. But God said no, I created you this way that my work might be displayed in your life.

Our vision was refocused. We finally understood that our son's affliction, and ours for that matter, was not that he is gay. The affliction we suffered under was fear. As we were reminded that God created us and truly loves us for who we are; the fear and guilt subsided. There was yet another lesson in John chapter 9, which convicted us. In verse 18 we see a heated discussion develop between the pharisees, the newly sighted man and his neighbors. An important thing happens. Even under the fear of being put out of the synagogue, the parents speak up on their son/s behalf. Those who are ashamed of the apparent infirmities of others may take a reproof from these parents, who freely owned, "This is our son, though he was born blind, and lived upon alms." Though they did not understand all that had transpired, they were fully assured of it - Can we show any less faith?

What Pastors And Church Leaders Need to Understand:

Even as long time leaders in our home church, we came to feel like outsiders, primarily because the ruling leadership only allows a single conservative opinion to be voiced. Think how much more difficult it must be for the less connected people. There are more people in our congregations impacted than we realize. Statistics reveal that one in four families has a gay member in the immediate or closely extended family. Churches are not equipping families to appropriately work through the related issues. Being made to feel unworthy and unwelcome, gays of all religious persuasions are

walking away from their denominations.

The gay community has been relegated to a status of second class Christians (you can be in our church as long as you follow a "straight" lifestyle, or as long as your actions do not make me uncomfortable). The irony of the ordination debate is that we should be ordaining homosexuals, if for no other reason, than because the vast majority of "straight" Christians make no attempt to minister to the gay population.

If you are a church leader who is not well informed about both sides of the homosexual issue, the guidance you provide a family will most likely do far greater damage than good. We spent a great deal of time investigating Ex-Gay Ministries (organizations that believe that homosexuality is not part of God's plan for us). Typically these groups use a combination of prayer, varying methods of persuasion, and reparative (conversion) therapy to change a person's orientation. Although genuinely well intended, the impact of these ministries can be devastating. There is no significant evidence that a person's sexual orientation can be changed. Some participants in this experience are able to change their behavior for varying lengths of time, but for many the aftermath of this conversion process is horrifying.

The dropouts of these programs (who quite frequently enter them as a last resort) are at extremely high risk of suicide; most likely from the hopelessness and guilt forced on them during the treatment process. As a result of the social stigmas placed on homosexual people, they are ten times more likely to suffer from alcohol and or drug addiction. Gay youth are seven times more likely than their peers to commit or attempt suicide. It is important to remember that the American Psychological and American Psychiatric Associations long ago removed homosexuality from their list of abnormalities. The APA of Washington State has declared reparative therapy to be unethical for use with sexual orientation. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that, "the psychosocial problems of gay and lesbian adolescents are primarily the result of societal stigma, hostility, hatred and isolation." The American Medical Association makes similar comments. We thank God that we did not force our son into reparative therapy.

Families newly caught up in the homosexuality issue are very fragile. If you are mentoring with such a family it is critical that you maintain trust by holding in confidence what they share with you (unless you receive their permission otherwise). In our case that confidence was violated by our pastor and even though we have forgiven the specific indiscretion; this is not a person we will soon confide in again. The information that was shared rapidly moved along to second and third parties. Now we have unnecessarily strained relationships with all three.

Today's great debates within most mainline denominations center on the status and rights of homosexual people in the church. The church has absolutely focused on the wrong issue. The issue we should be spending our time on is how to minister to the homosexual community. If you sincerely want to minister here you will need to make a choice whether you are trying to bring people to a relationship with Christ or trying to convert them to a straight lifestyle. If the later is part of your goal, it will be quickly obvious to the recipient. In general, mainline denominations have lost credibility with the gay community. Too many high profile ministers continue to provide fuel to the bigots of this world by condemning homosexuals from the pulpit. A ministry to gay people can not be successful until trust is regained. There are many stereotypes and a lot of false information to overcome before a congregation will truly be capable of being open and accepting of the gay community. This experience will take the congregation through many of the same stumbling blocks, emotions and pain that gay persons and their families experience.

A person's concept of theology has a great deal to do with how they view the Bible. There was a time in the Presbyterian Church where we used the Bible to justify the oppression of African Americans, the subordination of women and the exclusion of divorced and remarried persons from church leadership. But we are longer there. Dr. Jack Rogers, Professor of Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary, reminds us of the theological resurgence that took place in the 1940s; which refocused our thinking.

"Instead of viewing the Bible as a collection of inerrant facts, the new theology affirmed that, 'the very human Bible was the record of the very real encounter of God with people.'" It attempted to correct the legalistic and literalist fundamentalism of the 19th century and replace it with an understanding of the totality of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit we have come to view those passages used to subordinate these groups of people, not to be in keeping with the larger context which includes the awareness of the cultural limitations of people in biblical times nor did they include the perspective of Jesus who said the whole law was summed up in the dual commandments of love God and love your neighbor."

Why are we having so much trouble applying the same biblical concepts to the current debate? Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. categorized such behavior with this comment:

"The church at times has preserved that which is immoral and unethical. Called to combat social evils, it has remained silent behind stained-glass windows, an echo rather than a voice, a taillight behind the supreme court rather than a headlight guiding men progressively and decisively to higher levels of understanding."

Where Are We Today ?

Certainly we would agree that heterosexuality is the societal norm. We do not claim to fully understand the physiology and psychology behind homosexuality and we have difficulty relating to the orientation. But our understanding is filtered through the glasses of white, middle class, heterosexual, American parents and it does not necessarily follow that homosexuality is not part of God's worldly plan. It is incredible to realize that there is more information available in a single Sunday addition of the New York Times than there was in an entire lifetime 400 years ago. Science makes new discoveries every day and will no doubt make sense of the homosexual mystery long before the theologians ever come to agreement.

Generalized, degrading statements from the pulpit are significant factors that place the safety of the gay population at risk for their lives. It exploits stereotypes and generates unfounded fears like many hold about all homosexuals being child molesters; when, in fact, statistics tell us that the overwhelming majority of child molesters are actually white, male heterosexuals. When we speak about homosexuality we are speaking of people who are homosexual. The word is an adjective that only describes a very small part of who they are. They are brothers, sisters, friends, children, next door neighbors, fellow church members and people with whom we work.

We are devastated by the murders, like that of Mathew Shepard (the young gay man who was tied to a fence near Laramie, Wyoming and beat to death in October of 1998). The Rt. Rev Steven Charlston (Chaplain of Trinity College) believes that silence is what killed Mathew Shepard. "The silence of Christians who know that our scriptures on homosexuality are few and murky in interpretation and far outweighed by the words of a Savior whose only comments on human relationships were to call us to never judge but only to love."

It challenges us to think that the holocaust in Europe probably did not happen because there were too many Adolf Hitlers, but more likely happened because there were not enough Oskar Schindlers." Each of us must speak out for those who do not have a voice. We will continue to examine our own prejudices and challenge stereotypes where ever we find them. We will work for a church that seeks to include rather than exclude those who do not fit the common mold.

We do not claim to have all the answers. No doubt God will continue to reveal to us in ways we currently do not understand. While we struggle daily with the internal conflicts within the greater church, we have found ourselves blessed - Blessed by our

son's faith in God - Blessed because God continues to walk with us through all the confusion - And blessed because we have been challenged to a deeper understanding of our faith. A wise person told us, "Life is change, but growth is optional." When it comes to growth, all of us have a "choice."

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