

Ministry to Homosexuals: A Pastoral Perspective

Robert Solomon

Some initial comments need to be made regarding the perspective and scope of this paper.¹

1. The biblical teaching that homosexual behaviour is sinful and contrary to God's will is held as a given. The Bible does not differentiate the way modern discussions do between homosexual orientation and homosexual acts. But it does not condone sinful lusts (whether homosexual or heterosexual) as well as sinful acts. Both are considered as something that negatively affects our relationship with God and others.
2. There are sinful attitudes and acts that are as serious, if not worse, than homosexual acts. Jerry White has written about "respectable sins" that are often overlooked and excused by the church, but which do as much damage to our spiritual lives. These would include pride, selfishness, judgmentalism, envy, worldliness, and sins connected with our speech.² We must remember that the Lord Jesus reserved His harshest criticism against religious hypocrisy and acted compassionately towards the publicans and sinners who were repentant and seeking God's forgiveness.
3. Homosexuals have different agendas. Some are militant and seek the acceptance of homosexuality as normal and acceptable behaviour. They are in the process of mainstreaming homosexuality (and other forms of sexually sinful behaviour) as normal, and the legalisation of same-sex marriage. They have also come into the church to do the same. Then there are others who know that what they do is not acceptable to God, struggle with it, and are seeking forgiveness, acceptance, and help. It is the latter that we will be focusing on. How do we provide pastoral care for such people?
4. The term "homosexual" usually refers to men. But in this paper, the term is also broadly used to refer to those within the LGBT spectrum, and many of the principles mentioned here would be broadly applicable to the others too.
5. The pastoral responses that we discuss in this paper are not so much to homosexuality as an issue but to homosexual persons as such. There are several aspects to the nature of such pastoral responses and this paper will be restricted to pastoral responses to homosexuals who come in contact with the church or who are in church. We could talk about pastoral action with regard to homosexuals in society at large but the issues there are different though not totally dissimilar to those which will be discussed here. For example, to insist on the same moral framework of pastoral care to be applied to all people, inside and outside the church may be difficult to be implemented and will not be acceptable to all concerned³. As a principle, in referring to associating with people living in sin, the apostle

¹ This paper is an updated and expanded version of an earlier paper published in *Church & Society*, 1, no. 3 (December 1998), and *A Christian Response to Homosexuality; National Council of Churches of Singapore* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2004).

² Jerry White, *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007).

³ See Peter Coleman, *Gay Christians: A Moral Dilemma* (London: SCM, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), pp. 91-93 for a historical account of the process of separation between Christian morality and state morality in Britain, in relation to homosexuality.

Paul says that different approaches are applied when comparing those in church with those outside the church (1 Cor. 5:9-13). Here, our focus will be on pastoral responses to homosexual people in the church or those who wish to join the church.

6. The church's ministry is both prophetic as well as pastoral. We cannot ignore one for the other. In opposing inroads made by LGBT groups, it is possible that in our prophetic stance against them, we may neglect a more pastoral approach to those who are in the shadows, who struggle and are trying to be disciples of Christ even as they battle with their sinful urges and habits.
7. In the pastoral care of homosexuals, often the focus is on treatment and counselling. That is to say, the aim of counselling is often to help the person function appropriately so that he can enjoy well-being. In this case, many modern therapeutic strategies take a highly functional perspective. As long as someone can function effectively within his life circumstances, that would be an acceptable goal. Much of this would depend on how the person will see himself and how comfortable he is with himself and his life choices. This has often led to the person himself becoming the arbiter of the situations he is in for it is believed that the answers to his problems would be in him. "Being oneself" would go a long way in functioning well. There is some truth in this. However, it cannot be the sole basis for whatever pastoral response is made. In recent times, in pastoral care and counselling, there has been an attempt to recover the moral dimension, for it is felt that one cannot provide adequate pastoral care free from a moral perspective⁴. Thus we recognise two aspects of pastoral responses to the homosexual: the functional and the moral. We shall keep this in mind in the following discussion. Biblical, theological, medical, sociological, and psychological perspectives provide some necessary and helpful directions.
8. This paper looks at pastoral responses to homosexuality mainly from the perspective of pastoral care. Pastoral care can be defined as having been derived "from the biblical image of *shepherd* and refers to the solicitous concern expressed within the religious community for persons in trouble or distress."⁵ According to William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle, pastoral care is provided in four different modes: healing, reconciling, guiding, and sustaining⁶. These modes are not independent of one another but do affect and overlap with one another. We shall be exploring pastoral responses to the homosexual from these four different angles in this paper.

The Problem and the Context

We have had some discussion in attempting to define homosexuality. Generally, homosexuality is understood in terms of homoerotic desire and homosexual act, together with homosexual identity. In other words, what one feels, what he thinks of himself, and what he does contribute to a definition of homosexuality. In several discussions by Christians on homosexuality, a distinction has been made between disposition and action and pastoral

⁴ Don Browning, *The Moral Context of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

⁵ L. O. Mills, "Pastoral Care (History, Traditions, and Definitions)," in Rodney J. Hunter (ed.), *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), p. 836.

⁶ William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 33-66.

responses to each of these then explored⁷. We can add identity or ontology to disposition and action. Proponents of homosexuality as a legitimate form and expression of human sexuality have argued for a needed congruence between ontology, passion, and act. Ontology is discovered by paying attention to whatever passions come naturally. Passions must then be allowed to be expressed through corresponding acts.

From a Christian perspective, however, ontology is discovered not through direct experience of one's passions but by listening to what has been revealed from beyond. Thus the Christian exegetical perspective from Scripture is that we have to understand ourselves ontologically as beings created by God, fallen through disobedience, and able to be redeemed by God through Christ. A Christian theology of creation points to our ontology, among other things, in terms of human sexuality. We have been created male and female and human sexuality, both in terms of desire and act, must be directed toward the opposite gender.

The problem in pastoral perspective seems to be the dissonance between ontology and desire, and between ontology and act. We shall examine these problems in our subsequent discussion.

In the pastoral care of the homosexual, several contextual aspects have to be borne in mind. The person's many relationships have to be considered. His relationships with his family members, with church members, peers, and other homosexuals are all important considerations. Also the person's participation in Christian liturgy, leadership, ministry, and other aspects of the church's life are other key considerations.

With these things in mind, we shall now explore the various aspects of pastoral care of the homosexual.

Healing

Earlier, we had noted the problem in terms of dissonance between ontology and desire. If subjective desire is discordant with revealed identity, what is the problem? If act is contrary to ontology, one can see it more clearly as sinful since act can be thought of as due to a choice. Behaviour is something we can choose. (However, it may be argued that behaviour is determined by desire and therefore any presence of choice is only an illusion, there being no such thing as free will. This I will leave it to the philosophers and systematic theologians to deal with. For our purpose, we accept the traditional Christian understanding of free will; we will explore this further in the next section).

The incongruence between ontology and desire is another thing. Has one control over one's desire? Is there a difference between desire and motive? If so, is the one determined and the other a choice? When Jesus pointed out that looking lustfully at a woman is sin, was He primarily referring to desire or act? These are questions, answers to which would be helpful to our enterprise. Suffice it to say that for our purposes, we shall say that desire is something determined, though desire can contribute strongly to motivation. Somewhere between desire and motive comes in choice. Here, we are more interested in desire per se. If desire is incongruent with ontology, then what is the problem? What causes desire to be dysfunctional? Using medical language, we would think of disease or illness; using theological language we would say depravity, and these two terms are not mutually exclusive

⁷ See eg., Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), and Mona Riley and Brad Sargent, *Unwanted Harvest?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995).

If some organic cause-and-effect relationship can be found *vis-a-vis* homosexual desire, then it is easier to think of it in terms of an illness or disease which needs healing. However, it must be noted that some would say that such a link need not be interpreted in this way and that causal links between biological features and homosexual desire can be interpreted to support homosexuality as an acceptable normal (as in natural) condition. From our Christian perspective, our starting point is not experience, but revelation, and we begin with what scripture says about our ontological identical, especially in terms of our sexuality. To put it another way, the root of our identity is not desire but Word. Discord between ontology and desire has to be interpreted as due to diseased (and/or fallen) desire. Can this condition be healed?

Attempts to find a relationship between biology and desire/behaviour in homosexuality has not brought up conclusive evidence. There is no clear genetic, neurological, or hormonal factor associated with homosexual inclination⁸. That makes medical treatment of homosexuality, if homosexual desire is considered to be an illness, something that is not clearly possible. It must also be noted that there is often conflicting “scientific noise” in academia, partly due to the pressure of being politically correct. As a result scientific research findings have been “used, misused and abused.”⁹

Some Christian researchers have suggested that while the evidence for a connection between biology and homosexual orientation may not be strongly established, there is enough evidence to suggest some linkage. Even so, such linkage may at best be considered as predisposing the person towards rather than determining his orientation. And also, such predisposition cannot be used to diminish biblical prohibition of homosexual behaviour.¹⁰

While it is not clear if homosexual desire is due to organic pathology, many have tried to show that it can be explained in terms of psychopathology. Here again, there is no conclusive evidence,¹¹ though evidence has been put forth to strongly suggest such connections.¹² In other words, nothing definitely can be said regarding the nature of the homosexual or his nurture in terms of their contribution to homosexual desire. Anthony Yeo therefore rightly points out that it is not clear what the nature of therapy would be, apart from helping the patient deal with concomitant psychological and emotional problems arising from his intrapsychic and interpersonal contexts.¹³ There are those, however, such as Leanne Payne, who have argued that it is possible to bring healing to homosexuals because of important psychological factors

⁸ John Harvey, “Updating Issues Concerning Homosexuality,” *The Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, vol. 28 (1993), pp. 1-40.

⁹ Stanton L Jones and Mark A Yarhouse, “The Use, Misuse, and Abuse of Science in the Ecclesiastical Homosexuality Debates,” in *Homosexuality, Science, and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 73-120.

¹⁰ S. O. Cole, “The Biological Basis of Homosexuality: A Christian Assessment,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, vol 23 (Summer 1995), 89-100. See also Stanton L Jones and Mark A Yarhouse, *Homosexuality: The Use of Scientific Research in the Church’s Moral Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

¹¹ See Edward T. Welch, “Homosexuality: Current Thinking and Biblical Guidelines,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 13:3 (Spring 1995), 19-35. Welch argues that the Church, while more likely to reject views that propose a biological cause for homosexuality, nevertheless has shown a greater openness to psychological theories about homosexuality. He warns against such easy acceptance of psychological theories (p. 27).

¹² E.g. see P. S. Bearman and H. Bruckner, “Opposite -sex twins and adolescent same-sex attraction,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 107:5 (2002), 1179-1205.

¹³ Anthony Yeo, “Understanding Homosexuality and the Church: A Psychotherapeutic Perspective.” *Church & Society* 1, no. 3 (December 1998): 63-69.

associated with the homosexual condition¹⁴. Payne and others have taken an “inner healing” approach to bring about change within the homosexual.

Can healing take place in those struggling with homosexual orientation and behaviour? Professional institutions in the West have taken a strong stand that attempts to change the orientation of homosexuals would be harmful and any such programme is frowned upon. But this is often more rhetoric than reason, as a cool-headed examination of the results show that treatment outcomes are similar to those suffering from other serious psychological or behavioural problems.¹⁵ It is not surprising that such findings have been vigorously challenged in some quarters.

Depending on what the causes of homosexuality, whether they are biological, psychological or environmental or a combination of these, the outcome of healing strategies depend on these perspectives. There is little that can be said in terms of the healing mode in pastoral care if healing is understood purely as technical or therapeutic intervention, given the inconclusive knowledge that we have. As it is, homosexuals may have to live with their homosexual desires unless some pathological connections can be clearly made, or if we talk about the redemptive transformation of desire by divine grace.

The process may be the same as those struggling with sinful tendencies: a man who is struggling with lustful thoughts and behaviour, or a woman who is trapped in kleptomania (impulsive stealing), or a gambler who has great difficulty in finding freedom from his addiction. In many such cases, the wonder of spiritual transformation, brought about by the grace of God acting in the person’s life must be recognised. Our churches have many people like this, and the person struggling with his homosexuality is no different from them. The same kind of pastoral care needs to be given. The same emphasis on prayer and trusting in God must be given, resulting in transformation. This has to do with regeneration more than healing as such. We now move closer to that concept when we talk about the mode of reconciliation in pastoral care.

Reconciliation

According to Ralph Martin, the Christian ministry is essentially the ministry of reconciliation in Pauline theology¹⁶. This reconciliation is experienced in the vertical and horizontal dimensions. To this can be added the intrapersonal dimension; in a sense it is reconciliation with one’s own created human nature, from which we are also alienated.

In the case of a homosexual, what is the nature of his alienation? Like all others, the alienation is in his relationship with God and others, as well as himself. The homosexual needs to be reconciled in these areas, like all other human beings. The question is whether because of the nature of homosexuality, the homosexual person needs a further experience of reconciliation. If we take Romans chapter 1 seriously, then we will have to say that homosexual behaviour is viewed as a serious transgression of the rule of God¹⁷. The sense of alienation is all the more

¹⁴ Leanne Payne, *The Broken Image: Restoring Personal Wholeness through Healing Prayer* (Westchester, Ill.: Cornerstone Books, 1981).

¹⁵ See Stanton L Jones and Mark A Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007).

¹⁶ Ralph Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981).

¹⁷ That this has been the consistent Christian view is argued well by J. Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, 1955), though it has been challenged; for

intense and great. We have to be careful, though, lest our usual bias against sexual sins adds more gravity or antipathy against homosexuals than it is necessary in the light of Scripture.

Why is it that church members tend to view sexual sin much more seriously than say the much more dangerous sin of pride, or the sin of greed, which according to Paul is on the same level of seriousness as, if not identical with, idolatry (Col. 3:5)? We must view the sin of homosexuality seriously but must also be careful lest we end up being cruel because of cultural influences on our responses. I say this because Christian reconciliation does imply strongly that God views us all sinners redemptively, including the homosexual. Hence, Edward Welch, an American pastoral counsellor asserts that:

An effective church should have homosexuals! Because of the love of Christ, the church should pursue homosexuals. And through its exaltation of Christ in preaching, corporate prayer and worship, the church should attract homosexuals. It should minister the Word to those who are already in church by flushing out the self-deceived, exposing the dishonest, confronting the rebel, offering forgiveness to the guilt-ridden, and giving hope. The church should also welcome and hold the attention of those who struggle with homosexuality but have never been part of the church. With such people we can add that the church should minister by surprising them with love, a sense of family, and the absence of self-righteous judgment. It should offer truth in such a way that it is convicting, attractive, and radically different from anything the homosexual has ever heard¹⁸.

In order for reconciliation to take place there needs to be, in the simplest of relationships where there is an offender and the offended party, forgiveness, on the one hand, and repentance on the other hand. It is not enough for one to exist without the other. If the offender repents and the offended party does not forgive, then there will not be any reconciliation. Likewise, if the offended party forgives, and the offender does not repent, there cannot be any reconciliation either. We know from Scripture that Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8); God forgave us through the death of Christ on the cross. In order for reconciliation to be experienced, we need to repent from our sins. The pastoral question in homosexuality is whether it is a sin. If it is, pastoral action will seek to help the homosexual experience repentance, and therefore reconciliation with God. If it is not sin, as some argue, then repentance is not needed and there is no added measure of reconciliation needed between the homosexual and God, apart from the general reconciliation that all sinners need.

Our authority in this matter has to be Scripture and we have to recognise that there is a clear dissonance between ontology and behaviour in homosexuality, as we have noted earlier. It is this that requires repentance on the part of the homosexual, without which no proper reconciliation can take place between God and the homosexual. Repentance requires resolving not to repeat the behaviour, because there is recognition and an agreement with Scripture that homosexual behaviour is wrong.

The horizontal dimension of reconciliation would involve the person's relationship with family members, church members, men, women, and his friends and acquaintances. In the case of the church, it is important that we accept the repentant homosexual and integrate him fully in the life of the church. Cruel forms of homophobia have no place in the church. The homosexual has also to be helped in being reconciled with members of the community,

example see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

¹⁸ Edward T. Welch, "Homosexuality: Current Thinking and Biblical Guidelines," p. 29.

whether in the workplace, or neighbourhood, or sports club, and so on. As we have said, it takes two people in relationship to be reconciled. The process of reconciliation is bi-directional. As such, the responses of people related to the homosexual in everyday life may be unpredictable. Nevertheless, sensitivity on the part of church members in welcoming homosexuals who repent and are committed to follow Christ can go a long way in the reconciliation process.

The role of women in the case of (male) homosexuals is particularly valuable. A healthy relationship between the homosexual and women in the church can result in some form of healing and reconciliation which helps the homosexual pursue normal relationships with men and women. The same dynamics applies in the case of lesbians (female homosexuals). Men relating to male homosexuals may often find their own fears about homosexuals; these fears have to do with the responses in both parties. In this case, overcoming one's fears can help a man relate in a healthy and redemptive way to a homosexual.

Reconciliation with oneself poses some tricky problems in the case of the homosexual. Our earlier discussion on the relationship between ontology and desire is pertinent here. If there is a dissonance between ontology and desire, then reconciliation is needed. The direction of reconciliation, in this case, should be toward ontology rather than desire. In theological terms, we speak of transformation, which is the work of grace. This process of transformation (related closely with the other major term, sanctification) is not instantaneous and may take a lifetime and beyond. Unless, some clear connection is made between biological or psychological pathology and homosexual orientation, we may not have any clear position as far as healing is concerned, as noted earlier. On the other hand, if we are clear about ontology, then we can at least recognise that there is a gap or dissonance between ontology and desire. This gap has to be overcome through reconciliation, achieved by the transformation of desire by divine grace. We may be stepping into the area of mystery here and it may well be that we treat it as such.

Sustenance

The ministry of sustaining is particularly called for in the absence of a clear healing and when the situation does not seem to be resolved. In the case of the homosexual, there may not be any clear resolution of the problem of homosexual inclination and desire, even though he may have made a commitment to be celibate and to abstain from homosexual behaviour. It is possible that these feelings, and the temptations and frustrations that are attached to them, may be lessened and even eradicated over time. On the other hand, as is often the case, the struggle with homosexual inclination and desire may never be totally or satisfactorily eliminated this side of eternity. The celibate homosexual will have to wait for that Day when the Lord will wipe away every tear (complete emotional healing) and there shall be no more death (complete physical healing) as is promised in Rev 21:4.

Traditionally, the ministry of sustaining is done when persons are under great stress due to situations that cannot be changed, such as in grief, terminal illness, and so on. For the homosexual, the sustaining is done firstly in terms of internal factors that may be difficult to be changed. In the midst of strong urges and desires, the homosexual may have to be sustained in his faith and resolve to abstain from homosexual practice. The absence of any clear resolution within may cause doubts and even guilt in the person and he may be tempted to give up altogether. It is in this context that having a proper eschatological basis for the resolution of his ambiguities and struggles will help him to sustain his faith in Christ.

According to John Cassian, struggling with sexual temptation, whether heterosexual or homosexual, serves a useful purpose in the Christian life. It helps one to plumb the depths of one's own egotism and sinfulness. Sexual sin points to far more serious beasts within the soul such as greed, anger, and pride¹⁹. The struggle with sexual temptation can thus have a positive effect in helping one to deal with larger and deeper problems and issues so that spiritual maturity can be attained. This knowledge can contribute to the process of sustaining a celibate homosexual in his struggle.

A word of caution is in order here. It is possible to draw too clear a distinction between desire and behaviour so much so that it is not helpful pastorally. There is a danger that desire may become acceptable and tolerated in the form of imagination and lust. Our earlier discussion of the transition from desire to motivation and choice needs to be remembered, and what is commonly understood to be desire may in fact slip into the realm of sin rather than stay within the realm of temptation. The homosexual must be vigilant in this matter while being patient with his condition.

As far as the external features of his problems go, he will be helped if they can be changed where it is possible. Avoiding relationships and places, which would tempt him to give up his resolution to quit homosexual practice, would be helpful and desirable. It is here that good integration into the life of the Christian community, acceptance and sensitive and sensible encouragement of the person would go a long way in sustaining his resolve to follow Christ. The practice of Christian disciplines and the drawing on Christian resources such as Bible reading, prayer, worship, the Eucharist, and so on, will all help the person to be encouraged and sustained in his Christian faith.

One very helpful way of sustaining celibate homosexuals is to encourage them to form support groups or recovery groups, similar in nature to groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. The value of finding others who empathise with one's struggles and the mutual encouragement that is possible in such a group are enormous. The question here is how church members would respond to such a group. In this regard, a point has to be made for the education of church members on this issue. We need to repent of our fear and hatred of homosexuals (sometimes termed "homophobia") to such an extent that we have not helped homosexuals find the redemptive grace of Christ. The support given by church members and the encouragement provided will ensure better success in the transformation and discipleship of the homosexual.

In short, the ministry of sustaining will help the homosexual remain celibate while he battles with homosexual desires within. A proper eschatological view of salvation and transformation, and the appropriate use of Christian resources for spiritual life in the context of Christian community are important features of this aspect of ministry.

The pastoral advice given in the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* is most apt here. It calls for the centrality of the crucified Christian life, as believers obey Jesus in denying themselves, carrying their cross and following Jesus (Lk 9:23).

"What, then, are homosexual persons to do who seek to follow the Lord? Fundamentally, they are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross. That Cross for the believer is a fruitful sacrifice, since from that death come life and redemption. While any

¹⁹ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 420ff.

call to carry the cross or to understand a Christian's suffering in this way will predictably be met with bitter ridicule by some, it should be remembered that this is the way to eternal life for all who follow Christ"²⁰

Guidance

The homosexual who becomes a Christian and who then practices Christian discipleship by abstaining from homosexual practice, though he may have to struggle with homosexual desires and temptations, can be guided to grow in his Christian faith and learn to walk with Christ. As in Christian life in general, guidance encourages the Christian to discover the workings of the Holy Spirit within him and in the community/ies in which he lives. Sexuality is not the only important area. A focus only on sexuality may distract the former homosexual (or celibate homosexual) from other key areas of Christian discipleship, such as prayer, service, and worship.

Proper guidance will have to deal with helping the person discover, understand, and appropriate his identity in Christ as a child of God and servant of Christ. This also has to do with his vocation or calling. Guidance of the person in the Christian life will help him to find ways of living out this vocation in his daily routines, rituals, roles, and relationships, in the context of his past homosexual behaviour and possibly present homoerotic feelings. This person can be helped to grow as a person and as a Christian.

Guidance would also involve helping the person deal with possible difficulties such as temptations, guilt, frustration, feelings of a poor self-image, and aiding the person deal with life stages such as marriage, middle-age, employment, as well as life stresses and surprises such as failures, illnesses, and the like. The possibility of entering into a heterosexual marriage would always be there and there are homosexuals who have been helped tremendously by marrying a person of the opposite sex and gradually finding normalcy and fulfilment. On the other hand, one should not be forced to enter into a heterosexual marriage just in order to overcome homosexual temptations. If there is a failure of intimacy and fulfilment in the marriage, the homosexual temptations may return with a new vengeance.

Desire per se may not be evil; what is often sinful is desire directed in the wrong direction or expressed in the wrong way. A homosexual struggling with his homoerotic feelings may be helped to discover a deeper longing and need for intimacy which has to be directed in the proper way so that the person may grow into maturity and overcome his struggles. An empathetic approach will help such persons find ways of growing in grace and overcoming their struggles in their daily lives.

Summary

The pastoral care of the homosexual, on the one hand, follows similar patterns as that of others in the church. To isolate the homosexual and make him the worst of sinners may not

²⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, 1 October 1986, n. 12. This document was produced by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Catholic Church, headed by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI) and approved by Pope John Paul II. It was a response to the discussions that followed the publication of *The Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics* in 1975 which made a distinction between the homosexual condition and homosexual acts, and described these acts as "intrinsically disordered," and argued that they cannot therefore be approved in any way. The document is found at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfhomop.htm>.

follow scriptural patterns; neither does it make good pastoral sense. After all, there are worse sins, which are often left unchallenged in church, such as pride and greed. Homophobia, in this sense, often makes the pastoral care of the homosexual difficult or even impossible, by blowing up the problem out of proportions.

On the other hand, the homosexual will have to be taken care of in a different way due to the particularity of the problem such as views and attitudes in church and society, and the nature of the problem. We have seen the necessity to reflect on the nature of homosexuality in terms of inclination, behaviour, and identity. Pastoral care begins with a biblical understanding of human identity and sexuality, and ontology. From this starting point, the care of the person involves helping to deal with the discrepancies that exist between ontology and desire, and ontology and behaviour. We have explored briefly some of the issues involved in this process by looking at the four functions of pastoral care – healing, reconciliation, sustenance, and guidance.

The goal of pastoral care is to bring the person to a saving relationship with the triune God, and to help him to find integration between his being, desire, and behaviour. This is done by locating him in the Christian tradition and community and by helping him to find nourishment and sustenance in Christian resources. Through these he is helped to grow and express his vocation and basic identity in Christ.

Some Pastoral Situations

Besides the general aspects of pastoral care of the homosexual who becomes a Christian and joins the church, we need to look briefly at some pastoral situations, which may be encountered in terms of homosexuals.

1. Pre-baptismal discovery of the homosexual

Should a homosexual be baptised? At what point can he be baptised?

2. Post-baptismal discovery of the homosexual

This may arise because of discovery or confession and poses a problem, not only in terms of counselling the person, but also in terms of church discipline. Should the pastor allow the person to remain as a church member? Should he be allowed to remain in leadership position? Should he be allowed to participate in Holy Communion? Should his family and friends be told?

3. Participation in the Eucharist

Should a homosexual be allowed to take part in the Eucharist? When can he be allowed to take part?

4. Leadership

Should there be any limitations on the homosexual holding leadership positions in church? Here we should also include the much-debated issue of whether homosexuals could be ordained? What if an ordained person is discovered to be a homosexual?

In all these situations, the key question seems to bring us back to the definition and dynamics of homosexuality. Given our present understanding, it is helpful to consider homosexuality in terms of identity, desire, and behaviour. A biblical and pastorally informed position would be to view homosexual behaviour as sinful and to require abstinence from homosexual behaviour as part of expected Christian discipleship. The presence of homoerotic feelings over and above a commitment to celibacy is in many ways similar to the way a heterosexual person has to deal with his feelings of sexual lust. It has to do with dealing with temptations and learning to overcome these inclinations by not falling into sin.

We have a problem with terminology here. Do we call such persons celibate Christian homosexuals or Christian ex-homosexuals? It depends on how we view the homosexual condition. It seems to me that most churches would be more comfortable with the latter term. The danger here is that we may neglect to recognise the real struggles that a Christian with homosexual tendencies faces, having a superficial and simplistic understanding of the problem. The trouble with the first term is the difficulty in putting together the two words “Christian” and “homosexual” because of the tendency to blur the lines between instinct and behaviour.

Whatever we finally agree upon, we can say that homosexual behaviour is incompatible with Christian life and it is difficult to see how a practising homosexual can take part in Christian sacraments and take leadership positions in church²¹. By practising homosexual, we mean one who habitually behaves homosexually. A further consideration is the attitude of the homosexual. One can be a practising homosexual who feels sorry for his behaviour and humbly accepts that his behaviour is sinful. One should take an understanding pastoral approach in these cases, seeking to help the person since he wants to be helped. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and pastoral guidance will help such persons. Should one wait for complete abstinence before such people are allowed to take part fully in the life and responsibilities of the church? If so, do we use the same standards, as say in the case of lying, sinful speech, and so on? If not, then how does the pastor use his discretion? Are there any guidelines to follow?

The treatment of a homosexual who openly practices homosexuality (whether he considers it to be sinful or not) is quite different from those discussed above. This distinction may be an important consideration in the pastoral care of those who still behave homosexually. For those who abstain from homosexual practice, but struggle with homoerotic feelings, we have already seen some aspects of pastoral care. Bringing them in contact with divine grace will help them to experience victorious Christian living, holiness and Christian maturity. From time to time, we will come across homosexuals who abstain from homosexual behaviour but also become free from homosexual tendencies. In such cases, we are reminded of the grace and power of God which are at work in all of us sinners, transforming us into Christlikeness. We must accept that all persons, whether heterosexual or homosexual, married or single, are called to holiness. God “has saved us and called us to a holy life” (2 Tim 1:9), and this includes right relationships and the proper use of God’s gift of sexuality within the creation order as revealed in God’s unchanging Word.²²

²¹ For the arguments from both sides of the debate whether active homosexual persons can be allowed to take part in the regular life and ministry of the Church, see Jeffrey Siker (ed.), *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

²² See “An Understanding of the Biblical View on Homosexual Practice and Pastoral Care,” Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary (Andrews University, Michigan) Position Paper, October 9, 2015, pp. 20-21. <https://www.andrews.edu/sem/statements/seminary-statement-on-homosexuality-edited-10-8-15-jm-final.pdf>.

Conclusion

The pastoral care of the homosexual in church would require some understanding of the issues of identity or ontology, disposition or desire, and behaviour or act. Research has shown no clear demonstration of a cause-and-effect relationship between biological factors/psychological processes and the condition of homosexuality. We need to remain with the biblical and traditional view of the church that homosexual acts are sinful and should not be condoned in church, and active homosexuals need to be dealt with pastorally in the appropriate ways. The homosexual disposition is something that has to be handled pastorally, using self-discipline and other means of help. It is not clear how this condition can be healed except in relying on divine grace to purify and transform desire. We have seen how it may be helpful to consider the pastoral care of the homosexual in terms of the processes of healing, reconciliation, sustaining, and guiding. A clear and confident moral response is needed while a sympathetic pastoral response that offers the grace of God to the homosexual is also required²³. These two stances are two sides of the same coin and one should not diminish the other.

²³ *The Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, n. 3. The Letter expressed concern that the homosexual condition itself was increasingly being viewed as “neutral or even good.” In prescribing a pastoral response, the Letter assumes that with confession and grace, homosexuals can live celibate or chaste lives. While eschewing violent reactions, whether by speech or action, against homosexuals, the Letter does speak of the need for a clear moral response and guidance. See Peter Coleman, *Gay Christians*, pp. 144-148.