

God and the Gay Lifestyle
by Rev. David L. Mahsman

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“Gay is hot,” said a recent story in the New York *Daily News*. “The U.S. Supreme Court knocked down an anti-sodomy law in Texas,” it continued. “The TV show ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’ is a smash hit. And Madonna and Britney Spears swapped spit last week at the MTV music awards.” It certainly appears that homosexuality continues to gain ground as an acceptable “alternative lifestyle” in American society. And this seems true in church as well as in state (or in pop culture). In August, the Episcopal Church, USA, approved its first-ever openly gay bishop. And while its General Convention declined a proposal to authorize drafting a standard rite for blessing same-sex unions, it did say, “We recognize that local faith communities are operating within the bounds of our common life as they explore and experience liturgies celebrating and blessing same-sex unions.”

Is homosexual behavior suddenly OK?

‘A momentous break’

Rev. V. Gene Robinson, who is divorced, has two daughters and has been with a male partner for 14 years. A priest for 30 years, he was elected in June by the New Hampshire diocese to be its next bishop and confirmed in August by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church.

The day after Robinson’s confirmation as bishop, President Gerald Kieschnick of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod released a statement. “While it is clear from God’s Word that His forgiving love in Jesus Christ is constant for all people,” Kieschnick said, “this action nevertheless constitutes a momentous break from the Christian Church’s 2,000-year-long understanding of what the Holy Scriptures teach about homosexual behavior as contrary to God’s will and the Biblical qualifications for holding the pastoral office.”

The decision, he said, will be “deeply divisive” in the Episcopal Church and the larger Anglican Communion, and it will be controversial throughout Christendom. “It is my sincere hope that the Episcopal Church, USA, would reconsider their decision in the light of the Biblical understanding of human sexuality and the qualifications for the pastoral office,” Kieschnick said.

He raised the issue again less than a week later as he brought greetings to the biennial Church-wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which was meeting in Milwaukee.

The ELCA has a “full communion” relationship with the Episcopal Church and is itself confronting very similar issues. The 2005 ELCA assembly will be asked to decide whether or not people in committed homosexual relationships are to be ordained in that

church and whether or not the ELCA should have an official policy on blessing same-sex unions.

“Foremost among the challenges to the church’s witness to the world is remaining faithful to Holy Scripture as we study and respond to some of the great moral issues of the day,” Kieschnick told the ELCA assembly Aug. 13. Then he referred to what the Episcopalians had done a week earlier and spoke words similar to what he had said about those actions: “I pray that your study of deliberation of this matter will be made in the light of the Biblical understanding of human sexuality and the qualifications for the pastoral office.”

Same-sex unions

In a separate statement this summer, Kieschnick spoke also in defense of traditional marriage. The catalysts were two court decisions: one by the U.S. Supreme Court, declaring unconstitutional a Texas anti-sodomy law; the other, in Canada, an Ontario court ruling that overturned the definition of marriage there as the union of a man and a woman.

“There is a principle in the legal profession that, when translated from the Latin, says: ‘The law also teaches.’ What concerns many Christians about these two recent court decisions is that the law helps to shape public morality,” Kieschnick said. “What concerns us is whether these and similar laws, by their capacity to teach and shape, will lead our society to re-think its definitions of marriage and family.”

Kieschnick said he could support a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban homosexual marriage. The proposed amendment would state that “marriage in the United States shall consist only of the union of a man and a woman.” By contrast, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien has declared his determination to make same-sex “marriages” legal throughout his country.

Said Kieschnick in his statement: “According to the Scriptures and to centuries of traditional law, homosexual marriages are condemned as being aberrant, against the will of God and ‘unnatural.’ By God’s design, marriage has always meant the union of ‘bride’ and ‘groom’ (gender-specific terms)—which are then ‘wife’ and ‘husband,’ ‘mother’ and ‘father,’ of the family.

“This is not just Christian thinking, an attempt to foist Christian morality on a pluralistic society. Marriage, at all times and in all civilizations, has always meant the union of a man and a woman in a permanent relation-ship. The institution is trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-historical. “To tinker with its meaning, to change the fundamental vocabulary of what ‘marriage’ has meant throughout the history of the world, is to eat away at the edges of our society. It is to threaten the very center of that society—the family unit—through which society is continued and new life comes into being. “The essential differences between a man and a woman are many and profound. Yet God has instituted loving marriage to integrate these differences into a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts. This amazing whole is essential for raising children—

with both a mother and a father. In fact, children instinctively yearn for both a male and female role model. God's divine plan for a family is just that—mother, father and children—not a father/father or mother/mother arrangement.

Same-sex marriages are thus an affront to the very human nature God, our Creator, gave us. "Granting the status of marriage to same-sex unions requires that we sacrifice the timeless meanings of marriage and family for the sake of sexual freedom. It is the wrong choice to make, and yet it is precisely the choice that our society—the voters, courts, Congress and even the churches—may be asked to make. I pray we think about what is at stake before stepping onto the slippery slope of same-sex marriage."

'A categorical prohibition'

The ordination of gay and lesbian clergy and same-sex unions are controversial issues in the Episcopal Church, as well as in the ELCA and in a number of other Christian churches. This is reflected, for example, in a letter written by Episcopal Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold to the bishops of his church following Robinson's election in New Hampshire. Griswold noted, "Great joy and deep distress are emotions being felt by many within our church. Some view the election as prophetic and an action of the Holy Spirit, while others view it as disregarding Scripture, Tradition and the larger view of the Anglican Communion"

The Missouri Synod has its own disagreements and controversies, of course. But what the Bible says about homosexuality—and the conviction that Scripture is the final authority on the matter—isn't one of them.

Over the years, the Synod has adopted convention resolutions that speak to the issue; the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) included a section on homosexuality in its 1981 report, "Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective"; and a presidential task force in 1999 published "A Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families."

"Homosexuality comes under a categorical prohibition in the Old and New Testaments (Lev. 18:22, 24; 20:13; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; 1 Tim. 1:9–10)," says the CTCR report. It says, "In discussing the sins which follow upon man's refusal to honor God as Creator of all things (Rom. 1:26–32), the apostle Paul singles out the sins of homosexual behavior for special comment. Such behavior comes under God's judgment not because it is any more heinous than the 21 vices listed in 1:29–31, but because it, too, illustrates man's rebellion against his Creator."

Likewise, a 2001 convention resolution that commends the 1999 ministry plan to the Synod's congregations "as a resource for study and a guide for pastoral care" notes that "the law of God declares homosexual lust and activity to be sin and contrary to the created order" (Rom. 1:24–27).

But neither the CTCR report nor convention resolutions leave the matter with words of condemnation. "While not minimizing the threat of God's wrath against all forms of

enslavement to sin, the church needs to recognize in its efforts to help the homosexual that all people are born in need of deliverance from the effects which sin has imposed on their lives,” says the CTCR.

The 2001 convention resolution, after noting that Scripture says homosexual activity constitutes sin against God, also reminds us that:

- “The Gospel declares that Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2) and that Christ, who knew no sin, was made to be our sin so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).”
- “The church’s proper evangelical work is to proclaim the reconciliation of the sinner to God in the death of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:18 –19).”
- “Holy Baptism leads us to daily contrition and repentance for all our sins of thought, word, and deed, in which the ‘old Adam’ is drowned anew each day, so that a new person, forgiven and restored by Christ’s death and resurrection, daily rises and comes forth to live before God in Christ’s righteousness and purity forever.”

Homosexual behavior, like any sin, can be forgiven. That’s quite a different thing, of course, than to say that such behavior is OK.