

Chapter 8

Homosexuality: A Word Not Written

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Can something be condemned if the word for that something does not exist? The same question can be asked about approving something, but more often the question concerns something that is thought to be deserving of condemnation. The question takes on special importance where there is an authoritative text from the past. Although the Bible and the Qur'an are perhaps the most representative examples of such texts, they are not alone. The United States Constitution is regularly invoked for approval or disapproval of realities that the writers of the document could not have had in mind. The twentieth-century Supreme Court ruled that "separate but equal education" is unconstitutional while a "right to privacy" is constitutionally protected. A historian would find it difficult to say which respective words in the United States Constitution disavow one practice and support the other. In the case of the Constitution, the Supreme Court is itself not clearly stated in the Constitution.

For a Christian, the Bible is not just a document of governmental principles. Its importance to Christian life is greater than is the Constitution for citizens of the United States. The Bible is believed to be a complete guide to life; its importance is based on the belief that it is *inspired* by God. (The belief of Muslims that the Qur'an is *revealed* by God raises different issues that cannot be explored here.) Christian communities and people who consider themselves Christian tend to believe strongly in living in accord with the Christian Bible.

Anything that is condemned in the Christian Bible cannot be accepted as part of a Christian way of life. Idolatry, incest, and murder are clear-cut examples of unacceptable behavior. Despite the vast changes over the millenia, there is continuity in the meaning of the original terms and their translation into modern languages. In the opposite direction, the Bible's approval of the love of neighbor, compassion for the suffering, and the restoration of stolen goods are also names of activities that are translatable without major problems.

Beyond a small number of clear commands that refer to specific actions (the New Testament actually has very few of these), most Christians recognize the need for interpretive help in understanding the Bible. Are "human rights" something to be approved? The Bible does not have the term to ask the question. Should the Christian church be democratic? An answer presupposes both an interpretation of biblical texts and an agreed-upon meaning of the contemporary term *democratic*.

There is a way of reading the Bible that, while called "literal," is actually a disregarding of the *words* for the sake of ideas. That is, a set of ideas is assumed to be immutable so that the words are mere labels. The nonexistence of a term is not taken seriously; the reality it is assumed, was condemned *in other words*. "Homosexuality" is an interesting example of what is supposedly condemned by the Bible in a few texts. One of the "proof texts" is in the Book of Leviticus: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (18:22). The practice of a contemporary Christian scanning the Book of Leviticus to decide what is approved and disapproved in contemporary life is itself an intriguing image. Paul's view, however, is undeniably central for a Christian. The person who assumes Paul condemned homosexuality thinks it is obvious that he had the same idea in mind as the contemporary reader. The fact that the term *homosexual* was invented in the nineteenth century is not considered relevant. But we return to our opening question: Can you condemn something which you do not have a word for? How exactly is the condemnation stated?

There is no denying that at least one writer of the New Testament, Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, condemned certain sexual practices that he thought were perversions. "Men committed shameless acts with men" (Rom. 1:27). But should what he condemned be given the name "homosexuality"? At the least, it is anachronistic to impose a modern word on an ancient document. For example, one might wish to argue that the roots of modern anti-Semitism go back to the New Testament. But to say that the New Testament is "anti-Semitic" is to apply a modern word (coincidentally invented at almost the same moment as *homosexual*) with a range of meaning unintelligible for the New Testament era. But is *nothomosexual* a simple idea that anyone can identify? Does everyone today know exactly what is being referred to? Would not St. Paul's reaction to hearing the word for the first time be, "That is just what I mean"?

In 1994, Stephen Donaldson, the president of "Stop Prisoner Rape," wrote a letter to the editor in *The New York Times*. He pointed out that the *Times* had

referred to the prevalence in our prisons of "homosexual rape." Donaldson pointed out that practically all rape in prisons is "heterosexual." Which is correct? If one means by "homosexual" a certain set of behaviors between people of the same sex, then prison rape is "homosexual." However, if one means by "homosexual" a person's fundamental orientation in sexual life, then prison rape is seldom "homosexual." Can anyone say which is the correct usage? Although both meanings are present in ordinary speech, the *Times* in this case would seem to have badly faltered. If one accepts the existence of people with a homosexual orientation, then the characterization of prison rape as "homosexual" becomes misleading and offensive.

The ambiguity still present today in the term *homosexual* reflects the evolution in its meaning since its invention a century and a quarter ago. Invented as a name for either a disease or a crime, *homosexual* was nonetheless available when the twentieth century distinguished between sexual behavior and sexual "orientation," a distinction that has been the basis of political tolerance. Many religious groups can support the civil rights of gay and lesbian people while not approving same-sex sexual relations. Whether such a policy can be consistently maintained on a long-term basis is doubtful, but the recognition of persons with civil rights is a big step. The term *homosexual* remains ambiguous today. But when someone is said to be "a homosexual" the presumption today is most likely to be that a person is homosexually orientated, whether or not this person has ever engaged in sexual relations with a member of the same sex.

At midcentury, when Alfred Kinsey did his study of male sexuality, he distinguished between 40 percent of the population who had engaged in "homosexual experiences" and the 5 to 10 percent who were "genuinely homosexual," that is, whose primary orientation was toward same-sex love. Experience of sexual activity between two males could range from innocent experimentation to predatory violence to deeply committed love. What emerged for some of Kinsey's subjects, and perhaps more clearly for some men today, is that their sexual lives are oriented to same-sex love.

What does the Christian Bible say of such men and their female counterparts? Nothing directly. No judgment is made about gay and lesbian people; the question could not be asked, because the language was not available to do the asking. That is not to say that the Christian Bible offers no guidance to persons who have a same-sex orientation. Starting from the first chapter of Genesis, the Bible affirms that all creation is good because it is the work of God. The Bible also warns that all human desire can go astray and become

corruptive. Sexual desire is especially dangerous not because it is evil but because it is so important a human good. Sexual life needs regulation because it is integral to the community's present existence and the foundation of its continuance into the future.

For most of human history, the sexual life of humans, like that of other animals, was immediately related to the reproduction of offspring. The nearly exponential growth of the population in the twentieth century has made both possible and necessary the exploration of human sexuality as a reality of its own. (It might be noted that although Jewish attitudes toward sexuality have generally been more positive than many Christian groups, the Jewish attitude toward homosexuality is influenced by the precariously low reproductive rate in the Jewish community.)

At the end of the twentieth century, individuals are probably no wiser than they ever have been about their sexual lives, but the human race undeniably has a different understanding of sexuality from what it had in the past. Studies subsequent to the two Kinsey Reports have confirmed the fact that the human race has an imaginative diversity of sexual expression. Sexual intimacy between consenting partners of the same sex seems to be nothing less and nothing more than part of that wonderful range of expression.