

## DOCTRINAL BRIEF: IS HOMOSEXUALITY A SIN?

*John F. Brug*

I recently received a phone call from a journalist working for a Roman Catholic newspaper asking if I could verify the statement, "Lutherans believe homosexuality is a sin." She wanted to verify that the statement was correct before she included it in a story she was working on. She explained that she was quoting this statement from a California court decision which upheld the right of a WELS-affiliated school in California to suspend two students who allegedly had advocated pro-homosexual views. Her article was expressing relief that the case had turned out the way that it had (at least at this level of appeal) because Catholics had been watching the case with interest since "we are all in this together."

A story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* had reported that a California state appeals court had ruled that a private religious high school can expel students it believes are lesbians on the grounds that the school is not covered by California civil rights laws. In its ruling the court had relied in part on a 1998 state Supreme Court ruling that allowed the Boy Scouts to exclude gays and atheists. The court ruled that California Lutheran High School is a social organization entitled to follow its own principles, not a business subject to state anti-discrimination laws. "The whole purpose of sending one's child to a religious school is to ensure that he or she learns even secular subjects within a religious framework," Justice Betty Richli said in the 3-0 ruling. As with the Boy Scouts, she said, the primary function of the school is to instill its values in young people, who are told of its policies when they enroll. It is clear therefore that neither the Scouts or the school are businesses. The court said:

The record establishes that the Boy Scouts is an organization whose primary function is the inculcation of a specific set of values in its youth members, and whose recreational facilities and activities are complementary to the organization's primary purpose. . . . [M]embership in the Boy Scouts is not simply a ticket of admission to a recreational facility that is open to a large segment of the public and has all the attributes of a place of public amusement. Scouts meet regularly in small groups (often in private homes) that are intended to foster close friendship, trust and loyalty, and scouts are required to participate in a variety of activities, cere-

monies, and rituals that are designed to teach the moral principles to which the organization subscribes.

Our readers will note the irony of a ruling which bases the rights of a WELS school to discriminate on the precedent that if the Scouts have a right to discriminate because of the inherent moral basis of the organization, then a religious school must have the same right. The same moral/religious exemption that applies to Scouts must apply to a church school.

Our interest in this article is not in the court case itself (neither the facts nor merits of the case nor the terms of the ruling) but only on the statement "Lutherans believe homosexuality is a sin." Those interested in the court case can read the ruling for themselves. "The ruling in *Jane Doe vs. California Lutheran*" can be read at [links.sfgate.com/ZFZP](http://links.sfgate.com/ZFZP) (at least they could at the time of this writing).

So what about the statement "Lutherans believe homosexuality is a sin"? Why might someone be in doubt about the accuracy of this statement, as the journalist was? One cause of doubt might be the word "Lutherans." The journalist may have heard of Lutherans who advocate gay marriage or gay clergy. The court disposed of this issue with a footnote in its ruling, which states that whenever the term "Lutherans" was used in the ruling, it was shorthand for WELS and ELS Lutherans since they were the only Lutherans party to the suit.

Another source of disbelief might come from gay rights advocates who were incredulous that anyone could have such an antiquated, unenlightened view in the 21st century.

Most likely, however, the source of the journalist's perceived need to get verification for the statement was uncertainty about the scope of the word "homosexuality." What is included in the word? only homosexual actions and practices? homosexual desires? homosexual tendencies? an inborn homosexual nature (if such exists)? Many Evangelicals who condemn homosexual activity as sin would be unwilling to state that the desires or tendencies are sin if they are not acted on.

Lawsuits like the California case and others which are likely to follow, the national debate over the legalization of same-sex marriages or similar unions, the conflict that is rising in many denominations over the ordination of practicing homosexuals, the sharp disagreement about the blessing of same-sex marriages by some churches, and the dispute over whether homosexuality is an inborn disposition or a free choice are among the current issues that may lead people to ask, "What is WELS's stance on these issues?"

Our topic in this article is not the legal or scientific issues, but the theological issue, namely, our public teaching and practice which is based on what the Bible teaches concerning homosexuality.

The best place to begin a discussion of this issue is with 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, because this passage emphasizes both the law and the gospel elements which are essential to addressing this issue.

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders (μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἀρσενοκοῖται) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

On the basis of this and other passages of Scripture we must draw the following conclusions about homosexuality.

Scripture clearly declares that homosexual practice is a sin which is contrary to God's intention in creating man and woman. In the passage above, the NIV rendering "male prostitutes" is not a very apt rendering. The Greek term refers to the more passive partner in the homosexual activity. Neither this term nor the more general term that follows limit the condemnation to homosexual activity which involves prostitution, promiscuity, or idolatry. The condemnation is general and inclusive of all homosexual activity.

Factors in this sin are rejection of the natural knowledge of the law and sinful resistance to the revealed will of God. People may become slaves to this sin due to hardening of the heart (Ro 1:18-31).

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup>In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion (Ro 1:26,27).

Homosexuality violates natural law. It involves a suppression of the truth. Even Biology 101 makes it clear that the male body was not designed for sex with men, nor the female body for sex with women. This sin is condemned also among people who do not have the written, revealed law of God as Israel did (Lv 18:22-25).

Many factors contribute to individual acts of sin: the sinful nature we are born with, the weaknesses of our bodies, evil influences in our environment, temptations and encouragement from other sinners, and our own sinful choices join together to lead us into sin. All of these factors contribute to homosexual sin. The proportionate role of these various factors may vary from case to case.

We must warn the impenitent that homosexual activity, like all sins, excludes people from eternal life (1 Co 6:9-10). We must also note,

however, that as far as incurring guilt is concerned homosexuality is not in a different category from other sins. It is part of a list of damning sins that includes such sins as stealing, greed, heterosexual sin, drunkenness, and slander.

We cannot limit the sin of homosexuality to deeds but not desires, any more than we can limit heterosexual sin to deeds but not desires. Scripture clearly includes desires and inclinations toward sinful actions in the category of sin (Mt 5:27-28). This is true of both homosexual and heterosexual sin.

We are happy to assure the repentant, who are struggling against this sin, that they have complete forgiveness through the blood of Christ. When Christ died for all of the sins of the whole world, he gained forgiveness for homosexual deeds, for homosexual desires, and for the inborn sinful nature which produces these sins (1 Co 6:11).

We should sympathize with all who are struggling against this sin, remembering that we too have “pet sins” which may have a strong hold on us. We warn against a “selective morality” which harshly condemns homosexuality or other sins that we observe in others while treating those sins which are present in our own lives more lightly (Mt 7:1-5). We should be impartial and unbiased in warning against all sins. We should be impartial and unbiased in our proclamation of forgiveness.

We all look forward to the resurrection of the body. Then all the weaknesses of body and soul which now lead us into sin will disappear forever. Then all of us will be able to serve God perfectly and purely in everything we do.

So back to the original question, “Do Lutherans believe homosexuality is a sin?” If we have to choose between a “yes” or “no” answer, I suppose we would have to choose “yes,” but we would want to give more than a “yes” or “no” answer. We would want to explain both the law and gospel elements of dealing with this issue. We would want to put this sin into the context of sin in general. When we encounter homosexuals in our outreach efforts, we do not try to convert them from being homosexuals so that we can then try to convert them to being Christians. We approach them with law and gospel as we would approach any other sinners. We use the law to convince them that they like us are sinful by nature, by desires, and by deeds. They like us need a Savior from sin. They like us have that Savior in Christ. Having come to faith in Christ, they like us will struggle to overcome the sins that remain in their lives whatever those sins may be. They like us will daily look into the mirror of God’s law to identify the sin that remains in their lives. They like us, motivated by the gospel, will use the law as a guide in changing their sinful lives. They like us will turn to Christ in sorrow and repentance when their sincere efforts fail, and

they slide back into the sin that they have come to hate. They like us will become totally free from the power and lure of sin only when they stand before Christ pure in both soul and body.

So does the sin of homosexuality make a person subject to church discipline? The sin itself does not, any more than any other category of sin does. It is impenitence that subjects a person to church discipline. A person who has committed heterosexual sin, who is repentant of that sin and who is struggling to break free from the hold of the sin remains a Christian brother or sister in good standing. Persons who condone or defend the sin in themselves or in others do not. A person in the congregation who has committed this sin but is repentant can remain a member of the congregation in the same way that a repentant alcoholic or drug addict can. On the other hand, a person who has not committed homosexual sins and who has no homosexual tendencies, but who persists in defending or condoning the sin of homosexuality could not remain within the fellowship of the congregation. It is repentance or lack of repentance that determines the person's relationship to the church. Proper Christian dealing with homosexuals is simply a specific form of the correct application of law and gospel.

### **Note on Homosexuality as Innate or Chosen**

Some advocates of legal and religious tolerance of homosexuality claim that homosexuality has a genetic cause. Some reports claim that some homosexual men share a particular pattern in the X sex-chromosome which they received from their mother. Other researchers have claimed the existence of other types of biological similarities between homosexual men. Some of these claims are disputed. Even these researchers, however, acknowledge that their discoveries cannot account for all homosexuality and may merely be associated with homosexuality rather than being a direct cause of it. Most researchers conclude that the origins of homosexuality are complex and varied and may never be fully understood.

How should we respond to such claims in the light of the biblical teaching of sin? Is homosexuality a free choice or an inborn tendency?

Though the possibility exists that some forms of homosexuality are genetically or innately influenced, it does not seem possible that it is genetically determined. If it were, identical twins would be identical in their sexual orientation, but this is not the case. There is, of course, much literature on both sides of the issue. A useful book on the scientific aspects of the issue is *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* by Jeffrey Satinover.

Like many such either-or questions, this question of innately determined or freely chosen poses a false dilemma. Every sin is both a choice

of the will and the expression of an inborn tendency to sin. Our sinful will is guilty of consent whenever we sin in thought, word, or deed. As a result of our sinful nature we take pleasure in our sins and defend them. This universal tendency is apparent also in the efforts of gay rights activists to condone their homosexuality and to deny that anything is wrong with it.

Although the consent of our sinful will is present in every sin, it is also true that we are born as slaves of sin. We may also yield to a particular sin so often that we no longer control the sin, but the sin controls us. We may find ourselves yielding to sin even when we don't want to.

Sin infects both our body and our soul. The body we now have is not the perfect body which God created for Adam and Eve. God did not make us what we are today. Our body has been contaminated by the effects of sin. There is no reason to maintain that the specific effects of sin have been identical in each one of us or that we are all equally susceptible to every sin. Our individual degree of susceptibility to some specific sins may be due in part to differences in our bodies. Susceptibility to abuse of alcohol and to a hot temper are just two examples of sins which may be affected by the chemistry of our bodies. Few would deny that the pressure to sexual sin is greater at 18 than it is at 8 or at 88 and that a primary reason for this is the changing chemistry of our bodies. It may well be that a person's susceptibility to homosexuality or to certain other sins depends in part on bodily differences, but this really has no bearing on whether or not the deeds or desires in question are sin. That is determined solely by God's law. Sin is the transgression of the Law.

Even though the weakness of our own body may be one factor which leads us to sin, God holds us responsible for all of our sins, even those sins which enslave us and those sins which we are not aware of. We need God's forgiveness even for those sinful desires which we resist and do not act upon. These desires too are sin. (Read Romans 7 for a treatment of slavery to sin).

### **Note on the Civil and Legal Dimensions of the Issue**

We must distinguish between a Christian's duty as a Christian and a church member and his or her duty as a citizen who also happens to be a Christian. How should I as a Christian respond to the attempt to legalize gay marriage or to ban any discrimination against homosexuals by religious groups. Should I send money to the telephone solicitors for a televangelist's organization so that he can lobby the government on behalf of Christianity? I'll answer "No" to that appeal. I as a Christian have a much better way to oppose godlessness and immorality in society. I will preach God's law which condemns sin,

and I will proclaim his gospel which offers forgiveness. Nothing I can do as a Christian will do more to ward off serious moral threats to our nation's future than proclaiming God's Word.

My Christian duty toward homosexuals (and toward the sexually immoral, thieves, swindlers, murderers, slanderers, drunkards, and any violators of God's will) is clear—to confront the impenitent with God's law which condemns their sin and to comfort the penitent with the gospel which offers forgiveness.

As a good neighbor and good citizen, my duty is not to pressure people to accept and to practice my religious beliefs (1 Co 5:12), but to promote laws which protect individuals and society from harm. If reason, evidence, and the natural knowledge of God's law, which remain in people even after the Fall, all testify that stealing, murder, drug abuse, sexual immorality, abortion, and homosexuality are harmful to individuals or to society, I as a citizen should work for laws which oppose those evils. I do this not to force my religious beliefs on others, but rather to work together with other people who share a natural knowledge of God's law in order to protect society from evil. The fact that stealing is forbidden by the 7th Commandment and murder by the 5th does not mean that I as a Christian cannot support laws against stealing or murder. The recognition that these acts are wrong and harmful is not peculiar to Lutheranism or to Christianity. It is based on a natural knowledge of God's law and on experience. This knowledge, therefore, is common to all people, except where sinners have suppressed this knowledge (Ro 1:18-32).

I can also join together with other citizens to oppose laws which would limit religious freedom by preventing churches from preaching against sin or by preventing churches from disciplining members on the basis of their own moral standards. Churches could work together to protest or to testify against such laws (cooperation in externals).

As a Christian citizen I should work for laws which will protect society from the harmful consequences of sin. As a citizen I promote such laws on the basis of reason and natural knowledge of the law. If the state tolerates moral evils which violate God's law, I will continue to oppose them on the basis of God's Word.

As a member of the church my goal is to win people's hearts and guide their lives by God's Word. As a citizen my goal is to regulate people's conduct so they do not harm themselves or others. Many of the moral principles of God's law are relevant to both goals and may be used in both spheres, but for different purposes. As a member of the church I use all of God's law as a mirror, a curb, and a rule. As a citizen I use parts of God's law as a curb against conduct which reason and natural knowledge of the law recognize as harmful to society.