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Understanding the Complexities of the Gay Marriage Issue

Kevin Twain Lowery

Public opinion and the political landscape are both rapidly changing to favor the legalization of gay marriage, and this is sure to meet strong resistance in various places. Consequently, for those of us in settings where the potential for polarization and conflict is relatively high, it would be prudent to foster open, substantive dialog about the issue. The goal of this paper is to help frame this discussion in a constructive way, without the rhetoric and the oversimplifications that are too often prevalent. Coming to a peaceful resolution of this issue requires us to examine it on all sides, so we may understand what is at stake and thus be able weigh our values effectively and wisely. I humbly share with you my personal opinions and assessment, and although I do not claim to be a leading expert on this matter, I have, as an ethicist, tried to keep informed with current events and scholarship. I invite each of you to investigate these matters so that you may be well informed, and then I encourage you to engage one another in respectful and prayerful dialog.

It is my contention that this issue is not ultimately about legal rights; it is about legitimation, and this will be my focus. However, it is first necessary to clarify the various aspects of the issue, namely, homosexuality itself, the role of marriage in society, and the hermeneutical challenge of formulating a Christian response. En route I will briefly consider some of the more common arguments that are made. Once I have laid this foundation, I will return to my contention that the issue is about legitimation and then conclude the paper by framing the issue in a way that I believe can stimulate discussion that is both edifying and productive.

Understanding Homosexuality Itself

As far as we can tell, sexuality appears to be complex and multifaceted. It is shaped and/or determined by a mixture of genetic and social factors. This includes physiological traits as well as cultural forces. Even among heterosexuals, sexual desire and sexual response can vary significantly from person to person. Each person is a unique combination of physiology and experiences. Who we are biologically largely (if not entirely) determines how we interpret our life experiences, and then these interpretations largely (if not entirely) determine who we are psychologically, including our worldview and our self-identity. To the extent that we share genetic traits and life experiences, there will be similarity in our self-identity. Inversely, to the extent that our traits and experiences are different or even unique, our self-identity will be different, perhaps unique.

Historically it has been assumed that each gender has its own sexual characteristics that are shared universally throughout the group. Granted, each gender has its own set of sexual characteristics that are generally shared within the group, but the overgeneralization of this has led to some faulty conclusions. For example, it has been believed that it is perfectly natural for men to enjoy sex immensely, but not women. Beliefs like this reinforce the one-sided mores of patriarchal cultures, in which men are permitted multiple wives and their sexual promiscuity is flippantly overlooked. In contrast, women in patriarchal cultures are expected to be totally and exclusively devoted to their husbands, and this kind of gross disparity is often justified by simplistic, erroneous sexual stereotypes. Patriarchal cultures clearly illustrate how the sexual mores and proclivities of those in power (whether it be the men or the majority) are solidified into stereotypes, and then the stereotypes themselves are used to enforce the will of the powerful on everyone. For a host of reasons, deviation from the norm is not tolerated, and nonconformists

are punished in some way, sometimes even executed. Yes, even Levitical law required adulterers and homosexuals to be put to death.

Since sexuality is somewhat complex, homosexuality cannot be reduced to a single cause or factor. For instance, some presuppose that homosexuality is merely a form of sexual addiction. Others may think that homosexuality stems from some type of abuse that the individual may have suffered, especially in early childhood. Another common mistake is to lump homosexuality in with a number of sexual disorders, e.g. pedophilia. There are also those who wish to attribute all homosexuality to genetic factors. Could it be that homosexuals had parents who were domineering and/or did not adequately model traditional masculine and feminine roles? In reality, there are a number of factors that can contribute to a person's sexual inclinations, so they simply cannot be reshaped at will, let alone be "cured" by some failsafe method. We should try to be as informed as possible and be prepared to respond as Jesus did, not only to groups of people, but also to individuals with unique differences.

We understand enough about human sexuality today to realize that overgeneralizing it is both shortsighted and unjustified. First, it begs the question to argue that everyone should conform to a perceived norm simply because it is the norm. It cannot be assumed that a particular norm must be followed, for that is the very issue that must be decided. That would be like saying that everyone should learn to be right-handed, because the vast majority of people are right-handed. In fact, this was indeed the case in ancient times. The Latin word for "left" is "sinister," indicative of the ancient but lingering belief that "different" means "evil." Second, since there is some variation in sexuality, justifying conformity in general does not tell us how much conformity we need. In effect, some have argued against homosexuality by taking the Kantian approach. Obviously, if everyone were homosexual, then the human race would reach eventual

extinction like the celibate Shaker communities, so we need a certain number of people to reproduce, and heterosexual mating is necessary for this. We are therefore justified in expecting general conformance to the heterosexual norm. However, this does not imply that everyone must be heterosexual. It seems that there should be tolerance for individuality at some level. For example, should we heed those who claim that there is only one proper way for husbands and wives to have sexual intercourse? It is not apparent how this could be justified.

“Love the sinner, hate the sin” is the mantra of many, and although it is generally a worthwhile and noble principle, it is no longer adequate to rely on this response alone. Sexuality is a core part of our self-identity, a part of who we are, so we cannot simply treat it as we would some other kind of desire or temptation. To be human is to be a gendered, sexual being. We find it difficult to even conceive personhood apart from gender. Indeed, we do not have singular, personal pronouns that are non-gendered. That is why we can only refer to God as a gendered being, even though we believe that God is neither gendered nor sexual.

Sexuality is one of the most basic parts of our understanding of what it means to be human. Like our desire for food, the sex drive does not need to be encouraged or cultivated. It is biologically necessary for the survival and thriving of our species. We are often able to increase our sphere of stimulus and response, but for the vast majority of people, basic sexual proclivities are inherent and are typically discovered by puberty. We do not and should not view sexuality as something external to the individual or as something that necessarily can be altered to any significant degree. Our sexual proclivities are a part of us, a part of our identity. People thus tend to think of homosexuals *themselves* as unnatural or perverted, rather than viewing only their homosexuality as unnatural or perverted. In other words, in the case of sexuality, we cannot really separate the “sinner” from the “sin”, since it involves a basic part of identity.

It seems that sexual inclinations are as much a part of one's identity as gender itself. In fact, the real connection seems to be between gender and sexual inclinations. We can no longer simply classify people as either male or female. Instead, gender must be qualified in some way (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual), and even these categories are not precise, because some people have inclinations or combinations of inclinations that are in some ways unique to them. Granted, the majority of people share the same basic inclinations, but it would be too simplistic to assume that sexual response is identical for most people. For example, every marriage does not have the same sex life, because although many people are alike in some basic ways, each individual is somewhat unique in the way that he or she responds sexually. In spite of our uniqueness, we still tend to identify ourselves in groups. We place ourselves and others in general, albeit imperfect categories. Sexuality is no different. We categorize people according to their sexuality, and this includes both gender and sexual inclinations. In that regard, it is difficult to separate them. They both become a part of our basic identity.

The intertwining of sexuality and identity is amplified by our uncertainty as to the extent that sexual inclinations can be changed. If we really believed that they could be readily altered, we would regard them as something more extraneous. It is like the difference between eye color and hair color. Eye color is a more fundamental part of a person's physical characteristics, because we do not know how to change it. That is why it is likely to be included on identification cards and driver's licenses. In contrast, hair color is comparatively trivial, because it can be changed so easily. There are those who evidently regard sexual inclinations in this way, viewing them as a more extraneous part of our humanity. They remain optimistic about changing the sexuality of homosexuals. Apparently, they believe that every human being is ultimately a heterosexual. They assume that something has gone wrong for the homosexual, and they believe

that if this wrong can be undone, the homosexual will be able to be a heterosexual once again. Even though this may be true in a few instances, the evidence suggests that this is not at all typical. The overwhelming majority of homosexuals acknowledge having been aware of their sexuality since childhood, not only experiencing homosexual attraction, but also lacking the heterosexual inclinations they observed in others.

Consequently, it is mistaken to think that homosexuals can be transformed into heterosexuals, except in rare circumstances. Of course, we can always try to expand our repertoire, so to speak. We can learn to perform tasks with the opposite hand, we can learn to eat foods we don't like, and we can increase our range of sexual response by increasing the intensity of sexual arousal as well as broadening the range of stimuli that trigger it. In other words, it stands to reason that homosexuals can be aroused by heterosexual stimuli, and heterosexuals can be aroused by homosexual stimuli. Nevertheless, it does not appear that one's basic predispositions and preferences can be changed at will. Left-handed people will still be most comfortable using their left hands, some people will like broccoli while others will not, and all of us will still have our individual sexual orientations and preferences.

Unlike many of our other desires, Sexual desire is ongoing and does not recede to the extent that other desires may. A person may be able to overcome bitterness and anger, but only because they are not inherently a part of a healthy human existence. The same thing cannot be said about sexual desire. When I was in college, I was mentored by an elderly gentleman whom I respected greatly. On one occasion he confided in me, telling me of his ongoing struggle with sexual temptation and lust. He indicated that he had repeatedly asked God to take away his sex drive and make him a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of God. However, this never happened, and he finally resigned himself to the fact that he would have to continue to fight this

battle, most likely for the rest of his life. Sexual desire is an inherent part of being human, and it will not fade the way that acquired desires can. To be sure, libido does change throughout the course of a person's life, but we cannot precisely predict what it will be in the future. All we can do is handle it in a responsible manner today.

Assessing the Morality of Homosexuality

There is yet another reason why the motto, "Love the sinner, hate the sin," will no longer suffice. It is indeed a question of the utmost gravity. The issue that is now being raised in society and in the church is whether homosexuality should still be regarded as inherently and categorically sinful or should now be regarded as legitimate when judged by the same standards that apply to heterosexuality. The assumption behind "Love the sinner, hate the sin," is that homosexuality is sinful, and this is what is now being challenged by a growing number of people, including the Christian community.

Objections to homosexuality are often based upon the judgment that it is unnatural and does not conform to the general course of nature. In my opinion, natural law arguments are perhaps the strongest that can be raised against homosexuality. Indeed, this is the type of argument made by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament. Nevertheless, even the natural law argument is open to interpretation and must be qualified in two ways. On one hand, what seems unnatural to one seems perfectly natural to another. A significant part of what we regard as "natural" is due to cultural conditioning, and we must be aware of that. We don't have to go too far back into history to find examples of things we now accept but were once considered unnatural, things like interracial marriage, women in positions of authority, traveling by automobile, electricity, and modern medicine. This is why gay rights advocates are hopeful that

exposure and interaction will continue to change perceptions and make homosexuality acceptable to the general public.

On the other hand, the mere fact that something seems natural does not necessarily make it morally acceptable. Some people might be more naturally violent than others, but this does not excuse violence. At most it might change the way we would view the offender's culpability, but it should not cause us to excuse the behavior altogether. Just as public opinion does not necessarily make something evil, public opinion does not make it good either. History is rife with examples of this, too. In the final analysis, the issue of homosexuality must ultimately be judged by something more substantial than personal feelings. A particular culture can make homosexuality seem either acceptable or appalling, and that is why we should ultimately judge homosexuality in light of the benefits or harms it produces.

In this regard, it should be noted that there is a difference between something being disturbing and it being harmful. Of course, we should be disturbed by things that are harmful. However, there are any number of other reasons why we may find certain things disturbing, and many of these are not moral in nature. For instance, someone may get upset when a family member puts ketchup on the Thanksgiving turkey, and yet we would not consider that to be sinful or immoral. Some things are simply regarded as matters of convention or etiquette, and they cannot be breached as such.

Unfortunately, a lot of people are unable to distinguish social taboos from harmful behavior. Social taboos change from group to group. A good example of this is the use of particular words to refer to body parts or bodily functions. In contrast, what is harmful in one particular setting is quite often harmful in others, that is, if we define harm as something more than merely offending someone's feelings. Consequently, homosexuality (and other ethical

issues) must be judged according to the benefit or harm that is produced, both for the individual and for society as a whole. Feelings are simply too subjective to allow them to be the primary basis for accepting or rejecting something on a moral basis.

Another important distinction to be made is that between personal interest and the common good. In the first place, everybody does not want the same things. We have different goals and values at least some of the time, so it is not possible to please all of the people all of the time. In the second place, what benefits or brings happiness to a particular individual does not always benefit or bring happiness to the group. This principle likewise holds true on a larger scale. We cannot assume that what benefits a particular group of people (e.g. a nation) will promote the common good of humanity as a whole. Consequently, democratic societies must find some balance between the group and the individual. On one hand, promoting the common good generally leads to a better state of affairs. On the other hand, the rights of individuals need to be respected in order to protect them from the whims of the group. In a civil rights matter, the number of people who are affected is irrelevant. The question is whether the matter is a civil rights issue in the first place. If it is, then those rights must be protected for each and every citizen. We wouldn't accept the argument that we shouldn't worry about the sex trade because it only affects a few teenage girls, nor would we be persuaded that we need not do anything about domestic violence since the majority of homes don't experience it.

The common good generally outweighs the needs of the individual, but there must still be some protection for individuals and respect for private conscience. This is basically what St. Paul argues in Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8. In society, even when individuals engage in activities that ultimately harm them, we must still respect their freedom of conscience. For instance, we do not stop people from ruining their lungs with cigarettes, but we do restrict the use of cigarettes to

the extent that they have the potential to harm others who do not use them. Collective conscience must be counterbalanced by private conscience. The common good cannot be allowed to degenerate into the tyranny of the majority.

I believe that we ultimately make moral judgments according to the likelihood of potential benefits and harms brought about by particular actions and attitudes. We generally simplify moral reasoning (as we do all our reasoning) by systematizing it into rules, goals, virtues, etc. These generalizations also protect us from the whims and faulty reasoning of individuals by placing greater stress on past experience and collective conscience. Nevertheless, the rules and goals do change over time as we begin to reassess the potential benefits and harms of certain decisions. Once society starts to believe that the potential dangers are not as great as we had feared, it is only a matter of time until the proscriptions are rescinded. Most of us make choices that were condemned by our predecessors, mostly out of fear.

Human beings, like many organisms, have strong defensive mechanisms, for the evolution of such was necessary for survival. For instance, let's suppose a hunter-gatherer hears something rustling in the bushes. If his first inclination is to dash into the bushes hoping to find something to kill for food, he may himself end up being killed by a predator. On the other hand, if his first response is one of alarm and caution, his chance of survival is much higher, since he can find something else to eat much more easily than he can recover from a serious wound. Eons later we still have these defensive mechanisms, and they generally serve us well. However, many people have great difficulty getting past their fears, even when there is evidence that these fears do not have much basis in fact. In ethical issues, people will often appeal to slippery slope arguments, and it is rather obvious when these become guided by fear more than reason. After all, do we really think that legalizing gay marriage will result in the state granting marriage

licenses for the purposes of incest, pedophilia, and bestiality? Those activities clearly cause immeasurable harm, so I am not at all convinced by these slippery slope arguments. Another common way for our defensive mechanisms to show up in ethical arguments is through the appeal to tradition, which can be construed as the collective conscience of the past or as the respect owed to our ancestors. In spite of the fact that we have evidence that sheds new light on the issue, we are told that it is arrogant or disrespectful to depart from the thinking of the past. After all, Great-Grandpa would turn over in his grave if he knew how we think and act today.

In my opinion, after all the dust settles, homosexuality should be and will be judged by the tangible benefits and/or harms it produces.

Marriage in Society

A question that must be asked is whether society (i.e., the state) has a compelling interest in recognizing and encouraging marriage. After all, if the state has no real interest in the matter, the issue could be resolved by removing the state from marriage altogether, making marriage a religious or private convention, like club membership or friendship. Notwithstanding this possibility, it seems that society and the state do have a stake in the institution of marriage, not for any religious or sentimental reasons, but for the sake of justice and the well-being of society.

First, society is stronger and more stable with marriages than it would be without them. There is also ample evidence to show that children benefit greatly from being raised in a secure environment with loving parents. The stability of marriages is increased whenever the marital relationship is legally binding in some way. Society clearly has an interest in encouraging marriage, and we have chosen to use tax breaks and other means as incentives in this regard. Second, since it is in society's interest to have legally binding marriages, then the state has a

responsibility to maintain justice in these relationships. It will only hurt society in the long run if we allow people to dump their spouses at will without any repercussions.

Does society have an interest in encouraging and regulating marriage between gay spouses? Some claim that it does, because it benefits from marriages in general, whether they be heterosexual or homosexual marriages. However, that is part of what we must consider and decide. One thing is clear: society definitely has an interest in limiting marriage to unrelated, fully consenting adults, another reason why I do not find the slippery slope arguments compelling.

The Hermeneutical Challenge in Formulating a Christian Response

It is often assumed that scriptural exegesis is sufficient for resolving ethical issues, but this is not true. The application of Scripture to a particular situation or issue (i.e. hermeneutics) is more involved than that. For one thing, Scripture itself is not explicit about every issue, and this permits room for interpretation. In these instances, we must appeal to more general principles within Scripture in making our assessment. A good example of this is entertainment (e.g. television, movies, dancing, playing cards, etc.). There are not particular passages of Scripture that explicitly condone or prohibit such activities. Instead, more general principles must be applied, and this allows for much more disagreement.

Notwithstanding this limitation, there are many other passages in Scripture that address ethical issues directly. This certainly seems to be the case for the issue of homosexuality, since there are Scripture passages that are rather explicit in their condemnation of homosexual acts. Some try to explain these passages away, claiming that they only condemn using homosexual relations for domination and subjugation. I personally am not convinced by these

rationalizations, because, as I mentioned earlier, Paul is making a natural law argument against homosexuality, and he does so rather bluntly. It would seem as though this should unequivocally settle the matter. For many people it does, but usually because they assume the answers to two other hermeneutical questions which may be raised. Other people do not answer these questions in the same way, and they thus feel justified in reaching vastly different conclusions as to how these explicit passages should be understood and applied to our lives today.

The first question is, “On what basis can we interpret some scripture texts as universal principles while interpreting others contextually or metaphorically?” There are very few people that follow every edict of Scripture literally. Naturally, the vast majority of Christians do not feel the need to follow all of the decrees of the Old Testament, because they believe that Christ has fulfilled them for us, releasing us from that obligation. Nevertheless, very few Christians follow every New Testament instruction to the letter either, but not for the same reason. What we must decide for every Scripture passage is whether it is intended to be followed: 1) universally by all Christians, 2) metaphorically (i.e. more generally and symbolically) by all Christians, or 3) only by the people to whom it was originally addressed. It is patently obvious that the New Testament books were written for particular first century audiences, but it is not so clear when the biblical authors intended for their words to be applied more broadly.

Let us consider some examples. A notable and debatable issue is whether women should hold positions of authority, especially over men. When Paul told Timothy that women should keep silent in church and not hold authority over men, we do not really know whether he only had particular situations in mind or intended for these principles to be followed as general rules. Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists claim the latter, while most other Christian traditions (including the Wesleyan traditions) do not agree and encourage women to use their gifts to their

fullest extent, even in positions of authority, including pastoral ministry and denominational leadership. Instead of following Paul's instruction literally, we interpret it contextually (i.e. as specifically being relevant to the context in which it was written), perhaps deriving a more general principle from it.

Another example is slavery. For centuries, slaveholders pointed out that slavery is not condemned in the Bible, not even in the New Testament. Paul merely asserts that masters should be kind to their slaves. He does not forbid the owning of slaves. Fortunately, those passages were eventually interpreted contextually. This same process of hermeneutics can also be applied to biblical standards of dress. There are still those who feel that it is morally wrong to wear jewelry and expensive clothes, braid their hair, grow goatees, and get tattoos, but many others interpret these passages more contextually. The simple fact that Scripture is explicit does not by itself make them feel compelled to follow these regulations. This is what we must recognize in applying the Scriptural passages which explicitly condemn homosexual acts.

The other hermeneutical question that can be raised is, "To what extent is Scripture inspired in such a way so as to transcend the limitations of its authors?" In other words, how can I be sure how much God was influencing Paul when he condemned homosexual acts? Some would argue that Paul was merely a man from the first century, so we need not take his opinions that seriously. This is a much more fundamental question which concerns the nature and authority of Scripture itself, and I will not address it here. We fully affirm the inspiration of Scripture, so this is not a concern in our tradition. I am merely pointing this out to help you understand why some people feel that they can believe that Scripture is inspired to some degree and yet feel a great deal of freedom in following it. Anyone who wishes to address the issue of

homosexuality should be aware of this dynamic, because it changes the parameters of the way that Scripture is interpreted and applied.

The mere fact that Scripture is explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality does not preclude interpreting these passages metaphorically or contextually. However, some feel that Scripture should be followed as literally as possible, placing the burden of proof on those who would depart from the literal interpretation. Nevertheless, as our cultural distance from the biblical authors increases, a literal interpretation of Scripture is insisted upon less and less. In order to justify following the biblical condemnation of homosexuality literally, a case should be made for regarding these passages as universal edicts, not as mere condemnations of specific first-century practices. The challenge is to make this case without begging the question.

“It’s All About Legitimation”

Regardless of whether marriage should be considered a civil right, the issue of gay marriage is taking the shape of a civil rights issue, because it is ultimately about legitimation. I dare say the gay community will no longer be satisfied with conciliatory compromises. A cry for equality is a cry for legitimation. A few decades ago, gay people were glad just to be able to walk the streets without fear of being beaten or drug through town chained to the bumper of a car. For the past decade or so, they were thankful to be able to enter into civil unions. Now, I doubt that anything short of equality will be satisfactory. This should not be surprising, for it is only human nature to want to improve our lot in life, especially when we feel we are being treated unfairly. After women were given the right to vote, it was only natural that they would want to eventually hold office, too, and even expect to receive equal pay for it. African-

Americans likewise appreciated their freedom, but did we really think that they would be satisfied using separate water fountains and sitting in the back of the bus?

Yes, the issue is less about legal rights than it is about regarding homosexuals as different, not as freaks of nature. Like other civil rights issues, this matter has reached the point of no return. I do not believe that gay people will be satisfied to return to yesterday's status quo. Regardless of how we may judge the issue, we should be aware that this is the reality we face. Hopefully, we can at least reach the point where gay people will not have to battle depression and suicidal thoughts because others cannot accept them as they are, especially their loved ones.

Framing the Issue

Given the fact that sexual orientation can rarely be changed, we have only three options for responding to the gay marriage issue: 1) we can expect gay people to live a heterosexual lifestyle even though this runs counter to their basic inclinations, 2) we can expect them to remain celibate throughout their lives, or 3) we can accept homosexual relationships within the parameters of what we otherwise consider to be healthy, productive, sexual relationships. If we regard homosexual activity as sinful, we must expect gay people to be celibate and be limited to platonic relationships. Even so, don't be surprised if this response is roundly rejected.

Popular opinion is shifting rapidly toward the acceptance of gay marriage, yet there are others who remain adamantly opposed to it. The potential for polarization is great in Christian organizations, local churches, and even families. Will the tension resolve itself, or are there fights on the horizon? Only time will tell.

The rapid progression of this issue during the past few years illustrates how the burgeoning of communication in the digital age now allows social mores and conventions to be

challenged much more quickly than has been the case in the past. With each new advance in communications technology, social and cultural development accelerate even more. Although many of us in the older generations have been used to insulating ourselves from the world to a significant extent, this is not the case for today's younger generations. They enjoy frequent (if not constant) interaction with many different people, and ideas get challenged quickly and often within their broadening circles.

Historically, change has generally been slow in coming, but that, too, may soon be changing. If we wish to be relevant in today's world, we must be more proactive, less reactive, and in all things interactive. At times the church has seen itself as salt and light in a world that is increasingly decaying and darkening. At other times the church has seen itself as the champion of the weak and vulnerable. It may be that the church needs to set its own standards with regard to marriage. Catholicism has been doing that for centuries. In any event, we should be wise and count the cost, because somebody will be upset with us no matter what we decide. I am not suggesting that we simply choose what will bring the most favorable consequences, but I am suggesting that the higher the stakes become, the more seriously we should consider our decisions.

How will we be judged a century from now? Only God knows. I am hopeful that even if future generations view our reasoning as flawed, we will still have their respect because we were guided by a desire to be both fair and compassionate. I close with a quote by John Wesley, taken from his sermon, "Catholic Spirit."

Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.¹

¹ Sermon 39, §0.4