

“The church must rethink its traditional condemnation of homosexuality and offer a more constructive ethic to gay Christians than abstinence from sexual relationships”. Discuss

Function as an inadequate expression of love

It is my contention that the phrasing of the question of this essay displays that the very basis on which this debate is undertaken, both amongst revisionists and their traditional opponents, is a false perspective. The question is phrased with an anthropocentric perspective, in that its concern is with the dilemma faced by those whose sexual preference would seem to run counter to that sexual practice which the historical church has traditionally taught has appropriate. The question then, demands beyond a discussion of the various exegesis of the texts¹ and then an exploration of the discussion on sexual practice and the morality² or otherwise or various forms of relationship, a demand for some way for those with a homosexual orientation to **function** sexually. Even discussions around the biological or other causation issues or the secular debate³ speak into the debate from this human functioning perspective, for they seek to find a meaning in the justification or rejection of the orientation and its consequent sexual functioning.

¹ For example Gagnon, R; *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; John, J; *Permanent, Faithful, Stable*; Grenz, S; *Welcoming but not Affirming* pp81-100; Schmidt, T; *Straight and Narrow* pp64-99; Vasey, M; *Strangers and Friends* pp113-140 and of course the earlier works by Boswell and Countryman

² Some of the above and, for example, Wink, W (ed); *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*; Bradshaw, T (ed); *The Way Forward*; Williams, R; *The Body's Grace*

³ For example Satinover, J; *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*; Whitehead, N & B; *My Genes made me do it*

Perhaps the first to really approach the issue from a perspective of signification was Rowan Williams in the seminal “The Body’s Grace”. The connection between the surrender of ownership of one’s body in sex and the seeking of the pleasing of the other is an indicator of a deeper human relational truth that speaks of the deity beyond itself. As Williams writes:

“For my body to be the source of joy, the end of homecoming, for me, it must be there for someone else, be perceived, accepted, nurtured; and that means being given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness, of the other does it become unreservedly lovable.”⁴

I have written before⁵ of the eventual failing of Williams’ argument, in that when his language of signification and revelation is applied to homosexual relationships it fails to grapple with the apparent scriptural restrictions, but it is my intention here to identify an earlier breakdown in the argument and to progress from that point forward in answering whether a constructive ethic can be presented, however challenging that ethic may be.

On signification Williams writes:

“It seems that at least we have here a picture of what sexuality might mean at its most comprehensive; and the moral question, I suspect, ought to be one of how much we want our sexual activity to communicate, how

⁴ Williams, Rowan; *The Body’s Grace*; p4

⁵ <http://www.peter-ould.net/homosex1.htm>

much we want it to **display a breadth of human possibility** and a sense of the body's capacity to heal and enlarge the life of the other subjects."⁶

Here then I believe is the true point of dissonance, earlier than I have previously argued. Williams' point here is that sex can be viewed as a device to signify ourselves and the other. This provokes us though to question Scripture about what it indicates the signification of sex is. Or put another way, Williams wants to suggest that sex is important in its signification of the human being involved in the sexual act, but might there be another reality in who or what is being signified in sexual union?

The answer of course lies in what is presented by many of the traditional arguers of the case, that the linking of Ephesians 5:22-33 to Genesis 1 and 2 (and specifically 2:24) provides a much stronger argument against homosexual practice than "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve". Grenz discerns an aspect of this when he comments:

"This dimension of our sexuality is also evident in the second creation account. Adam first sensed his own maleness when confronted with the woman. That encounter led him to declare joyfully "She shall be called a 'woman', for she was taken out of man" (Gen 2:23, NIV). In a sense, this aspect of the story provides an explanation of the first narrative, **which links the *imago dei* to our creation as male and female** (Gen 1:27). We discover God's intention for us to be the divine image bearers – and hence our full humanness – through our interaction with one another as male and

⁶ Williams, Rowan; *The Body's Grace*; p5

female. This can occur within marriage, of course, but it is also operative in all male-female relationships⁷ ... **Marriage illustrates** Christ's self-sacrifice for the church as well as the submission to Christ (Eph 5:21-33) of a people who anticipate the future coming of their Lord (Matt 25:1-13; Rev 19:7; 21:2; 21:9-10)^{8 9}.

I would suggest though that Grenz does not go far enough in this understanding, because his perspective limits him **within a framework of sex as function**. When he writes, "The sex act, in turn, is the ritual celebration of this exclusive bond"¹⁰ he is not incorrect but he still leaves us with, despite the truth that "A homosexual relationship is not an appropriate context for the sex act, because in the context of such a relationship sexual intercourse simply cannot express this intended meaning" a question, namely "can it indicate something else?" (as Williams' essay may suggest). Jeffrey John suggests that "homosexual relationships should be accepted and blessed by the Church, provided that the quality and commitment of the relationship are the same as those expected of a Christian marriage"¹¹ but in doing so once again frames the comparison in terms of function. If a homosexual relationship **functions** as a heterosexual one, should it not then be viewed as an equal indicator of love? Can homosexual

⁷ Grenz, S; *Welcoming but not Affirming*; p104 – Emphasis added

⁸ Grenz, S; *Welcoming but not Affirming*; p106 – Emphasis added

⁹ This signification is also found in Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 3, Rev 19, Psalm 19, and Christ as the bridegroom in John 2&4 (which itself wraps around the discussion of salvation in John 3) and other passages.

¹⁰ Grenz, S; *Welcoming but not Affirming*; p114

¹¹ John, J; *Permanent, Stable, Faithful*; p1

function achieve “the best moral relationships of love that are possible for them within the limits of a condition they did not choose?”¹²

¹² Smedes, L B; *Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality*; in Wink, W (ed); *Homosexuality and Christian Faith*; p82

Ephesians 5 and the non-functional signification of sex

I want to suggest that our confusion is due to our misunderstanding of the signification of the sex act (as outlined in Eph 5). Too often the language is that the love of the husband to the wife is the signifier of the love of Christ to the Church, but in reading the verses one is struck by a peculiar observation – the language of the mystery of the union of husband and wife / Christ and the church **is one of ontology, not of function**. Verses 22 and 23¹³ translate literally “Wives to the(ir) own husbands as to the Lord, because a man is kephale¹⁴ of the woman as also Christ kephale the Church”. The inserted translation of “submit” in most modern translations (including the TNIV) introduces a verb into the phrase where no verb actually exists (ιδίους here is an adjective). Therefore the verse has been used as one of function instead of ontology, which is actually where the thrust of the argument is. Paul does not call for an action of submission, but rather, a better translation would be “Wives, be to your husbands as to the Lord”. Only in verse 24¹⁵ is the verb ὑποτάσσεται introduced, but even here it is passive – the sense is not really “submit to Christ” be rather “allow the submission which exists to Christ to occur”. This removes from the phrase the concept of

¹³ Αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἰδίους ἀνδράσιν ὡς τῷ κυρίῳ ὅτι ἀνὴρ ἐστὶν κεφαλὴ τῆς γυναικὸς ὡς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς κεφαλὴ τῆς ἐκκλησίας αὐτοῦ σώματος·

¹⁴ I have left “kehpale” untranslated as the discussion whether “authority over” or “source” or otherwise is the suitable translation is not necessary for the argument presented here. As may be surmised by the progress of the argument, I am more inclined to “source”, though Grudem’s appendix 1 in “Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood” is exegetically persuasive in the direction of “head of”.

¹⁵ ἀλλὰ ὡς ἡ ἐκκλησία ὑποτάσσεται τῷ Χριστῷ, οὕτως καὶ αἱ γυναῖκες τοῖς ἀνδράσιν ἐν παντί.

submission as a function of the wife / church and in its place sees it as an ontological state created by the (perceived) action of the husband / Christ.

The point of this becomes apparent as we progress through the rest of chapter 5 of Ephesians. Verbs here are distinguished by a number of features:

- 1) They are presented as actions of the husband to the wife, **never the wife to the husband**, indicating that in the relationship Christ / Church the Church does not precipitate any aspect of the connection.
- 2) Where love is spoken of from the husband to the wife (and curiously the reverse is never referred to, though to explore that would be too large a diversion for this essay) it is agape. The function here has no sexual component (eros never occurs in the Scriptures)¹⁶.
- 3) The chain of verses 25-27 is in the aorist (ἠγάπησέν, παρέδωκεν, ἀγίαση, καθάρισας, παραστήση, μὴ ἔχουσιν¹⁷). We are led through the passage observing completed actions, implying an achieved arrival at a state of being other to that which was before. The verbal action here is merely describing the functions that have occurred to produce an ontology that is now in existence because of those functions.
- 4) The conclusion of the chain is a statement of ontology in verse 32 – “This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church”.

¹⁶ Though Don Carson suggests that such distinctions in the different words for love are unproven (i.e. in Carson, D; *Exegetical Fallacies*; pp51ff)

¹⁷ “not having” – here having is active, but is presented as a negative

The conclusion is in one sense clear but in another takes some grappling with – the mystery that Paul is talking about in relation to “one flesh” is not the function of sex itself but rather, very simply, the state of being of the husband and wife. That is to say, it is not the sexual act itself which is the signifier of God, for function speaks of a temporal change (i.e. an action which presents two separate states of being at two separate times) and the necessary change between the two. Rather, for the union of male and female to signify God in his nature, rather than simply our perception of his functions of love etc, the emphasis is upon the being of the couple, that the presence of male and female at the climax of union is the indicator, not the actual function of the sexual union (i.e. the ejaculatory / orgasmic act).

Perhaps this is clearer when we consider that the ultimate revelation of God is his name which is a statement of ontology¹⁸. God is revealed most intimately not in an experience of his function, but rather in an ontological encounter, a connection of being to being, not doing to doing. Weinandy leads us to a further clue as to what ontological fact is being indicated in the being of sexual union when he writes:

“Thus, God in revealing his name YHWH, manifests both that he is with his people, since they know his name, and that he is present as the unknowable or unnameable”¹⁹.

¹⁸ Exodus 3:14 - וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה

¹⁹ Weinandy, T; *Does God Suffer*; p52

Weinandy understands the nature of God's transcendence and the human perception of it – it is insufficient to experience God in terms of how he functions, the divine revelation is God's nature.

But Christian tradition takes us further, for it acknowledges the Ephesians 5 / Genesis 2 mystery of husband and wife being one flesh as a signification that Christ is the locus of the incorporation of the elect into the life, even the very existence of the Trinity. Christ's union with the Church is not so much something that happens, it is something that is. The theosis of the church is an actuality that will be present beyond the final day, the day when marriage as a signifier no longer matters, for the union will then exist.^{20 21}

²⁰ Matthew 22:29-30

²¹ Christoforos Stavropoulos' essay "Partakers of Divine Nature" in Clenendin, D B (ed) "Eastern Orthodox Theology" is an excellent introduction to theosis

I represent by being, not doing

We come to a position where we see that discussions about sexual practice, whilst guiding our exegesis of passages such as 1 Corinthians 6:11-13, ultimately leave a gap in answer to the question of “But how should I love”? One can accept the Biblical teaching on sexual practice and function but still be left with the question “How do I express my love” or even the dilemma faced by all un-married people, namely, “How do I represent Christ and the Church when I am single?” The question “How, as one homosexually orientated, can I signify the union of Christ and the Church if I can NEVER enter into that specific heterosexual union which enacts the sign?” is merely a sub-set of the generic question asked by **all** non-singles, and therefore, if we find a way for non-singles to signify the union of Christ and the Church we have, by logical reduction, discovered a way for all, regardless of that perceived sexual orientation, to engage in that same signification that married people do.

The solution is that an attempt to “functionally” present this or any signification (which is the base of Williams’ and others’ argument – i.e. that the offering of myself in sexual union to another exhibits the “Body’s Grace” which is a deeper sign than simply the body itself being presented) misses the point that the signification in the married sexual act is not the function of sex itself but rather the simple presence of the male and female. That being understood, as a single person, my refusal to let my body enter any relationship which presents an ontology dissonant to this marriage signification is itself a signifier, in that I

willingly signify that which I am not, presenting my ontological status as a single, un-sexually engaged person (with the accompanied implicit refusal to engage in any sexual function apart from married sex) as the signifier of the theotic union of Christ and the Church.

The subtlety of course is that I do not need to act the function of love to signify the greater love that is that of Christ and God. Simply in my acceptance of the ontological indicator of married sex and my refusal to engage in sex contrary to that, I am letting my very existence be an ontological truth about God and his connection to the church. The very “non-function” of sex in this case is the indicator, rather than the function of sex (as Williams attempts to find a solution in). This being so, the question of “how should I best **function** sexually?²²” misses the point, with the question “how should I best **be**, so to signify Christ and the Church?” which understands the ontological representative dimension in the sexual encounter of two distinct beings far better.

Pastorally the implications are clear – it is the acceptance of the signifier of the Ephesians 5 sexual encounter that is the key for the will to let one’s chaste body signify in it’s being, not function, Christ and the Church. Once this is grasped and we present our existences as such, by engaging in the signification of the union of Christ and the Church, we permit that union to take place. As this writer has then subsequently discovered, the willingness to signify the Christ / Church bond

²² This is the argument of the likes of Smedes and Campolo, that those with a homosexual orientation should functionally love the best way that they can, at the moral optimum for their constrained position.

in chasteness leads one to permit that bond to occur within, and for God to so shape one's future life to continue to signify the bond, whether chastely or sexually.

Further to this, we also discover that any suggestion that marriage is a superior signifier of the union of Christ and the Church (i.e. that the ideal for Christians should be marriage) is at best misguided, for such a perspective depends upon a functional view of the husband / wife signification. Rather, it is the presence of the diversity and inclusion together and promotion of both singles **and** marrieds in the life of the church that signifies Christ and the Church, for only together can the whole body be offered as a sacrifice to the Lord²³. Ultimately then it is the being of the church, not its function that is the Body of Christ and the signifier of the divine and in the recognition and encouragement of such is the redeeming ethic for all, married and single.

²³ Romans 12:1-2, 1 Corinthians 12

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