



Ethics and Gay Christians

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Introduction

I approach this topic with some sense of uneasiness, not only because of the recurring poverty of ethics in my own life but also because I know that due to some understandably bad experiences with oppression at the hands of homophobic church people, discussion of ethics in the lives of lesbians and gay men can be a thankless and even resented undertaking. It can be experienced as threatening to all of us. Recently, a director of Dignity (the Roman Catholic lesbian and gay male organization) wrote: "When I first joined Dignity in 1975, I was told that if we pursued the discussion of 'morality and ethics' we could possibly split the membership of Dignity right down the middle." (*Dignity Newsletter*, Feb., 1982) Perhaps that "goes with the territory," so to speak. After all, when what is meant by "morality and ethics" in this context usually means "sexual ethics" in general and, more specifically matters of promiscuity, monogamy, S&M, "open relationships," and so on, discussion can get quite heated.

Of course, ethics covers much more than sexuality (or what passes for sexuality) though it is understandable that sexuality gets the attention. But if we are to address ethics in the lives of lesbians and gay men who are Christians, much more *live* the ethics, we must look at more than sexuality. We won't grasp the significance of even sexual ethics unless we see sexual ethics in the broader context, both of theological basis and outworkings.

Christian Ethics

What is the qualification we intend by speaking of ethics in the lives of lesbians and gay men who are *Christian*? What difference does “Christian” make? Is there a difference between ethics and Christian ethics? Are we, as Christians, supposed to be different from other people?

After sampling 20,000 households in America, a recent finding of a market research organization was this: “Christian buying habits and daily activities are, for the most part, not that different from anyone else’s.” (*Contemporary Christian Music*, Mar., 1982, pp. 23, 26) The Moral Majority’s protests notwithstanding, it was discovered that, for example, “the majority of those who listen to religious radio on a regular basis claimed as their favorite television shows: ‘Three’s Company,’ ... ‘Dallas,’ ... and ‘Love Boat.’” To me, Christian gay publications sometimes sound very much like gay publications that make no pretense to anything “Christian.” I’ve noticed that in such periodicals, for example, Paul’s serious warnings of evil teachers in Philippians 3:2 are ridiculed by “us bar-hoppers and bath-goers,” there is titillation of the promise of shared bath facilities for an up-coming convention, there is the reminder that “with the social season upon us,” (Advent) Christian gays should know the symptoms of “new, unfriendly” sexually-transmitted diseases, there is a review of a book by a gay Episcopal priest recounting his world-wide one-night stands and a gay *Christian* periodical can do no better than to reprint as review what amounts to the press release of the secular publisher of the book itself. Even a *secular* gay periodical (*The Advocate*, Sept. 17, 1981) says in its review of the book (*Look Back in Joy* by Malcolm Boyd) that “The descriptions are usually very vivid, but frankly, I’m not all that interested in what a famous gay man has done (and with whom) in the course of his love life. What I am needing is insight into the meaning of relationships, be they transient or long-term.” Even Tennessee Williams, who is certainly no stranger to either transient or long-term homosexual relationships, knows enough to say, as he did in an interview (ARTS, Part II, June, 1982) that “any kind of promiscuity is a distortion of the love impulse.” I’ve seen attacks on and condemnation of Anita Bryant, Jerry Falwell, and anti-abortionists, with double-standard criticism for right-wing and left-wing Christians, and a self-deceiving self-serving bias that says “to hell” with those who are different, especially “homophobes.” Perhaps we’re no different from straight Christians who self-servingly and just as self-righteously say “to hell” with anyone else, especially “queers.” Maybe we’re as selfishly culture-controlled as are those we would liberate. Maybe we’re more gay and lesbian than we are Christian.

Dennis Winter, Vicar of St. Andrews, Paddock Wood, Kent, says that a mature Christian’s behavior is “frequently so different from that of his age that he, or she, is an outcast from society. Like Jesus,” such a person “may even be thought of as immoral, ... clash [ing] with the established ways” and Winter notes that “it is only the voice of history that proclaims” such a person “a saint.” (in *Law, Morality, and the Bible*, edited by Bruce Kaye and Gordon Wenham, 1978, p. 193) We need not go into detail here with an analogy of the Moral Majority vis a vis gay and lesbian Christians. We all have experienced that and have talked it to death.

But we might add, that in the same sense, those of us who would be mature Christian lesbians and mature Christian gay men frequently must behave so differently from some ways of certain sectors of gay society that we can become outcasts from that society as well. How much do we conform to the standards of some parts of gay male and lesbian culture instead of testing ideas

and lifestyles in terms of our Christian identity and our liberation to serve rather than to insist on our own rights? How easy it is to go along with the self-deceiving self-serving bias of pride and self-absorption. How often do we volunteer to carry the oppressor's burden that second mile as Jesus said his followers should carry the burdens of the Roman soldiers? Can't we forget ourselves for a while? Do we agree with Henri J. M. Nouwen, who, in his 1981 commencement address at Princeton Seminary, had this to say: "If we are truly faithful to our vocation we will find ourselves not on the road to power, but on the road to powerlessness; not on the road to success, but on the road to servanthood; not on the broad road to praise and popularity, but on the narrow road of confrontation and rejection." (*Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, II, #3, 1982)

Jesus challenged all sorts of conventional expectations and mores of both religious and secular society. Remember his approaches to the religious leaders, to women, to children. Let's confess that we who are Christian lesbians and Christian gay men sometimes do a more thorough job in challenging conventional morality than in challenging conventional immorality. In this we are the flip side of our New Right enemies who do a better job challenging conventional immorality than in challenging conventional morality.

Judging as Condemnation or Discernment

At about this point, it would be well to give some consideration to the subject of *judging*.

In any discussion of Christian ethics, inevitably we must face the question of judging as *condemnation*, which is itself *condemned* in the Bible, or *discernment*, which is itself *commanded* in the Bible. When we take it upon ourselves self-righteously to condemn others we are condemning ourselves, though we're so self-deceived and defensive about it it may not be too obvious. We are commanded to so "judge not." (Matt 7:1; Luke 6:37; cf. Matt 7:24; Luke 6:41f; Mark 4:24) But sometimes we can be so out of touch with reality and fall into such a defensive compensation for our own sins that we do condemn each other and thereby condemn ourselves. We fail to see, with William Barclay, for example, that "if we realized what some people have to go through, so far from condemning them, we would be amazed that they have succeeded in being as good as they are." (*Matthew*, I, p. 263) I think that this observation is especially appropriate when we think of the obstacles gay men and lesbians have had to face alone, without any real help from family, friends, church and society but with rather the strong opposition from these very quarters.

Clearly, we are told not to judge others by condemning them. On the other hand, however, we are told to forgive others. (Matt 6:14f; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25; Luke 17:3f) In order to forgive we have to perceive that someone has sinned against us and in order to so perceive we have to be able to discern sin in another person. Since it takes one to know one, this can be pretty simple. We have to be free from condemning and at the same time be free to recognize or discern wrongdoing. We are told to rebuke our sisters and brothers when they sin. We are told to help our sisters and brothers overcome sin in their lives for their own well-being, but we are not to read them out of the Kingdom (Matt 13:24-30; 36-43, 47-50. cf. 22:11-14) In Galatians 6 Paul said that we should gently point out another's sin but that we should watch out that we don't commit the same sin. It is our familiarity with sin in our own lives that makes sin so very believable in others' lives. We are urged to carry another's burdens but to beware lest we become proud and self-deceptive.

We're told, too, that each of us should carry our own burdens, but that we should not be so preoccupied with self that we engage continuously in comparing and contrasting ourselves with others, though each should test his or her own actions. Paul repeats this elsewhere (Rom 14:5-12), saying that in some matters "everyone should have reached conviction in his [or her] own mind," that one who does or does not do something "has the Lord in mind" in participating or abstaining and remembering that we are each accountable to our own Master, Jesus Christ. In everything we do and are "we belong to the Lord." Even our bodies are not our own. Paul asks his readers to "Form your own judgment on what I say" about our spiritual privileges (I Cor 10:15).

A "Gay and Lesbian Ethic?"

Are we Christians called to develop a "gay and lesbian ethic?" No. We have biblical, theological, and practical reasons for resisting any effort at concocting a special "gay" or "lesbian" ethic.

Psychosocial research shows that there is no intrinsic difference between same-sex and other-sex orientations. Our homosexuality, as we know from experience, is only one part of us. There are as many homosexualities and heterosexualities as there are individuals living their own sexualities. As with any other aspect of our lives, what we believe and value and see our way clear to pursue as Christians or as non-Christians will determine what we do with our sexuality.

In view of the fact that for us Christians, there is no male ethic and female ethic, no Jewish ethic and Greek ethic, no slave ethic and master ethic, there is likewise no gay ethic and straight ethic. What holds for Christian men holds for Christian women. What holds for straight Christian men and women holds for gay Christian men and women. This unity, of course, doesn't necessitate uniformity, as is obvious from the Jerusalem Council. But it should guard us against the setting up of a whole new set of moral standards for homosexuals as homosexuals or for lesbians as lesbians. Paul writes that "there is no distinction," that "all alike have sinned," that "all are justified by God's free grace alone, through his act of liberation in the person of Christ Jesus." (Rom 3:22ff, NEB) As Christians, we are all called to a common revolutionary lifestyle in Christ-like behavior. Are we so busy sometimes trying to promote our gay social revolution or feminism's agenda or our own weak but pridefully self-preoccupied egos in repetitious impersonal genitalizing, for example, that we miss our basic task: the promoting of a revolutionary outworking of our common calling in Christ. *We are to get lost for Christ's sake!* It is in this that we may express Christ-like behavior.

The Ground and Goal of Christian Ethics

What we do and don't do depends on who we are and who we aren't. More precisely, how we behave and how we feel depends on what we believe. This is true biblically, theologically, and psychologically, even if inward thought and outward behavior don't mesh. Remember that stingy man in Proverbs who invites you to "Eat and drink" but "is always thinking about the cost," whose "heart is not with you." (23:7 NIV) His calculating niggardliness is there because he doesn't know what it is, himself, to receive. He doesn't believe he has received or will continue to receive. Therefore, he thinks he cannot afford to give freely. To the writer of I John (4:19) it is clear that we can love others because God loved us first. We can give because we have received.

The fact that we are loved already “casts out fear” so that we are free from excessively self-centered grasping and giving that is just as selfish. We can get on with loving each other more wholeheartedly. Knowing God’s unqualified mercy, we can face even the most threatening “truths” about ourselves and others since the One who is both the Truth and Love stands over against any “truths” we may encounter. That’s why, in Ephesians 5:4, thanksgiving can replace the “coarse joking” and put-downs Paul eschews. It’s not a matter of three-letter words replacing four-letter words; it’s a matter of trust in God replacing pride and a ridiculous self-confidence. It is such gratitude, as Luther knew, that forms the basis for our ethical obligation.

Old Testament commandments rest with the nature of reality as it really is, i.e., “I am the God who rescued you out of Egypt. Therefore: these are your obligations.” The specific laws are inseparable from the Preamble of this Treaty. The New Testament commandment to love rests with the New Testament reality of God’s eschatological act in the perfect life, the cross, and the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. “Therefore,” the writer of I Peter (1:13-16) says, “prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As *obedient* children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in *ignorance*. But just as the One who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”

Christian acts are rooted in the acts of God. Ethics for gay men and lesbians who are Christians cannot be rooted in a secular sexual liberationism or an agenda of politically correct or trendy selfishness. “Gay” or “lesbian” Christian ethics, if Christian, are Christian ethics, *period*. They are nothing more and nothing less. We are *Christians* who are gay people. Christian ethics are not autonomous or abstract. As Emil Brunner put it, the divine imperative follows from the divine indicative. Guilt and fear can therefore be overcome. Love, even to the enemy, is therefore finally possible. But apart from the Gospel, this is precisely what is not possible.

In an article in *Psychology Today* (Nov., 1981, pp. 68ff), Peter Marin writes of what he calls “Moral Pain.” Although he focuses on the “moral pain” of Vietnam veterans, he speaks of it as afflicting “the rest of us,” too. He sees it as “a profound distress that may defy therapy,” that opens up “areas of pain for which there is really nothing like a ‘cure.’” He writes of the “inadequacy of psychological categories and language in describing the nature and pain of human conscience” and sees the inadequacy to lie in the psychotherapeutic tradition itself and its “morally vacuous view of human nature.” He confesses: “Many of us suffer a vague, inchoate sense of betrayal, of having somehow taken a wrong turning, of having somehow said yes or no at the wrong time and to the wrong things, ... having two coats while others have none ... and yet proceeding, nonetheless, with our lives as they are.” Sadly, denial and distraction are the only coping mechanisms some people have left.

It would be tragic if we who have been privileged to hear the Good News and have been entrusted to go everywhere proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins, offer nothing more potent than a “baptized” New Right platform or a “baptized” gay liberationism to our gay brothers and lesbian sisters and to a fearfully hostile church and confused society all suffering such “moral pain.” Men and women who are having enough trouble living with themselves—especially with their same-sex desires—not to mention living with others, need to hear and see answers more relevant and effective than what are offered by either self-righteous enemies of sex

or idolators and trivializers of sex. So many people have never really heard the Good News because of the Puritanical pretensions of theocracy which isolate abstract rules from the Good News of God's acceptance of us in Christ. Others have not heard the Good News because of an absolutizing of relativity even among those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ.

Instead of the loopholes of a hard casuistic legalism or an amorphous situationism, each tending to a deceptively absolutist amorality, Paul was somewhat specific as to what love which "fulfills the law" required in rather concrete situations. Even in that flagship of Christian liberty, his letter to the Galatian Christians (5:19f), he wrote that the "works of the flesh" are obvious: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like." (NIV) These he contrasted with "the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (22f) He urges: "Let us keep in step with the Spirit." (25, NIV) Paul tells the Thessalonians to "live at peace among yourselves ... admonish the careless, encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, and be very patient with them all. See to it that no one pays back wrong for wrong, but always aim at doing the best you can for each other and for all." (5:14f, NEB) According to that most contemporary epistle, the one to the Ephesians and others (4:17ff), we are "no longer [to] live as the Gentiles do [who], in the futility of their thinking ... have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." You see, when we give ourselves to what cannot satisfy we are continually looking for what we have not received. The writer sums: "Be *imitators* of God ... and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." (5:1f, NIV) "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (5:21, NIV) Clearly, these instructions are not as specific as some would want but they are more specific than some others want.

Reciprocity in Ethics Based in the Imitation of God

Do you notice that there seems to be a remarkable practical reciprocity that is built into the biblical ethic that calls us to be imitators of God? It's good for others for us to imitate God. And it's also good for us. We may also say that it is good for God.

Look, for example, at the passive resistance Jesus taught when he said: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matt 5:39, RSV) Paul said that too, in his letter to the Roman Christians (12:21): "Don't allow yourself to be overpowered by evil. Take the offensive—overpower evil with good!" (Phillips)

Luther suggested that God has placed next to everyone of us someone who serves as what he called the "indicator of our wrath." He proposed a sort of graduated sensitization system in our dealings with such a person. Notice, as we look into this, what happens to us as we implement Luther's plan. First, Luther suggested, *think* about that person. Second, think in *friendly* terms. Third, desire that person's *best welfare*. That is not necessarily what you think is that person's best welfare; it is not even necessarily what he or she "wants" either. (Incidentally, one of the most effective ways to do this is to pray for the person. That's what Jesus said we should do, "pray for those who persecute" us (Matt 5:44).) And then the fourth step in Luther's plan is to approach that person in real love. Our love for ourselves, Jesus said, gives us clues as to how to love others. Let's try that with the "indicators of our own wrath"—such as Jerry Falwell, Jerry Kirk, Richard Lovelace, Richard Halverson. It can get challenging!

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis cuts through much unnecessary introspection when he advises: “Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.” Psychologically, of course, this reciprocity makes perfect sense. We incorporate “them” with “us,” and though we may still disagree, we anticipate that end in which our differences are of no final concern. Such an “indicator of our wrath” would thereby need no longer be so defensive and consequently need no longer be so much on the offensive. He could take his guard down somewhat and perhaps even become something of a friend.

Certainly, though, if we are going to give care in doing at all, anything aimed at the welfare of another human being, we might as well give care to doing it as intelligently as possible, as wisely “as serpents” and as harmlessly “as doves.” Let’s be *on* to our own rationalizations and hidden agenda. Let’s not be blind to the evil in the world. Let’s not be careless about consequences. Luther, you remember, cautioned that even in our almsgiving we must examine whether the giving of *these* alms, at *this* time, in *this* way, furthers the other person’s real welfare or brings harm. What is the most *intelligent* thing to do? What is *effective*? What are the unintended effects, for example, of genital acts with strangers? Do these acts show intelligent and loving concern for the welfare of strangers or can we delude ourselves with all sorts of projections and fail to see our rationalizations for grabbing what we think *we* want when *we* want it? You know, there is plenty of medical, psychological, sociological and experiential evidence to show that anti-gay Fundamentalists are no less effective in blocking the meeting of homosexuals’ intimacy needs than are gay liberationists who preach the “celebration” of indiscriminate genitalizing. What are the unintended effects of impatience? Of gossip? Of “standing up for the truth?” We must love responsibly, with all the resources of our heart, mind, soul,—with all of our strengths, and yes, even in all our weaknesses. We’re no better than Paul who confessed that “what I do is not the good I want to do” and that “the evil I don’t want to do, I keep on doing. ... Who will rescue me? Thank God, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom 7:19, 24f)

Conclusion

Ethics for Christians are what we can call “mimethics,” an ethics of imitation. The Greek word in Ephesians 5:1 is μιμηται, imitators. “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (NIV) Here are both the ground and goal of ethics for Christians, whether we are gay men, lesbians, or heterosexuals. God’s love is our ground and, as God’s dearly loved children, we are to set our goal as the living of a lifestyle of love, using every resource we have in Christ, as we imitate Christ who gave us everything we need, while giving back to God, as we ourselves must do.