

# Dialog with Gay and Lesbian Lutherans: A Response

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Lutherans Concerned/North America, a U.S./Canadian organization of gay and lesbian Lutherans and non-gay supportive friends, has recently issued "A Call for Dialog," a theological position paper directed primarily to their fellow Lutherans. In twelve dispassionate, but pain-filled pages, they plead for drastic changes in the church's attitude and practices, and for full acceptance of themselves as sisters and brothers in the faith. It is a sign of hope that such matters can be discussed openly in today's church, and it is a sign of theological maturity that the paper itself speaks responsibly on a number of highly-charged issues. The paper may be ordered for \$1.50 from Lutherans Concerned, P.O. Box 10461, Ft. Dearborn Station, Chicago, IL 60610-0461. Individuals congregational adult education programs, church boards, and all leaders could do well to study and discuss this paper—and enter into dialog with it.

In the following paragraphs I intend to summarize the main points of the paper and raise some questions about it. I have also invited Lutherans Concerned to continue the dialog in *Currents* by responding to my paper.

A Call for Dialog (hereafter: A Call) consists of four parts: Gay and Lesbian Persons in the Church; Theological Issues; Biblical Issues; The Ministry of Reconciliation.

Part One notes that as many as one in ten Lutherans may be gay while conceding that this is a guess extrapolated

from general societal statistics. In any case, there are thousands of gays and lesbians in our churches, many of whom are afraid of "us," as we are of "them." They have suffered from poor counseling, lack of due process, and the absence of serious study of the issue; many of them have left the church under duress or in disappointment.

Part Two, Theological Issues, states two incompatible alternative views that bedevil all discussions of this issue.

**One point of view argues that there is one normative, heterosexual, orientation operative in human beings — a prescientific view which prevails in biblical and church historical literature. Heterosexuality alone is divinely willed, thus any variation from it, such as the homosexual orientation, is a reflection of the flawed, broken nature of the world after the Fall.**

Opposed to this is a second view:

**The other point of view regards the creation as more mysteriously diverse in matters of sexual orientation — a reality which contemporary scientific research is continuing to elucidate. Orientations such as bisexual and homosexual have a causality totally apart from the willful disobedience of the human family (the Fall) or the choice of any individual, and are to be understood as still another facet of the complexity of God's created order.**

In my judgment, these two paragraphs are indeed the nub of the issue, and all of us need to ask ourselves about the sufficient reasons—biblical, theological, psychological—that lead us to choose paragraph one or paragraph two. The paper's authors reject any attempt to forge a middle ground, probably because that middle ground means homosexual orientation is o.k. but sexual expression is not. The difficulty I have with these paragraphs is that they are incomplete and therefore misleading unless they address the question of sexual expression.

Part Two continues with the discussion of five theses (here abbreviated): Human sexuality, without distinction based on sexual orientation, is a gift of God; human sexuality manifests itself in a variety of gender orientations; All sexual orientations (from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual) are gifts of God; Love is the criterion by which our sexuality is judged; it is inappropriate to condone sexual orientation and condemn sexual expression.

The first three of these theses only spell out the implications of the second paragraph in bold type above. The fourth and fifth forge new ground, where extensive additional study and dialog are needed. The authors show the absurdity of the distinction between condoning homosexual orientation while condemning homosexual expression. Celibacy is a gift given by the Spirit only to the few, and the choice offered by the church with its condoning-condemning statements is not between homosexual expression of affection and heterosexual expression, but for homosexuals it is between homosexual expression and no satisfying relational intimacy whatever.

*if* the church were to adopt the second paragraph in bold type, however, it surely would want to raise additional concerns about the ethical questions involved.

1. What legitimates genital sexual expression? We all know that there is considerable variation between church policies and actual practices in Christian heterosexual relationships today. While the church wrestles with pastoral questions about pre-marital and extra-marital sex and with the growing number of divorces, it surely does not want to surrender its view that genital sexual expression is to take place within a relationship sanctified by the promise of life-long commitment. *If* the church were to adopt the second bold paragraph above, it would insist on something approximating "marriage" between same-gender partners, and break-ups in such marriages would call for the same kinds of pastoral care now exercised in broken heterosexual marriages. How would the dialog partners from Lutherans Concerns react to this?

2. A related problem concerns promiscuity. Again, there is no need to be hypocritical about the actualities of heterosexual practice, but surely the church is right in condemning promiscuity, and, as far as I know, promiscuous genital sexual expression outside of a committed relationship has also often been found to be harmful psychologically in a variety of studies. The perception many of us heterosexuals have is that many gays and lesbians are promiscuous, and, in fact, this seems to be a major contributing factor in the AIDS epidemic. "Love" as the criterion for evaluating our sexuality seems to be hopelessly ambiguous and inadequate. Love can too easily be confused with infatuation or passion. Must not there be added to love the notions of promise, trust, and intention for life-long commitment?

In Part Three, the authors discuss the few biblical passages that speak directly to the topic. They show that Genesis 19,

for example, reports an attempted gang rape of male strangers, without immediate relevancy for the question of homosexuality. They note the silence of the Four Gospels, and the ambiguity of the Pauline passages, in which the apostle seems unaware of gender or sexual orientation, and in which the persons condemned by him are also idolatrous pagan unbelievers, in addition to their being homosexuals. The authors of *A Call* argue that the condemnations in Leviticus are cultic rather than moral.

What they miss in noting the ambiguity and silence of the Bible is that our moral judgments are not limited to the Bible. Some of our opinions are based on a sense of what is naturally right according to nature. The same Leviticus chapters that condemn homosexual acts also condemn bestiality, incest, and intercourse of a couple during the woman's period. The first two of these I find morally wrong, contrary to nature—as does every reader of *Currents*. The third strikes us more as an esthetic question, devoid of moral implications. If we condemn bestiality and incest because they seem immoral and contrary to nature, how do we respond to fellow Lutherans who perceive homosexual genital expression as immoral and contrary to nature? We could dismiss them as bigoted or ignorant—but to our great peril. What the authors of *A Call* neglect is that many will make the judgment that homosexual expression is "naturally" wrong, and that it is very difficult for a person to change such views or for others to falsify them. A call to dialog, of course, can help us to see that such feelings are without biblical base (or biblical contradiction for that matter), but patience and tolerance for such opposing views may be necessary *from* the homosexual community as

well.

In addition, it is worth noting that our ethical opinions are formed by ecclesiastical tradition as well as by biblical data. While the Bible itself may be ambiguous or silent, and while it may seem to ignore issues like the "givenness" of sexual orientation, the church through its education, moral discussions, and life together has often drawn the conclusion that homosexual genital expression is wrong. Granted, it may have erred in this, as it did at times in condemning dancing or birth control, but any discussion of moral issues in the church needs to be aware that both Scripture *and* tradition do play a normative role in ethical questions.

Part Four of *A Call* invites all to a ministry of reconciliation and acceptance. It presupposes, therefore, that its readers adopt the second bold paragraph—though many in the church, of course, will not: and it neglects the questions I have raised about what level of commitment permits genital expression and about promiscuity. Strangely, *A Call* says nothing about church leadership, such as the ordination of practicing homosexuals, though I suppose that this would naturally follow if one were to practice a ministry of reconciliation.

I would wish my remarks to be understood in a context of dialog, as questions raised by a sympathetic person, who is as aware of the ambiguities of sexual ethics and of areas in which we should say "We don't know," as are the authors of *A Call* themselves. I support enthusiastically their call for discussion and hope that the church itself, its homosexual and heterosexual members, and its sense of purpose and mission will be enriched through the exchange