

“Hear the Spirit on same-sex unions”

(Sermon preached June 3, 2012 at Trissels Mennonite Church; manuscript revised and polished a bit.)

Words in **bold** were on PowerPoint. Underlining shows vocal emphasis.

In a meeting with some of you, I was asked to consider preaching a sermon on the most controversial issue of our day – same-sex unions.

This issue generates more emotions, more church divisions than any other.

So why not let it lie?! Why speak on it?!

The world is speaking, declaring its opinion.

If we-as-a-church are silent, if we don't search together for what the Spirit of God is saying, we will end up being shaped by the world, and not by God.

So what is the **Spirit of God** saying **on same-sex unions**?

The first source for hearing the Spirit's voice:

- **What we understand from the Bible**

Men and women through the centuries have testified that they hear God in the Bible.

The first of 3 main passages on same-sex behavior:

Leviticus 20:13 - If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them...are to be put to death... (also 18:22)

Apparently what the Bible says on same-sex acts can be settled quickly: it's wrong, seriously wrong.

But **Some say**: that this is not as straightforward as it appears:

Leviticus forbids a lot of things – like eating bacon, like wearing clothing made of 2 materials.

Much of Leviticus deals with ritual uncleanness rather than sin. In other words, same-sex relations might not be “sin” but “uncleanness.” The Gospel releases us from ritual law.

Good-hearted people who love the Bible raise this.

Here's **A response**:

Go slow in dismissing something just because it's in Leviticus.

Leviticus 18-20 is not just concerned with ritual purity but also with moral law – for instance, prohibitions of vengeance, theft, injustice to the poor, bestiality, and so on. Such texts still apply today.

A way to tell if a Levitical proscription is a lasting, moral law or a ritual law no longer in force:

look to see how the New Testament views it.

Which leads to the second passage:

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 - ...Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men [Greek - *arsenokoïtes*] nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

It seems that what the New Testament says on same-sex acts can be settled quickly.

But, again, **Some say:** it is not as straightforward as it appears:

The NIV (2011) translates 2 words on Paul's list as "men who have sex with men." Questions are raised on how to translate them. For instance, the second one:

The word *arsenokoites* does not occur in any literature prior to the New Testament and doesn't occur again for a century or more. How can we know the specific behavior to which it refers?

How can we know that the translation got it right?

Here's **A response:**

***Arsenokoites* is a compound word formed from two Greek words "male" and "to bed."**

It has a simple and obvious meaning – in fact, those same 2 words are in the Greek version (that Paul quoted often) of Leviticus 20:13.

Because of its rarity, it could not have, through use, acquired a meaning other than the simple and obvious one – the general concept of males choosing same-sex sex.

It seems that gay behavior as a general category is included on this list of sin.

Yet one more passage:

Romans 1:26-27 - ...God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. ...

The context in Romans 1 is Paul describing the fallen human condition.

Starting in v18 he describes us stopping our worship of the Creator and starting worship of the creature – ourselves.

Then in v26, he begins describing the behaviors that arise.

It's quite the catalog – see vv29,30,31.

At the head of the list: same-sex erotic behavior.

Some say: it's again not as simple as it appears. Perhaps the most common suggestion:

When Paul thought of same-sex conduct, he may have been thinking of an idolatrous form (like temple prostitution) or an exploitative form. No wonder he spoke against it!

But here's **a response:** a simple observation:

Paul describes behavior similar to what we see today. He not only refers to female and male same-sex relations but also uses the language of mutual desire ("consumed with passion for one another," NRSV). This suggests something consensual rather than something exploitative or connected with pagan temple worship.

Same-sex relations, even ones of mutual desire, are viewed by Paul as wrong – so starkly wrong that he has them head the list of fallen humanity's sin.

There's another common suggestion for how to take this passage. **Some say:**

By "unnatural" relations, Paul had in mind persons with heterosexual affections who engage in homosexual acts.

A response:

Only a thoroughly modern person with our emphasis on the individual would be sure that Paul meant an *individual's* rather than *humanity's* natural relations.

We must not leave Romans 1 without noting how chapter 2 begins.
Paul warns: be careful if you judge someone for being on that list. You'll end up judging yourself – you're on the list too.

One other passing, but essential, note on the Bible:
It is often pointed out as significant that **Jesus never mentioned homosexuality.**

But Jesus never mentioned homosexuality... **or** even the violent sexual sins of **incest or rape.**
He had no need to speak against them – **because his culture stood against them, with no dissenting voices.**

The Bible is one source for hearing what the **Spirit of God** says **on same-sex unions.**

Let's also look at a second source:
- What we learn from observing Life

I present 2 observations with much humility.
It's easy to be wrong in Biblical interpretation.
It's much easier to be wrong as we look at the world and human life and try to interpret and draw principles from that.

I offer them because they have affected me greatly.

First:
Heterosexual fit

A simple understanding of human reproduction and anatomy is enough to make it clear that same-sex coupling is not the intent of our Creator.

Doctors who work with homosexual men are trained to look regularly for at least 15 common afflictions.

In contrast, with heterosexual intimacy, the very action that can give one's partner pleasure can give oneself pleasure.
God grinned when he came up with that one!

Second, there's the matter of
Gay non-monogamy

In 1996 I was asked help lead a workshop on homosexuality for a group of churches.

In my research, I read something troubling:

In the early 1980's, 2 researchers studied gays in long-term relationships, writing a book, ***The Male Couple (McWhirter & Mattison)***. They were a psychiatrist and a psychologist, and a gay couple themselves.

The book reported that, for the male couples, sexual exclusivity was a general expectation early in the relationship.

But with time, virtually all the partners began making provision for outside liaisons. These were not "affairs" behind a partner's back but the couples agreeing to an "open relationship" – "**...an arrangement whereby the partners may have sexual activity with others...**" (***The Male Couple*, p.253**)

A couple pages later, the authors conclude: “we believe that **the single most important factor that keeps couples together past the ten-year mark is the lack of possessiveness they feel. ...ownership of each other sexually can become the greatest internal threat to their staying together.**” (p.256)

As part of my preparation for the workshop, I had also joined a Mennonite internet discussion group (MennoLink) that talked about issues such as homosexuality. 2 very active participants in the group were gay men; one had been in a committed relationship with his partner for over a decade and the other much longer. I had assumed that a “committed relationship” meant monogamy. But now I was no longer sure. I raised my concern, hoping they would seize the opportunity to reassure me. They blew up instead.

Over the years I have talked with many gays who want to be part of the Mennonite church and are frustrated that the church views their committed relationship as “sin.” I took me many more tries before I found one who welcomed the chance to affirm a commitment to sexual monogamy (not just emotional monogamy or social monogamy.)

In 2011 at our denominational assembly in Pittsburgh, I and 2 young adults talked for an hour with a personable, articulate, intelligent, winsome Mennonite young man who is gay. Toward the end of our conversation, I mentioned a *NY Times* article that week that wrote of “a sensibility that we might call American Gay Male” which includes sexually-open partnerships. I wondered out loud how much the Anabaptist gay community can distance themselves from that. He didn’t even toss some half-hearted sops in the direction of monogamy. Instead he tried his best to defend non-monogamy.

But those are personal anecdotes.

Here’s a national study that appeared in the journal *Family Process* (September 2011). In July 2000, Vermont became first U.S. state to offer a civil union to same-sex couples. Researchers contacted all the same-sex couples who got a civil union during the first year Vermont was doing this. 41% agreed to participate in a study. These persons were asked for

- the name of a friend in a long-term lesbian or gay relationship, and
- the name of a sibling in a heterosexual marriage.

Those persons were also asked to be part of the study. (This was a national study – couples from all over the US came to Vermont; only one-fifth were from Vermont.)

According to that study, here is the percentage of **Gay men who say they as a couple are “open”** (rather than sexually exclusive or monogamous) - **49.5%**

To compare that with the heterosexuals in the study:

Heterosexual males who say their marriage is “open” - 6.0%

Heterosexual males who cheated on their wives - 10.1%

Another study:

The New York Times (Jan. 28, 2010) tells about a study that followed 556 male couples in the San Francisco Bay Area for three years:

“...about 50 percent of those surveyed have sex outside their relationships, with the knowledge and approval of their partners. ... None of this is news in the gay community, but few will speak publicly about it.”

An anecdote on the hesitation to talk openly about this:

The *San Francisco Bay Times* (March 4, 2010) quoted a gay man saying that being in an open relationship is almost like “being in the closet again. Family and friends expect that we’re monogamous, and we don’t tell them we’re not.”

The percentage of gay couples having a sexually "open relationship" may go higher the longer a couple is together.

Two gay men in San Francisco who are professionals in the areas of research and psychology maintain a site advocating for non-monogamy – www.thecouplesstudy.com

They say: **“Most research shows that approximately two-thirds of long-term male couples who have been together for five years or more are honestly non-monogamous.”** (“Honestly” means they are open about it as a couple.)

Another study:

In 2002 **Barry Adam**, a Canadian prof at the University of Windsor – who is himself gay – conducted a limited study of gay men in relationships lasting longer than one year.

The results were reported in the *Washington Blade* (August 22, 2003).

Three-quarters reported being non-monogamous.

That figure is not necessarily significant: the survey had a small sample size and was likely given to whoever happened to be easily available to the prof.

Most troubling were these quotes from the prof:

“Those who were monogamous were more likely to be younger, more likely to be in newer, shorter relationships...”

“...I think younger men tend to start with the vision of monogamy ... because they are coming with a heterosexual script in their head.... What they don’t see is that the gay community has their own order and own ways that seem to work better.”

This means that non-monogamy among male couples is not just a matter of society failing to deliver needed relational support; it is also a matter of that group’s own choices and values.

I raise these indications of gay non-monogamy because the Spirit of God can teach us through what we observe.

The prevalence of outside sexual partners indicates that something is lacking and not right in gay unions.

Clearly something about those relationships is not satisfying. Otherwise there would not be such a pattern of outside sexual relations – something far short of the mark or ideal, which is body and soul coming together in union with one other person.

We would expect the Spirit of God to steer persons away from relations that are so lacking. And to inspire Paul to include them in the list in Romans 1.

I am not saying that if a couple is monogamous, then the Spirit blesses them.

I am saying that this general pattern of non-monog is significant. We decide whether to encourage – or ban – a behavior by looking at an overall pattern.

For instance, when we consider no-smoking legislation, we don’t say, “Look at these persons who smoke all their lives and live to be 90; we shouldn’t limit smoking.”

We rather look at the total picture and realize what is good for humanity-as-a-whole.

Here’s what hits me: are we really doing a young man a favor if we encourage him to embrace a behavior with that much risk of dysfunction? Especially a behavior that the Bible uniformly views as wrong?

My wife and I know and love a young man dearly, like a son.
 A few months ago he began living with an older man in a gay relationship. He's happy; his Facebook statuses are much more upbeat.
 But we ache for him. He's embracing a behavior with so much risk of dysfunction.

With all the gay non-monogamy, **The Spirit of God might, in love, steer persons away from that lifestyle.**

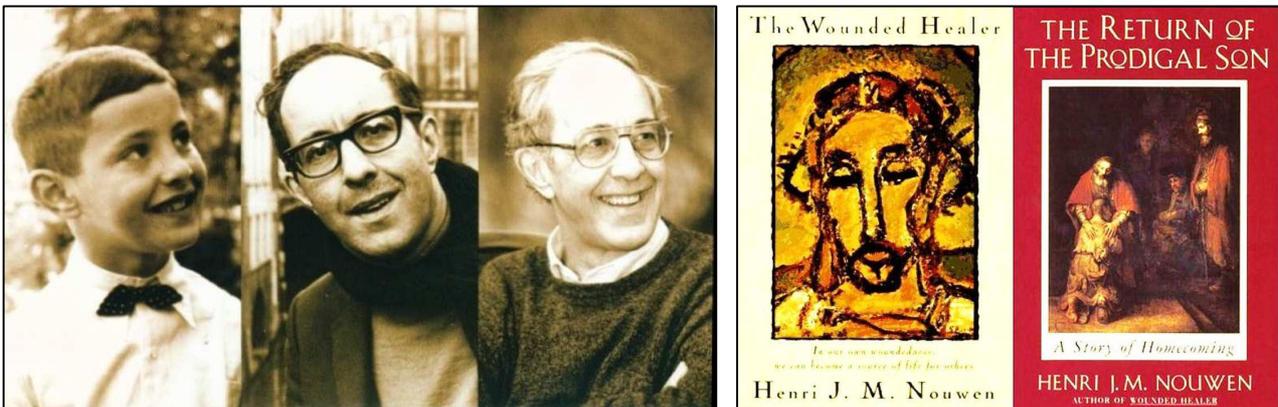
A Mennonite Bible prof has said that he has to know for sure that the Spirit of God forbids same-sex partnerships before he will restrict those relationships.
 But when a lifestyle might be dangerous, don't we generally counsel people we love to stay away from it until we have reasonable proof otherwise?

Two closing comments:

Our society says that for life to be full, we need to have pleasure. Particularly, we need sexual fulfillment. Calling gays to stay away from sexual behavior is a burden too hard to bear.

We indeed do need close relationships; we need to know and be known.
 But do we need sexual pleasure to find lives of freedom, joy, and service?

Henri Nouwen wrote 40 books on the Christian life and spirituality.
 He died in 1996; his books are still being read and cited, eg. **The Wounded Healer** and **The Return of the Prodigal Son**. He is one of the few authors valued by Evangelicals and by mainline Protestants and Catholics.



Nouwen was never public with this, but much of his spiritual intensity was forged in his continual struggle to not to yield to the same-sex attraction he felt since a boy.

If he had have said "pleasure is my goal" and yielded to that drive, instead of maintaining vows of celibacy all his life, he would have lost those dimensions of his life that draw us and would not have written those books with such clarity and depth.

The way of fullness of life is *not* found in what is easy, what brings immediate pleasure.

Society invites us to wear on our forehead the label of "heterosexual" or "homosexual."
 The Spirit invites us to wear the identity of "follower of Jesus."

My last comment:

If I say that someone is choosing what is wrong, may I never do so in triumph but in tears.

These are persons who God loves, who Christ died for.
They are of eternal and infinite worth.

I love the verse following the passage we looked at in 1 Corinthians 6.

Paul goes through that list of behaviors that destroy relationships and destroy ourselves.

Then, in v11 he writes: *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.*

Even in the midst of our sin, God is extending love and hope!
And if God loves persons enough to die for them, so must you and I.

HWB #372 O healing river

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online at www.interactingwithjesus.org/gaymatter/sermon-HNMiller.pdf