

Homosexuality: An Attempt At Dialogue

Presented by
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North Carolina Yearly Meeting of Friends (FUM)

Introduction:

Willie Frye (1931-2013) began his pastoral career among North Carolina's pastoral Quakers in the early 1950s. He came to this work from a background of strict fundamentalism. These were years of racial segregation, unquestioning support for American wars, and a goes-without-saying conviction that homosexuality was an unmentionable perversion and a crime.

But by 1960, sit-ins at Greensboro lunch counters set off an uprising to overturn the racial status quo that spread quickly from North Carolina across the region. Within a few more years, as U.S. troops poured into Vietnam, some Friends, including Willie, began to have doubts about that war and remembering something called the Peace Testimony. And in 1963, a group of British Friends published a pioneering study, "Toward a Quaker View of Sex," which sparked international controversy.

Willie Frye was involved in all these matters, as a pastor and a preacher. And his received attitudes were changing. In 1969, his peace witness led him to visit the Vietnam peace talks in Paris. On this and racial equality, he could draw on long Quaker witness, even if they were little practiced in his home area. As for questioning the homophobic status quo, the impetus for change had more personal sources: his own son turned out to be what would later be called "gay."

Along with his wife Agnes, the Fries organized some the earliest PFLAG (Parents of Lesbians and Gays) support groups; they also worked

with the PFLGC (Piedmont Friends For Lesbian & Gay Concerns).

Willie's stands in favor of civil rights, along with his challenges to U.S. wars and militarism got him into trouble. But when after his own personal struggle, he and Agnes began to question the received anti-homosexual attitudes, opposition became intense. Officials in North Carolina Yearly Meeting called him a heretic and worse; he received virulent hate mail.

It is no accident that the title of this concise & compassionate 1993 pamphlet was "An Attempt At Dialogue." Willie wrote it, printed a batch of copies, and handed them out to Friends at NCYM's annual sessions.

As far as constructive dialogue, it didn't produce much there, at least in the short term: instead, Willie was subjected to denunciation, condemnations, and attempts to rescind his credentials as a pastor, drive him out of NCYM, and end his ministerial career.

The effort at formal banishment fell short, but to many in the Yearly Meeting, Willie remained a pariah for twenty years, until his death in 2013. Further, a case can also be made that Willie's witness was a key catalyst in campaigns which have recurred in the following two decades, to purge North Carolina Yearly Meeting of all who were sympathetic to homosexuals, as well as to expunge the newer understandings of the Bible and Christian beliefs that went with them. As this Introduction was written in mid-2016 – 23 years after Willie presented this essay – these efforts are continuing. But this witness by Willie & Agnes has not been forgotten, and others have picked up the banner, and pushed back against the ongoing repression.

In certain aspects, this 1993 statement may seem to fall short of some current attitudes: it is focused on males; there is no mention of transgender or other non-conforming identities. Despite this, there is no question that this pamphlet was not only far in advance of the time and place where it was produced (and remains so in many meetings); it also took extraordinary courage to write, distribute, and then stand up for.

When the history of Quaker struggle over the presence of affirmation of LGBT persons is written, this essay, and Willie's example of seeking truth calmly but steadfastly in the face of fierce, unrelenting opposition will have a place of high honor, well worth recalling and reflecting on for many years to come.

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Willie R. Frye

It would seem incongruous for Quakers, of all people, to remain uninvolved in the debate over homosexuality while other denominations are courageously wrestling with their collective consciences. True, it is a very volatile issue and one which some would like to avoid, but it has not been the avoidance of such issues that has defined Quakerism. To the contrary, our identity as a religious group has been largely derived from our position on such controversial matters as religious liberty, peace, prison reform, slavery, women's suffrage and racial equality.

None of our historic testimonies has evolved without a great deal of soul-searching, debate, and even conflict, so we are within the bounds of our tradition to struggle together once again over a difficult issue. This statement is, therefore, my contribution to what I hope can be a constructive dialogue. Uniting us above all should be the desire to arrive at a sound Christian/Quaker position which is consistent with the teachings and spirit of Jesus whom we claim as the head of the Church.

Yet, this leaves us at a loss at the very outset, since Jesus did not say anything specifically about homosexuality. True, those who wish to condemn it can, indeed, find Biblical grounds for their position, but support does not come from the words of Jesus. Particular reference to the subject is limited to a few verses in the Old Testament, primarily in the Book of Leviticus, and brief mention in the writings of Paul. (see Romans 1:18-27). Since Christians consider Paul to be their major authority rather than the Old Testament, we must necessarily focus our attention on his writings.

The secret to understanding Paul is to remind ourselves that he was thoroughly Jewish, steeped, as all Jews were, in Judaic law and tradition from birth. More than that, he was trained as a Pharisee, a sect dedicated to the preservation of Jewish law, tradition, and Scripture. Although he did break with Judaism in order to become a Christian, his Christianity always retained much of his Jewishness and he cannot be comprehended apart from it. His views on homosexuality, therefore, must be understood in the context of his Jewish heritage – a heritage that included Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 which specifically prohibited homosexual practices. Hence, to understand Paul is first to understand the Levitical Law.

The factors that influenced the Levitical view of sex and procreation were very practical ones. As the Hebrews prepared to move into Canaan, it was clear that they would need large armies for military conquest and as they conquered the land and converted from a nomadic lifestyle to an agricultural economy, they would need a large and reliable work force. Therefore, just as we have incorporated our religious concepts such as the Puritan work ethic into capitalism, their religious ideas were shaped to serve their demographic needs.

There were two concepts introduced into the Hebrew faith as a result: First, abandoning the Egyptian belief in life after death, they taught that one must seek immortality through the lives of his descendants. It was very important, therefore, to “raise up seed” to carry on the family name and heritage. This is the significance of the Abrahamic covenant in which Abraham’s faithfulness was to be rewarded by descendants as numerous as the sands of the sea.

Second, man was made a partner with God in creation, thus making procreation a sacred responsibility. To “multiply and replenish the earth,” as commanded in Genesis was an article of faith. The concept was so deeply ingrained that, according to Dr. David Mace, even the word “Hallelujah” originally had a sexual connotation. It is from these concepts of the necessity of

continuing one's name and of participating with God in creation that the Hebrews arrived at the conviction that any male sexual act that did not contribute to procreation was sin.

The reason for the heavy responsibility on males was that they believed that the life was contained in the male semen alone and that the womb was merely a repository for that life while it developed. For that reason, it was a sin for a male to waste his semen.

The point is made most forcefully by the tragic story of Onan in Genesis 38. Onan's sin was not that of murder, theft, or some other serious breach. It was the sin of *coitus interruptus*! According to the story, Onan's brother died without children so it became Onan's responsibility to "raise up offspring for (his) brother." He had intercourse with his brother's wife as required, but "spilled the semen on the ground." For that, he was put to death!

The Levitical prohibition of homosexuality does not stand alone. It can only be understood in the context of Onan's sin, the condemnation of which reflects a national policy directed toward population growth. Homosexuality was not condemned because people found it distasteful. It was practiced freely by other cultures, many of whom associated with the Hebrews. It was condemned because it was a waste of male semen that might have been used for procreation.

This is further reinforced by two other seldom noticed facts: in the same chapter in which homosexuality is prohibited, intercourse during a woman's menstrual period was also prohibited. The reason is obvious: a woman could not conceive at that time so the male semen was wasted. For the same reason, nowhere in the Old Testament is lesbianism condemned. Since, in lesbian relationships no male semen is lost, to have condemned it would have been pointless.

The Levitical prohibition of homosexual activity makes sense only when we understand the reasons behind it. Moses and his

successors did not arbitrarily and capriciously decide that some acts would be acceptable while others would not. There were very practical reasons for the laws that they announced. For instance, we have come to realize that even the dietary restrictions which, to us, seem strange, made good sense in an age devoid of modern sanitation and refrigeration. Likewise, the reasons for circumcision were probably originally hygienic.

Having placed the Levitical ban on homosexuality in the proper perspective, we are immediately struck by a major contradiction in the thinking of those who condemn homosexuality based on the Levitical passages, keeping in mind that these passages form the basis for Paul's statements. The contradiction arises out of the recognition that the same Scriptures which outlaw homosexuality also form the basis for the Roman Catholic position on artificial forms of birth control. The Catholic belief that sex is reserved for procreation only and that the wasting of the male semen is an abomination is thoroughly consistent with the Levitical Law. Those who would use these passages to condemn homosexuality, therefore, are compelled by consistency to join with the Catholic Church in its condemnation of artificial birth control. The two issues cannot be separated.

Yet, most Protestant Christians have attempted to separate them. They have rejected the Roman Catholic position on birth control out of the recognition that the command to multiply and replenish the earth was for a different time and a different world and is a command that no longer makes sense. They have recognized that we cannot exercise the kind of compassion for the poor, the hungry, and the sick which was commanded by Jesus and at the same time allow the population of the world to continue to grow unabated.

It is obvious to any thinking person that it is as irresponsible to continue to bring people into the world which the world cannot support as it was to refuse to propagate the race in earlier times. While it was once a sin not to have all the children one could have, now it is a sin to have children that cannot be fed, clothed,

and educated. We must concede, therefore, that this is one of the many Old Testament commandments that, if enforced, would increase human suffering rather than alleviate it. In recognition of that, the Protestant Church, in general, has abandoned the Catholic position on birth control.

This, however, leaves many Christians in the untenable position of interpreting the same passage of Scripture in two different ways. While they consider it quite proper for a married male to “spill his semen” by use of a condom, diaphragm, or *coitus interruptus*, they consider it a sin for the homosexual to do so.

Having been immersed as he was in the Levitical Law and the tradition of his people, Paul could hardly have felt other than he did about homosexuality. It was his culture and upbringing that shaped his thought, not only on this matter but on other social issues. For instance, the subservience of women and the practice of slavery did not seem at all out of order to him. On several occasions, Paul frankly confessed that he wrote particular statements out of his own convictions and not out of divine inspiration. It is unfortunate that he did not issue such a disclaimer when he spoke on the subject of homosexuality, for he clearly spoke as a child of his time and place. Now, just as we have had to reexamine his position on the role of women and on slavery, we must reconsider his position on homosexuality.

Many sincere evangelical Christians are trapped into an uncomfortable and perhaps impossible position at this point because of their devotion to the “infallibility of the Bible” and the “unchangeableness of God.” If they were to change their position, they would feel that they had betrayed their faith since “God’s word says that homosexuality is a sin and God does not change.”

It might help to take a look at how much Jesus, Paul, and the Christian Church in general have changed many of the positions that were once thought to be unchangeable and the fact that we have accepted the changes with relatively little questioning. It

might also help to remember the introductory statement in North Carolina Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice: "Human understanding of truth is always subject to growth...Truth being so much greater than our conception of it, we should ever be making fresh discoveries."

Jesus had no hesitation in changing the law. It was, in fact, this heresy, this tampering with the law, that brought about his crucifixion. His attitude toward the law was made clear when he commented on the law of the Sabbath: "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." It was in this context that he said that he had come to set the prisoners free. The legalism of the Pharisees had too long bound them.

Some contend that he merely fulfilled the sacrificial law and that much of the remainder is still in effect; but it was more than the sacrificial law that he changed. In addition to the law of the Sabbath, there was the law concerning ceremonial washing, dietary laws, and numerous other laws and customs. It is significant that it was Jesus who broke the law and that it was the guardians of the law who crucified him.

Paul also contributed some changes. In a very practical move, he departed from his Jewish heritage and rewrote the law of circumcision. On this, Paul was a pragmatist and when he realized that he would never be able to get the Gentile Christians to accept this ancient Jewish rite, he abolished it. The conflict over it probably was just as heated as the conflict in the church today over homosexuality. Peter was the keeper of the faith; Paul was the heretic. To abrogate this law was to go against the law of Moses and all the history of Israel. Yet, Paul, "withstood Peter to his face" on the matter and had he not done so, we would probably still be practicing it.

Peter himself, legalist that he was, contributed a change when he, under the compulsion of his vision at the house of Simon in Joppa, received Cornelius the Gentile and proclaimed the Gospel to him and his company in spite of the fact that "...it is an

unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation.”

It is clear that whether rite, dietary law, or accepted custom, Jesus and his disciples readily made changes compatible with their understanding of Truth and Light. He consistently refused to exercise the same judgmental attitude toward people that the Pharisees demonstrated. In fact, it was that very attitude that elicited his most vehement denunciation of them, causing him to accuse them of adhering to the letter of the law while violating the spirit and of straining out gnats while swallowing camels. If we are truly searching for the mind of Christ, we will give more heed to his words and spirit and less heed to the Pharisee that comes through in Paul from time to time. Any slavish adherence to the letter of the law leaves us in danger of denying the spirit of it.

It has been this search for the mind and spirit of Christ that has led great men to make changes beyond those made by Jesus, Paul, and Peter. For instance, Christians, for centuries have used the Scriptures to defend war, but George Fox saw that war was contrary to the spirit of Christ. The Scriptures were also used by slave owners to defend slavery, but John Woolman saw slaves as his brethren and the children of God. New truth obviously required a new interpretation of the Scriptures and a new understanding of the spirit of Christ.

The Church in general has made and accepted many changes through the centuries in this so-called “immutable law of God” and most of them have not caused a ripple. We have had little trouble discarding Levitical prohibitions against eating oysters, scallops, or rabbits; and we hardly so much as know the laws regarding leprosy, much less obey them. We certainly have long since abrogated the prohibition against interbreeding cattle or mingling two kinds of seed in a field or sewing two kinds of cloth together. Leviticus 21:18-20 even excludes any handicapped person from the priesthood, an idea that is abhorrent to us. None of these were abrogated by New Testament writings, yet we have

had no compunction about ignoring such rules. By whose authority have we done this?

If we say that we are not bound by the Old Testament anyway but by the New, we immediately become entangled in glaring inconsistencies. Our denunciation of homosexuality based on Paul's condemnation immediately obligates us to denounce with equal zeal women who speak in church, women who cut their hair, women who wear jewelry, women who do not submit themselves to their husbands (no matter how abusive), church members who go to court against one another, and slaves who do not submit to their masters. The list continues to grow. In Ephesians 5 :1-5, Paul even prohibits foolish talking and jesting, a commandment that the most ardent homophobe seems to ignore. And to illustrate our extremely flexible use of the Bible, we take Paul's admonition to Timothy to drink a little wine and, reversing it completely, teach total abstinence. Arguments that Paul only recommended grape juice are without foundation.

The point is that this "immutable law of God" which we defend by the Scriptures has been reinterpreted and changed throughout history and we have accepted those changes so that they have become a part of our faith.

Our hypocrisy is in our selectiveness of the changes that we will allow. For instance, the Scripture says much more about adultery than about homosexuality; and on this matter, Jesus was not silent, for he clearly says that if a man puts away his wife and marries another, he commits adultery. Yet, in our society, the practice is common and the church long since has become silent about it. There is no movement in the Society of Friends to condemn these people or to exclude them from our society, and I am not suggesting that there should be. I am suggesting, however, that it is an excellent example of straining out gnats and swallowing camels.

Before we issue broad statements condemning homosexuality as a sin, and consequently, homosexual people, we should review

our definition of sin. In my days in Bible school, I took a course in “systematic theology” in which sin was defined as “the willful disobedience of the known will of God.” Therefore, in order for homosexuality to be defined as a sin, we first must demonstrate that the homosexual consciously chooses that sexual orientation. (In today’s world of prejudice, condemnation, rejection, discrimination, and outright persecution of homosexuals, it seems quite farfetched that anyone in his right mind would do so).

Why some people find themselves attracted to persons of the same sex has never been quite clear. For a long time, psychologists told us that it is due to early childhood experiences. Increasingly, however, researchers are gravitating toward the theory that the cause is genetic. There have been at least four major studies in recent years that have supported biological explanations. These have been carried out by people of such stature as Dr. Richard C. Pillard of Boston University School of Medicine, Dr. Dean Hamer of the National Cancer Institute, and others of equal renown. One very important discovery resulting from these studies is that there is a difference between heterosexual and homosexual men in the structure of three regions of the brain.

In the most recent study, published in the July 16, 1993 issue of the journal, *Science*, Dr Hamer has identified the possible cause for these structural differences – an inherited gene which is unique to male homosexuality. While more research is necessary to confirm Dr. Hamer’s findings, the editors of *Science* state in their report that there is a “99.5% certainty that there is a gene (or genes) in this area of the X chromosome that predisposes a male to become homosexual.”

If we should confirm unequivocally that there is a genetic link (and I believe that we shall) those who have condemned homosexuality as a sin will find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having consigned people to hell for a physical trait for which they are no more responsible than they are for being left-handed or having blue eyes. Surely, God is more cruel and

capricious than we had realized if he would create a person a homosexual and then send him or her to hell for being one.

Whether the cause proves to be biological or psychological, we know enough now to dispel any notion that it is a consciously chosen lifestyle. Knowing that, we must reevaluate our attitude, for, in the light of the knowledge that the condition is no more chosen than any other physical trait or condition, it is wrong to condemn or discriminate.

Once society excluded lepers, calling them unclean and making them social outcasts; once it abused the deaf locking them away in asylums for the insane; once society feared mentally ill people, thinking that they were demon possessed. People were burned at the stake, even in Puritan America, if they were suspected of being witches, and they were identified as witches for some very frivolous reasons. Once the same arguments used today to condemn homosexuals were used to deny women the right to vote and to defend slavery and segregation. All are contrary to the spirit of Jesus who said, "Judge not that you be not judged." Yet, in most Friends Meetings today, there is more tolerance and acceptance for almost any group than for the homosexual.

Today we have in our membership alcoholics, adulterers, thieves, liars, unwed mothers, readers of pornography, gossips, the slothful, and even murderers. All can find a refuge, understanding, forgiveness, love, and concern except for the homosexuals. It seems strangely inconsistent that we now have a movement to condemn and perhaps eject one segment of our membership whom we perceive to be worse than any of the above. To take the popular position which condemns and judges is to stand with the Pharisee and say, "I thank God I am not like other men." It is one thing to stand by religious conviction but it is quite another thing to use religion or the Scriptures to defend prejudice.

More in keeping with Christ's spirit would be some expression of deep concern for the homosexuals among us. If the church, and

particularly the Society of Friends, turns its back on them and condemns them, where can they turn? They cannot hope to find the nurturing environment that we all need in our spiritual quest. To avoid open rejection and hostility, most of them prefer to remain in the closet and only occasionally participate in some way in an underground gay community. They are deprived of support groups, they are deprived of the luxury of being open and honest about who they are, they are deprived of worth. Now, as never before, they need the church, but a church that is more intent on preserving its “righteousness” than in caring for persons is deaf to them.

As Friends, we must rise above the homophobic hysteria sweeping the country and seek to be a voice of reason, concern, and spiritual insight. We cannot afford to lose the soul of Quakerism by allowing ourselves to be caught up in the current compulsion to condemn and exclude. Naturally, we are stirred by the gay and lesbian rights movement. The civil rights movement of the sixties had much the same effect. Those of us who grew up in the South resisted and criticized it; we were hostile to it and felt threatened by it but, in the end, it compelled us to look within and what we found was raw prejudice that would not stand the objective scrutiny of the Inner Light.

The strength of Quakerism has always been found in our willingness to expose ourselves to that kind of examination and our further willingness to follow the revelation that the Light brings. It has been that willingness that has set us apart from other denominations and made us pioneers in areas of which we are now proud. It is time for us to hark back to our basic concepts in dealing with the present issue. The process has not failed us in the past. It will not fail us now if we have the courage to engage ourselves in it.
