

The Church and Homosexuality: Part I

By Greg Witherow

Over the last thirty years homosexuality has incrementally moved to the center stage of the American debate. In that time the moral high ground has changed hands as today the dispute is couched in the language of civil rights and tolerance. Along the way tolerance was redefined to mean all views are equal, leaving no room for objective moral judgment. Wrapped in the mantle of the 1960's civil rights movement, gay activists and their allies have gained momentum, racking up victories in the courts and sensing victory is within their grasp. In opposition and back on her heels stands Christendom. On the defensive, these faithful have resorted to digging vast trench networks (rapidly amending state constitutions), building bunkers (establishing parochial and home schools) and erecting street barricades (fighting in the courts) in order to halt the advancing gay agenda. With the power centers of the media, courts and educational establishment lost they have labored to win the hearts of an increasingly distracted and fickle public. And in the center sits an American public who, like the Israelites in Elijah's day, wait to be swayed.

But it has not always been this way. Fuzzy thinking and a compromised gospel is the origin of Christendom losing her message and then her voice. Cultural ghettos are our future unless the Church regains that voice (and soon), persuasively presenting the gospel in the public square. The Church first and foremost has a spiritual fight on her hands, first inside and then outside her walls. This essay will be the first to address Church teaching on homosexuality. We will start by reviewing how we arrived at this moment.

How We Got Here: The Culture

The Pill

The advent of the birth control pill brought contraception into the American mainstream in the 1960's. Although contraceptive techniques had long existed, for the first time in history sexual intercourse had been effectively decoupled from procreation. The efforts of Margaret Sanger (the founder of Planned Parenthood) and Protestant theology - each working different audiences - were factors in removing the public's historical resistance to contraceptives. But the Pill changed more than women's body chemistry. Widespread contraceptive use altered attitudes, unleashing remarkable changes in sexual mores.

Changing Morals

Historically, unmarried women had two reasons to say "no" to a man's advances - good morals and consequences. The female "no" channeled the male sex drive to commit to marriage and to develop a working vocation that provided for the family. This social contract resulted in stable families, requiring men to stop acting like adolescents, to make sacrifices and to think of the future. However, with contraception acceptable and increasingly available sexual consequences were minimized. Good morals remained the sole moat of the old codes. But contraception can veil promiscuity and introduce strong temptations. By no means did all people come to this conclusion, but enough did.

Laws Are Removed

Initially access to contraception was not universally legal in the United States. While this seems incredible in our day, it is a testament to past convictions. It was not until the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Connecticut law outlawing contraception in 1965¹ and a 1972 Massachusetts case² (giving unmarried access to contraception) that contraceptives were universally available in the United States³. Abortion, serving as the ultimate birth control technique, became universally legal in 1973 with the infamous Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision. Sex could now be *legally* engaged in for pure pleasure.

The Age of Pornography

In his goodness, God made sex enjoyable and an important binding aspect of married life. But as the fruit of that exchange (children) could now be eliminated, the sole focus of sex increasingly became centered on exchanging (or acquiring) pleasure. With sex increasingly unhinged from marriage and children, pornography became a multi-billion dollar industry. Heightened demand, the advent of color film and a huge profit potential fueled an explosion in the industry. Always existing on the fringes, “soft-porn” became acceptable in mainstream pop culture. Film, TV, music, video games and marketing campaigns began to target males with increasingly aggressive sexual imagery that had **zero connection to the procreation of children**. As the Sexual Revolution unfolded a group of people watched with interest from the sidelines. By the late 1970’s it occurred to them that attitudes about sexual behavior and freedom were aligning with their own.

The Gay Agenda Is Born

In 1977 a blip on the cultural radar screen appeared that was to have a lasting impact on the American agenda. In Dade County Florida an ordinance was passed that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. Anita Bryant, a former Miss America (1959), pop singer and spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission led a campaign to reverse the law. The much-ballyhooed crusade burst onto the national headlines. Eventually Anita Bryant and her allies overwhelmingly convinced Florida voters and the ordinance was repealed. But the seeds had been planted and the Gay Agenda had established a cultural beachhead. Over the next thirty years activists would work to change public attitudes, vying for a breakthrough in the public debate.

The Gay Agenda Advances

In the year 1999 the state of Vermont provided a breakthrough as the state Supreme Court mandated civil unions become state law. New Jersey (through the courts) and New Hampshire (through the legislature) would follow. Massachusetts (through the courts) and Connecticut (through the legislature) later adopted gay marriage. Domestic partnerships were recognized by a handful of other states. Voters and the courts wrestle

¹ Griswold versus Connecticut.

² Eisenstadt versus Baird.

³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combined_oral_contraceptive_pill.

with gay marriage in California. Twice the voters rejected gay marriage. The state Supreme Court overturned the initial voter initiative as unconstitutional. The second voter initiative amended the state constitution to ban gay marriages. Amazingly, the state Supreme Court plans to review *whether the newly ratified constitution is constitutional*.

How We Got Here: The Protestant churches

The Winds of Change

Christendom has historically testified marriage is between a man and a woman. This comes as a surprise to no one. What may come as a surprise to some is that historical Protestantism rejected contraception until very recently. In 1930 the Anglican Church's Lambeth Conference permitted contraception for the first time in Christian history. In effect Protestant theology unwittingly laid the groundwork for the Sexual Revolution.

Pope Pius XI quickly responded with an encyclical denouncing such views. But the Catholic Church was not alone. On March 21, 1931 the Church found an ally in the Washington Post editorial page. That morning readers of the Post editorials found the following article, written by guest columnist Anglican bishop Charles Gore.

“It is impossible to reconcile the doctrine of the divine Institution of marriage with any modernistic plan for the mechanical regulation or suppression of human birth. The church must either reject the plain teachings of the Bible or reject schemes for the “scientific” production of human souls. **Carried to its logical conclusion, the committee’s report if carried into effect would sound the death-knell of marriage as a holy institution, by establishing degrading practices which would encourage indiscriminate immorality.** The suggestion that the use of legalized contraceptives would be “careful and restrained” is preposterous.”⁴

But such warnings went unheeded and by 1960 every Protestant denomination accepted contraception. Most Protestants today are surprised that historical Protestantism once rejected it. In fact, most Protestants suffer from amnesia – they never knew they were against it. To hear the Reformers rail against contraception baffles modern evangelicals.

Adulterous Marriage

Soon after contraception was condoned virtually all Protestant churches accepted divorce and remarriage. Today, while divorce is seen to be the result of sin, remarriage after a divorce is accepted and considered valid, even if frowned upon. There is no concept of an adulterous marriage in the evangelical world today. The term “adulterous marriage” as defined by Christ⁵ is not even in the Protestant vocabulary; the term would need to be explained as an act between two “married” people. In Protestant churches, virtually no one is denied church membership on the grounds of remarriage after a divorce.

⁴ This can be found at the following web site: <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/2096654/posts>

⁵ Matthew 5:32 and others.

Embracing Homosexuality

In March of 2004 Gene Robinson was elected Bishop in the Episcopal church. He became the first openly homosexual, non-celibate man ordained a bishop of any major Christian denomination. His ordination reverberated through mainline Protestant denominations as openly gay, non-celibate clergy increasingly gained pulpits. “Welcoming churches” have become the new trend, “accepting people as they are”. Such churches reject the notion of repentance from consensual sex in order to live the gospel.

Rethinking Homosexuality

While mainline Protestants increasingly embrace homosexuality, evangelicals⁶ almost universally reject homosexual behavior. But attitudes have shifted, especially amongst the young, as can be demonstrated by the rift between James Dobson and Rick Warren.

Dr. Dobson (founder of Focus on the Family) has been the voice of evangelicalism for the past twenty years. Recently, pastor Rick Warren has stepped onto the national stage with his “Purpose Driven Life” and “Purpose Driven Church” books, selling millions of copies. The two men differ little on theology but part on emphasis. While Warren opposes abortion and the gay lifestyle, he believes abortion and homosexuality have over dominated the national debate on social issues. Dobson insists such views dilute the pro-life, pro-marriage message, making other social issues equivalents. How this plays out is yet to be seen. But young evangelicals are re-thinking their views about homosexuality.

How We Got Here: The Catholic Church

Modernism Reemerges

At the beginning of the 20th century, a new dogma called Modernism found its way into the Catholic Church. Modernism includes the belief that the Church and Catholic dogma are mere human institutions and as such their nature may radically change over time. Modernism rejects miracles, the historical accuracy of biblical narratives and ignores what the Church Fathers have historically taught.

To combat Modernism, Pope Pius X created the Oath Against Modernism. As of September 1, 1910 every member of the Catholic hierarchy was bound to swear by it. The following are two excerpts from the oath⁷.

“I declare myself to be **far removed from the error of the modernists** who hold that in **Sacred tradition** there is nothing inherently divine...[I will retain the Faith of the Fathers of the Church] **not in such a way that we may hold what seems best and most fitting according to the refinement of each age**, but that we never in any different wise understand the absolute and unchangeable truth preached from the beginning by the Apostles.”

⁶ Evangelicals are theologically conservative Protestants.

⁷ The full text can be read here: <http://www.memorare.com/reform/oath.html>

In July of 1967 Pope Paul VI lifted the Oath Against Modernism⁸. Like pent up waters bursting through a broken dam, the Church hierarchy was soon engulfed. Nothing could prepare the laity for the coming tsunami soon to be unleashed in parishes across America.

The Age of Dissent

With the closing of the Second Vatican Council, a papal commission was setup to examine contraception. In 1966 the commission reported its findings to the Pope, stating contraception is a valid moral choice. It recommended the findings become Church doctrine. Of the 72 members, only 7 dissented⁹. But Paul VI rejected the findings and in July 1968 released the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which invalidated contraception.

Undoubtedly the most controversial encyclical in the history of the Church, it met defiance across much of the West. Within two months the Canadian bishops published the Winnipeg Statement, essentially nullifying the encyclical. A Modernist theologian at the Catholic University of America¹⁰ declared the conscience of the individual overruled dogmatic teaching. **Six hundred dissenting theologians concurred.** With Conscience as King, the consciences of dissenting bishops ignored Church directives as they clandestinely allowed homosexuals to enter Catholic seminaries¹¹. A crisis loomed.

As a Man Sows, So Shall He Reap

In 2002 the Church in the United States was rocked with the priest sex-abuse scandal. Catholics discovered some bishops had covered up homosexual-pedophilia predators, who had feasted on young boys for decades¹². The uncovered revelations devastated the faithful. “Pink dioceses” and “Gay seminaries” long whispered about were now confirmed and exposed. Financial bankruptcies of some dioceses merely reflected a spiritual bankruptcy that had long ago taken place. But the Church creeds had not been corrupted. It was the bishops who had been corrupted by embracing (or tolerating) Modernist theology and dissenting practices. Church practices were in need of reform.

Summary

God punished Zechariah by taking his voice when he disbelieved Gabriel’s message. It was only after Zechariah acted with obedience that God restored his ability to speak. Over the last forty years Christendom lost its voice because it embraced sin; it compromised the faith. The Catholic Church, while officially standing for life and against contraception and the gay agenda, allowed dissent from historical Church teaching to run amok in parishes and seminaries. Only when the Church reforms herself of Modernist theology and dissent will God restore her gospel voice. Thankfully reform has begun. Our next essay will examine Church teaching on homosexuality.

⁸ Perhaps Paul VI judged Modernism is best opposed by debate, not oaths. He was wrong; we needed both.

⁹ Commissions membership represented 5 continents - see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanae_Vitae

¹⁰ The Reverend Charles Curran was removed from Catholic University and excommunicated.

¹¹ The Church has ruled that a celibate gay priesthood is not permissible (to be covered in the next essay).

¹² Approximately 4% of priests were involved in abuse between 1950 and 2002.