

Biblical Theology, Homosexuality and Pastoral Ministry **Prepared Statement by John C. Rankin**

Introduction to the Deeper Human Question

In my Th.M. Studies at Harvard Divinity School, my focus was on ethics and public policy. In the spring of 1988, I was taking a class in feminism and property rights, and during lunch one day, three women classmates came over and sat down with me.

One of them introduced herself and her two friends, saying, "You know John, for an evangelical, you're a nice guy," and then brought up a topic *de novo*. She noted that the three of them were lesbian, and that every lesbian they knew had been the victim of "physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse" by some man in her early years.

This was new information to me. And why, I have since wondered, were they sharing it? Perhaps because they thought I would listen, and affirm their humanity regardless.

These women were in the middle of a large and international nexus of lesbians in the university rich Boston area, and thus this anecdote carries great power (though not being a statistical claim, and from a different angle, homosexual men testify to the same).

In only a minority of instances is the biological father implicated in the abuse. Rather it is a stepfather, live-in boyfriend of the mother, some extended family member, or some other man with access to the household who is the usual perpetrator. [This is apart from those who are violated by other teenagers, or adults, as teenagers; and more recently, in a culture where institutional authorities support recruitment into a homosexual lifestyle.]

In other words, the abuse is usually the result of the chosen or *de facto* absence of the biological father – physically and/or emotionally – the absence of the one who is supposed to love, cherish and protect them in the unique power to give of godly fatherhood. Namely – part of the deepest pains that result from a broken marriage covenant.

I remember praying in my spirit as I heard these words, *Dear God above, has the church ever heard this? Or do we merely pass judgment on those who are homosexual and move on? I thought to myself, These are women for whom Christ died, to offer them the gift of eternal life. How well are we in the church communicating such good news?*

The Connecticut State Legislature

When I shared this story before the Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature in 2002, the packed room erupted in groans and moans so loud that I could hardly hear myself speak. I was told afterward by a Christian woman, that all those who groaned were women wearing the yellow pro same-sex marriage stickers. In the 1890s, Oscar Wilde called homosexuality "the love that dares not speak its name," referring to a closeted reality. This is no longer the case. But did I speak "the pain that dares not speak its name," and with compassion rooted in the Gospel?

This hearing on same-sex marriage was covered live on television, and in its wake, not one member of the media, not one same sex marriage advocate, not one university professor, not one politician – no one questioned what I said. Why?

Biblical Question Interjected

Also at the hearing, with two panels representing both sides of the debate, the Rev. Dr. Davida Foy Crabtree, conference minister for the United Church of Christ, raised a biblical question. Holding up a

Bible, she declared that Jesus says nothing about homosexuality. So a legislator asked our panel for response, and I answered: 1) Jesus affirms marriage as defined in the biblical order of creation, 2) he fulfills the Law of Moses that says no to homosexual actions, and 3) the apostle Paul ratifies the same. [Now, I could have added other details, such as Jesus explicitly opposing *porneia*, a word rooted in classical Greek literature for “sexual immorality,” that which includes homosexual actions.]

I did note that Jesus had no need to mention homosexuality per se, since first century Judaism was not struggling with the issue in its midst. Nor did Jesus mention the three cardinal sins for which Jeremiah chastised ancient Judah, that which led to the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C. – sorcery, sacred prostitution and child sacrifice. Jesus did not have to do so in his own day, on any of these questions, given the power of self-evident biblical assumptions at play among his fellow Jews.

Biblical Theology in Question

Earlier, in 1996, I addressed a standing room only forum at Yale Divinity School on the question: “Is homosexuality a gift of God?” My presentation was simple. I outlined the predicate for biblical theology as the storyline of creation, sin and redemption introduced in Genesis 1-3. And in the biblical order of creation, where all is good, human sexuality is defined by the marriage of one man and one woman in mutual fidelity, and this Jesus explicitly affirmed.

Such mutual fidelity, in its equality and complementary, is the social basis for learning trust and passing it along to our children. Sin is rooted in this trust being broken, and the Bible traces the storyline of the painful consequences of broken human sexuality in all of its categories.

The central question I also posed was this: “Can any presence of homosexuality be located in the biblical order of creation?” For indeed, the foundations in Genesis 1-2 interpret the whole Bible. If so, I said, then I yield my position.

An energetic question and answer period followed, and one professor and one avowedly homosexual student pressed me in particular. The student could not locate homosexuality in Genesis 1-2, so he said, “If there are two interpretations of Genesis 1-2, and the first one does not see homosexuality as part of the order of creation, and the second one does, then we must accept the second interpretation.” So I asked him what this “acceptable interpretation” might be from Genesis 1-2, and he had no answer.

I also noted that the Bible is the only source in antiquity that says no to homosexual actions. Thus, if students and faculty at Yale Divinity School want to affirm homosexuality, why twist the Bible against its own assumptions, when instead they can find many pagan and secular sources clearly in their favor?

I also affirmed my biblically rooted pro-life libertarian politics where the law should not prosecute private actions, so long as they do not cross into public consequences where someone’s life, liberty or property is assaulted.

A Most Effective Lesbian Activist

Arline Isaacson, co-chair of the Massachusetts Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus, led the way to the first-in-the nation “Gay-Rights” bill in 1989, and also, the lobbying effort in support of the first-in-the-nation same-sex marriage law in 2004. I have addressed forums with her at Boston University, Harvard College and elsewhere.

At Boston University, in her introductory comments, she said, “In debating John Rankin tonight on this issue, it is the first time I am not debating someone who palpably hates me.” I was blown away – especially if indeed she has debated others who have conveyed hatred for her person. Later in the evening, during the question and answer period, Arline looked at me and said, “John – we know that you love us.” Yet I never used the word “love.” Rather I showed her unfailing respect as an image-bearer of

God even as I fully disagreed with her. And at end of our last forum, she gave me a hug, and emailed me: "John, you are a true gentleman and a thoughtful advocate." And she gave me permission to publish it.

Which is to say, to win a debate and lose a relationship is pyrrhic and disserves the Gospel. But to win an honest relationship in the face of a real debate is to advance the Gospel.

Simple Observation

I write this brief paper, not in starting with systematic theology and then addressing the Bible and pastoral concerns. Rather, I begin with the pastoral concern for the human storyline in the crosshairs of the debate over homosexuality, and then introduce biblical theology as it applies to several anecdotes in human experience. This is consonant with how the biblical storyline sets the table for doctrinal understandings. The cardinal biblical and theological observation is this: Human sexuality as given by God is designed for man and woman in marriage, chastity without and fidelity within, and all other sexualities only advance human brokenness, and thus, in need of redemptive healing.

Final Observation

As I argue from a close translation of Genesis 1-2, Yahweh Elohim gives us all a level playing field to choose between good and evil, life and death, freedom and slavery. This assumption carries on through the Tenakh, and Jesus fulfills it dynamically in the face of his enemies during Passover Week.

Here, in the face of this debate, the takeaway is simple. If any of us have confidence that we are accountable to the truth and beauty of the Gospel, then we celebrate the Golden Rule. This means we make sure first to listen well to the stories and positions of those who believe differently. Only then can truth rise to the top in our midst.

This paper in its entirety, along with some of Dr. Rankin's related observations, is also available on his website: <http://www.teii.org/marriage-or-pansexuality/mars-hill-forum-154-biblical-theology-homosexuality-and-pastoral-ministry/>