

Putting a Face on Homosexuality

By Letha Dawson Scanzoni

Christians react in various ways to the matter of sexual orientation. Some are familiar with behavioral science research – and relatively accepting of its findings. So they're convinced that in speaking of homosexual orientation, we're dealing with a way of *being* and *feeling*. And they realize those feelings remain, whether or not they're ever translated into acts.

But the attitudes of other Christians toward homosexuality are often governed by myths and stereotypes. Too often our false labels and distorted characterizations are due to serious misconceptions about the nature of homosexual orientation. We have believed popular fantasies rather than looking at the facts and struggling with truths more challenging than we'd like.

“There's a tendency among Christians to lump all homosexuals together as a group of faceless, nameless ‘perverts’ – and to make statements not rooted in fact. They don't see us as people,” an Indiana University graduate student told me several years ago.

It's this matter of seeing gays and lesbians *as people* – respecting their personhood despite our differences in sexual orientation – where so many of us fail as Christians. One lesbian told me, “It kills me that people sit around talking stereotypically about gays and don't know they're sitting next to one in church.”

Similarly, another woman told of a time when a professional colleague pointed out a stranger on the street and said, “That man is a homosexual. I can spot one anytime, just by looking at them.” She recalled thinking, “Oh if you could only know! You've worked with me for nearly a quarter

of a century - and have never guessed my orientation. And because of your anxiety and hostility over this topic, I'll never be able to share this part of myself with you, even though you think of me as your friend.”

In another case, a pastor boasted of his ability to detect homosexual persons because the “Holy Spirit bore witness” in his heart whenever a gay person happened on the scene. Yet he hadn't the foggiest notion that his highly esteemed assistant pastor, living celibately, had struggled for years to come to terms with his own homosexual orientation!

Many Christians are hostile to such people. Some refuse to accept evidence that the homosexual orientation is involuntary and are persuaded that the orientation itself is sinful – even apart from any sexual activity. One writer, David Englesma, goes so far as to say that “the sin of homosexuality is not one shameful sin among many; rather it is the sin that most fully works out and manifests sin's vileness – it is the nadir of the degradation of sin.” To Englesma, nothing is so “monstrous,” “unnatural,” or “perverse” as homosexuality. The homosexual mind – the disposition, the tendency – is reprobate,” Englesma declares (from a three-article series in the September 15, 1981; November 1, 1981; and April 1982 issues of *The Standard Bearer*).

Not everyone who condemns the mere presence of homosexual feelings does so in as extreme a fashion as Englesma. Yet for many Americans, few issues bring forth such harsh reaction, such gut-level revulsion, as does homosexuality. Where does this revulsion come from?

We have, of course, been guilty of the same distorted vision and depersonalization in our views and treatment of other minority groups throughout history. I'm reminded of a statement attributed to Alexander Hamilton in another context: “The contempt we have been taught to entertain for blacks makes us fancy many things that are founded neither

in reason nor in experience” (quoted in Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*). We could easily substitute the words *gays and lesbians for Blacks* – and find the statement equally indicting.

On the surface, some of this reaction might appear to be linked to concern over maintaining a certain interpretation and use of Scripture. But look how the Bible is often used. Toward what other group are snatches of Scripture (including mistranslations) hurled so brutally and with such self-righteous contempt?

We all need to examine Scripture in an open and careful way, responding in obedience and faith to its teachings. But something more than an honest concern for Scripture seems to be involved when the Bible is used as a weapon for cruelly wounding sensitive people, driving many away from the God who reaches out to them in love.

In his excellent book, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Yale historian John Boswell deals with this. He shows how public sentiment toward a particular group at a particular time is reflected in the religious teachings emphasized and used as a support at that time. Boswell’s book contains a detailed chapter on Scripture passages relating in some way to homosexuality, and he suggests that “careful analysis can almost always differentiate between conscientious application of religious ethics and the use of religious precepts as justification for personal animosity or prejudice” (p.7).

Boswell then traces the how and why of social intolerance toward various minorities over the course of history. In showing how the preferences of the majority of people tend to be equated with the preferences of God, Boswell refers to the “tendency of humans to dislike or mistrust what is different or unusual.” Such a tendency, he suggests, “adds a certain visceral force to this belief in the rightness of majority sentiment” (p.38).

I think this is the key to the revulsion many people express when the topic of homosexuality is discussed. We are dealing here with an *anomaly* – something which doesn't fit the usual categories or customary order of things. (The term is not intended pejoratively). If the general rule is that women are attracted to men and men to women, how does one deal with the exception to that rule – the notion that some persons seem somehow “programmed” to be attracted to their own sex?

Cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas speaks of the taboos and anxieties that spring up in societies when they are faced with anomalies. The anomalies can be *ignored or condemned* or deliberately *confronted* and seen in a new way so that they can have a place in the scheme of things (*Purity and Danger*, chapter 2).

Until recently, most of us in Christian circles were used to the first two approaches to homosexuality. The topic was simply ignored and homosexual persons were invisible. If the topic was discussed at all, the tone was one of condemnation. Douglas explains why individuals and societies so often choose these ways of dealing with anomalies: “Uncomfortable facts, which refuse to be fitted in, we find ourselves ignoring or distorting so that they do not disturb our established assumptions” (*Purity and Danger*, p.49).

Sometimes the easiest thing to do is to get rid of an anomaly. “Take night-crowling cocks,” says Douglas. “If their necks are promptly wrung, they do not live to contradict the definition of a cock as a bird that crows at dawn” (*Purity and Danger*, p.52). She also tells of societies which have put twins to death because the phenomenon of multiple births contradicts the usual order in which human beings have single births and animals have litters. Condemning an anomaly is a way of strengthening our view of reality. And if we attribute *danger* to the anomaly (a common way groups deal with the “different”), we can put the subject above dispute. For

example, if we say “Rome fell because of homosexuality” and warn that America is in the same danger, who is going to argue that homosexuals are unjustly harassed?

We do not have to look far back in history to see where the perception of some group as “different” or “dangerous” can lead. The holocaust stands as a dreadful reminder. It is no surprise that homosexual persons were forced to wear pink triangles as the Jews were required to wear the Star of David, and they were herded into the concentration camps and gas chambers right alongside the Jews.

Of course, few voices today are likely to say - at least very loudly – that homosexual persons should be wiped out. But some of the ugly rhetoric suggests such a sentiment.

Thus, some people in scientific circles fear that even research designed to understand and possibly prevent homosexual orientation could be used against people already homosexual, labeling them as “bad” or “undesirable.” In 1982, for instance, the German Society for Sex Research condemned research which used hormone treatments during fetal development to try to eradicate homosexuality. The society not only faulted the soundness of the experiments and alleged findings but suggested that the research itself was in collusion with social prejudice against homosexuals.

I think what may be troubling to many Christians today is that we are being asked to follow Mary Douglas’s third way of dealing with anomalies. We are being asked to confront the fact of homosexual orientation and seek creative ways to deal with it. We can no longer pretend homosexuality doesn’t exist or doesn’t concern us as Christians. We are meeting homosexual Christians in our churches, on our campuses, in our other social contacts. We are hearing from them at denominational

gatherings; we are facing questions of ordination, of church membership and fellowship, and of ethical lifestyle.

Meeting homosexual Christians – or discovering that a highly admired Christian friend or relative considers himself or herself to be homosexually orientated – can be disturbing. It's especially disturbing if we have been taught to think of homosexual persons as groups of sleazy, evil, anti-God people.

I sometimes compare the dissonance felt at such times to feelings of a group of school children when a devoted teacher wanted to change their prejudiced attitudes towards African Americans. The children's parents prided themselves on racism, and many belonged to the Ku Klux Klan. The teacher instituted a reading hour in which she read aloud daily a story of a little girl named Jenny. The teacher refused to show the children the pictures of Jenny, saying she would wait until the last day to show them what Jenny looked like.

On the day the story ended, the children crowded around to see Jenny's picture. They were shocked to find that she was African American! They had thought of her as a friend, someone just like them. How could she be Black? Their parents had taught them bad things about Black people. The same thing can happen when we meet lesbian and gay people.

If we as Christians are going to minister to gay and lesbian people in Christ's name, we first must stop viewing homosexual orientation and homosexual persons in the abstract. We must allow the subject to become *personalized* to us.

Sometimes it comes to us that way unbidden. A few years ago, *Response*, the magazine of United Methodist Women, took a survey of crisis experiences in Methodist women's lives. One percent of the respondents reported that they were homosexual, and another 14 percent told of

becoming aware of the homosexuality of a close friend or family member. Many felt the church had provided no help at such times. Or, because they felt people in the church would be unable to handle the information, they refrained from telling anyone.

As a result, they experienced only loneliness, when they longed for understanding and support. One woman, whose daughter had revealed that she is homosexual, wrote: “We have grown spiritually (through this experience). We have had to break down our ‘walls of prejudice.’ Homosexuals-lesbians-now have a face: our daughter’s” (*Response*, January 1982, p.23).

As we stop keeping homosexuality at a distance, as an abstract, as we see it up close, with a face, something happens to us. We begin to see we are dealing with real human beings made in the image of God. And we begin to feel the pain of bearing a stigma and experiencing the oppression and fear as though it were happening to us.

I remember reading not too long ago an account of the life of John Howard Griffin, a white writer who wanted to combat racism. He was told by African Americans “the only way you can know what it’s like is to wake up in my skin.” Griffin did just that by having his skin artificially darkened and then writing *Black Like Me*, which tells how he was treated when others thought he was a black man. The author of the article, Robert Ellsberg, calls what Griffin did “a radical effort at human empathy.”

How can we make a “radical effort at empathy” toward those persons whose sexual orientation is gay? For one thing, we need to listen – really listen – to our brothers and sisters in Christ. I remember hearing one deeply spiritual Christian tell of what it was like to sit in a church and flinch with pain as the pastor pounded the pulpit with point after point he claimed to base on Romans 1. He was saying that all homosexuals had

reprobate minds; all homosexuals hated God; all homosexuals were rejecters of Christ, demon-possessed, and going to hell. The woman kept thinking, “That’s not true. What I’ve experienced of God and what he’s saying just don’t fit together. And what he’s saying the text says isn’t even there!”

Later, she prayed at home through an entire night, acknowledging to God her homosexuality and saying, “God, all my life I’ve heard homosexuals are your enemies - that they hate you. But I don’t hate you, God. I love you. If what they say is true, then I’m going to hell. But, God, even if you send me to hell, I’ll *still* love you. I’ll never stop loving you!” She began a journey towards self-acceptance as the Sun rose that morning. As was the case with several other gay and lesbian persons who have told me their stories, she found the loving understanding and support of empathetic heterosexual Christians especially healing.

One man told me of his excruciating pain over deciding to leave the pastoral ministry because after two decades of service he could no longer deny his homosexual feelings. “The church failed me when I most needed it to speak to me,” he said. He was able to rid himself of his intense anger and bitterness towards the church only after he found some Christians who were informed about the nature of homosexual orientation and were not afraid of it. They were willing to listen to him, and stand with him in his struggles, helping him believe he may find a ministry once again.

Our radical effort at empathy may include not only active listening but also creative efforts in using our imagination. Heterosexuals, for example, can think what it would be like to be told that their most loving, natural feelings toward the opposite sex were evil. If you are heterosexual, try to imagine how you would feel if you were told God could never be present in the relationship between you and someone of the opposite sex – or that the best way to please God was for you never to have romantic feelings

for those of the other sex. If you wanted to marry the person you loved, imagine being told that the church would do everything possible to break up your relationship “for your own good.”

And imagine how you would feel if, on top of all that, the church said you – as a heterosexual – needed to develop romantic feelings toward people of your own sex and even encouraged you in a homosexual marriage. Homosexual persons tell us that’s what their experience often feels like.

Imaginary exercises such as this are similar to a special workshop that was set up recently by a hospital to help teachers learn what children with certain perceptual handicaps are feeling (*Psychology Today*, January 1983). For example, to provide some insight into the reading problems of children with dyslexia, a teacher was told to take a pencil and draw through a maze while looking at a reverse image in a mirror. And to make this frustrating experience even worse, she was constantly told to hurry up – to conform, to be like everybody else, to experience life as others do. And although all of this made her feel inept and foolish, it gave her new insight into her students’ experience. (I almost hesitate to use this illustration, since it could be used to imply that a homosexual orientation is a disorder. That certainly isn’t intended. What is intended is to show a parallel effort at developing empathy through somehow entering the other person’s experience.)

Someone told me that for years he had had a friend with a homosexual orientation. Before becoming a Christian, the heterosexual man had always accepted the friend fully. But when the homosexual friend learned of the heterosexual’s conversion to Christ, one of his first questions was, “Can you still love me – now that you’re a Christian?” And the man wasn’t able to answer affirmatively for many months.

Many gay and lesbian persons are asking us the same question. They have had their sense of worth and dignity assaulted in the name of Christ. Many who are already followers of Christ have had their salvation doubted. I wish we could say to them, “Yes, I *do* love you – not *in spite of* being Christian but *because* I am a Christian. The homosexual *is* my neighbor, and I will love my neighbor as myself.”

“But isn’t this being ‘soft on homosexuality’ some will object?” “And aren’t you condoning an ‘anything goes’ attitude that runs contrary to Scripture?” No. Both heterosexual and homosexual Christians are responsible before God to uphold the same ethical standards and to live lives of faithfulness to Christ in love and “justice rooted in discipleship.” There is no double standard.

“But what if you’re all wrong?” the protest continues. “What will you say before the judgment seat of Christ?” My thoughts turn to the words of a compassionate, caring evangelical pastor who was criticized for permitting two homosexual men to sing in the church choir. They wanted to use their God-given singing talents for the glory of God and out of love for their Savior. “I know this is a very controversial area,” the pastor told me, “but when I get to heaven, I would rather find that, if I’ve erred, I’ve erred in the direction of being too merciful and compassionate rather than finding I was too judgmental and not compassionate enough.” To that I say, “Amen.”

Letha Dawson Scanzoni lives in Norfolk, Virginia, United States of America.