

Propositions on Dealing with Homosexuals in the Christian Congregation

Uwe Swarat

On understanding the following propositions

Whereas the debate about homosexuality in society has been by and large decided in favour of accepting homosexuals and has led to their (broad) legal equality with heterosexuals, there is a fierce struggle regarding this subject within the protestant Christendom in Germany, including the free churches and the Evangelical Alliance. For some, homosexual behaviour is a sin that may not be condoned, for others the repudiation of homosexuality belongs to an antiquated ethic, which must be put in question in view of the current reality of life. The fronts have hardened so much that scarcely anybody listens to the arguments of others, but rather simply tries to find out on which side they are on. For the respective “false” side they issue a broadside of abuse and insults. Such behaviour is not worthy of Christians.

In spite of the prevailing poisoned atmosphere these propositions have been put together in the hope of finding readers who are prepared to concern themselves once more with the substance of these disputes and to consider the subject from the perspective of the other side. The author wishes to be led in his evaluation of homosexuality by the biblical revelation and believes himself to be able to make a clear ethical judgement. How we should apply this fundamental judgement in dealing with homosexuals in a Christian congregation is a second question, which must then be considered. In following Jesus, Christians should have in view both the matter under consideration as well as the people concerned. Christian congregations must be ethically consistent as well as being gracious to those who think and live differently. Both are necessary if the Christian witness is not to be sullied. It is from this perspective that the following propositions should be read and considered.

On the ethical evaluation of practised homosexuality

1. All Christians, whether they feel themselves to be heterosexual or homosexual, are bound in their judgements to the speaking of the Spirit of God and should ask themselves together what God’s will is (Matt 7: 21, Rom 12: 2, Rev 2: 29).
2. As Christians we refer principally to the statements of the bible, the written Word of God, and attempt to understand it in its original and salvation-historical contexts. In doing so we do not ignore the insights of the natural sciences and the humanities, and the changed societal conditions, but include them in our reflections.
3. The biblical statements on homosexual practice must be seen in their original context (the culture of the ancient near-east) as well as in the context of the whole bible. In particular, the larger framework of the theology of creation and salvation may not be ignored, because this framework has Christ at its centre. This means specifically that we must expound the individual references to homosexuality in the Old and New Testaments in the light of the basic anthropological assertions in Gen 1 and 2 as well as Jesus’ pronouncements (Matt 19: 4-6) and those of His apostles (Eph 5: 30–33) concerning the bipolarity of the sexes as God’s creation.

4. The prohibition regarding sexual intercourse between men in Leviticus has for Christians just as little immediate validity as the other regulations of this book of the law. However, the two relevant passages (Lev 18: 22; 20: 13) contain in their formulation an indication of the created relationship between men and women, which is abrogated by homosexual intercourse: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." This is also for Christians a valid reason for rejecting homosexual practices.
5. The apostle Paul describes in Rom 1: 26f homosexual practice between men and between women as *παρὰ φύσιν* (*para physin*) – "unnatural" or "against nature". In connection with the formulation in V. 24, that they "dishonour" their bodies with one another (*ἀτιμάζειν* - *atimizein*), it is obvious that Paul refers back to the glory and honour of humans that ensue from their being made in the image of God as found in Gen 1 and 2.
6. In 1 Cor. as well (especially 6: 9) Paul advocates the normative conception of a monogamous, life-long, non-incestuous, sexually-complementary marriage based on Gen 1 and 2 and supported by Jesus' statements (Matt 19), and rejects all contrary practices such as homosexuality, adultery, fornication and incest.
7. That heterosexual and not homosexual sexual intercourse corresponds to the will of the One who created humans as male and female is affirmed not only in the statements of the bible alone, but also through creation itself, in as far as the bodily composition of men and women allows their reciprocal nature to be clearly recognized. Apart from that, the Creator makes possible the emergence of new human life only through heterosexuality.
8. The statements of the bible condemn homosexual *practice* as contrary to the will of God the creator. Admittedly, the bible does not concern itself with homosexual *inclinations* or homosexual *identity* of humans. There is reason to assume that the conception of a homosexual identity first arose in the 19th century.

On dealing with homosexuals in the Christian congregation

9. From the teaching of the bible the Christian church is admonished to adhere to the model of the heterosexual, monogamous, life-long marriage as the form of holistic sexual living together, and to reject practiced homosexuality as contrary to creation. At the same time, the church should be aware that the pastoral care of people with homosexual inclinations should be improved. This care should be undertaken with the aim of enabling these people to live out their identity as Christians in the Christian congregation.
10. Because the bible rejects homosexual practices, but not people with homosexual inclinations, the church should not condemn these people on account of their sexual orientation. It should rather accept them because of their human nature and their Christian faith. "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Rom 15: 7).
11. The conviction that homosexuality does not correspond to the good creation of God is not held by many homosexual Christians; rather, they hold their disposition to be a variation of creation. Those bible passages that condemn homosexuality are seen by them and those church members

who think likewise as referring to situations at the time of writing, which have nothing in common with contemporary homosexual relationships. This way of interpretation also wishes to be true to the bible texts and claims to seek conscientiously the will of God for today.

12. As long as the Christian church has not acquired further insights in this matter, she is required to bear the dissension. In doing so she should orientate herself on what the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome concerning weighty differences in lifestyle among Christians: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves" (Rom 14: 1. 22).
13. In order to create an atmosphere of mutual acceptance and respect, it is necessary to have expert informing, biblical instruction and a climate of trust. Insecurity among heterosexual Christians in the face of homosexuals, or a critical disposition towards homosexual practices on grounds of conscience should not be immediately morally disqualified as homophobia.
14. The idea that homosexuals generally need therapy and are capable of responding to therapy is difficult to sustain. There are clearly forms of homosexuality that arise very early in the development of the individual and are very closely linked to the personality of the person concerned. These cannot simply be "cured by therapy". Homosexual orientation can sometimes also be a consequence of unresolved internal conflicts or traumatic experiences and as such can be treated in a course of therapy. It is furthermore valid both for heterosexual as for homosexual people that spiritual change is necessary and possible (Rom 12: 2). This change can include sexual orientation, as shown by examples of some concerned.
15. Christians, whether with homosexual or heterosexual inclinations, should be encouraged to live in abstinence when they are not married or cannot marry. A life of celibacy, when it is chosen voluntarily, can be a spiritually fruitful form of Christian life.
16. Nevertheless it may be discerned that for some people their homosexual tendency seems to have been given them as a matter of fate and a task in life. To demand of such people, that they live sexually abstinent lives when they become Christians can be an excessive demand, which not every Christian can endure for a long time (cf. 1 Cor. 7: 8f).
17. In such cases a Christian congregation should seriously ask itself, if it will deny membership and the possibility of participation to people on this ground alone. The congregation may expect from homosexuals as well as heterosexuals that they do not engage in sexual intercourse with several partners, but live out their sexuality in the framework of a solid partnership. When homosexuals are not capable of living abstinely, then it is much better that they express their sexuality in a dependable relationship instead of anonymously with incessantly different partners.
18. For Christians, who let themselves be guided by the bible, sexual practice belongs fundamentally only in a lifelong, legally-ordered relationship between two people. This is in this case also true for homosexuals. One should not designate such a relationship between homosexuals as a "marriage", so as not to blur the distinction to the life-partnership between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, the legal form of civil partnership, which has been in force in Germany since 2006, can be a corresponding form of binding partnership for homosexuals, about which the churches must ask themselves if it can also be used by Christian homosexuals. This possibility is not a gen-

eral alternative option to marriage according to the creation order, but rather an exception on the basis of the views above based on the bible and the requirements of pastoral care for Christians, who desire to live in a solid, enduring and responsible relationship.

Concluding remarks

The Christian congregation, in dealing with homosexual Christians, will be able to practice combining truth and love (Eph 4: 15; 2. Joh 3), faithfulness to biblical principles and compassion with people. This challenge also exists with respect to other problems in life such as divorce and remarriage of heterosexuals. As Christians are still living in this world, which has fallen away from God, and are not perfect, they too fail with respect to the good will of God (Matt 6: 12; Jas 3:2). In such a situation, neither ethical rigorism, which can only issue prohibitions, nor a theologically relativizing laxity, which calls everything good, are helpful. On the contrary, it is necessary to find ways that do not cause those concerned to lose their faith. The apostle Paul summons the faithful in this manner: "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way" (Rom 14: 13). In the dispute about homosexuality, all sides will need to be able to bear with ambiguities and contradictions in situations and behaviour without reacting in an aggressive manner (tolerance of ambiguity). This can only succeed in a spiritual attitude, characterized by love for God and His word as well as by love towards people who are in need of compassion.

17.11.2016