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# Ethical questions as confessional questions?

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## SUMMARY

The issue of homosexuality is a problem for ecumenism. In the first part, various ways in which this topic is being handled within Christian churches will be listed. In the second part, a biblical-theological evaluation of

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## RÉSUMÉ

La question de l'homosexualité constitue un problème pour les relations œcuméniques. L'auteur considère tout d'abord les diverses manières dont cette question est abordée dans les différentes Églises chrétiennes.

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im ersten Teil werden verschiedene Weisen aufgezeigt, auf denen christliche Kirchen mit dem Thema Homosexualität umgehen. Im zweiten Teil wird eine biblisch-theologische Wertung des Problems gegeben.

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the problem of homosexuality will be given. In chapter three the consequences of this example for a Christian church that is defined *sola scriptura* will be traced. The concluding passage will seek to indicate some steps which ought to be taken within our service for the church of Jesus Christ.

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Puis il traite ce sujet sous l'angle biblico-théologique. Il en considère ensuite les implications pour une Église qui se veut fidèle au *sola scriptura*. Dans sa dernière partie, il indique quelle ligne d'action devrait être adoptée dans le cadre de notre service de l'Église de Jésus-Christ.

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Im dritten Kapitel werden die Konsequenzen für eine Kirche aufgezeigt, die sich dem *sola scriptura* verpflichtet weiß. Im abschließenden Abschnitt wird auf einige Schritte verwiesen, die im Dienst für die Kirche Jesu Christi getan werden sollten.

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## Introduction

“The sometimes sharply divergent specific teachings and practices of our Churches regarding divorce, contraception, abortion and homosexuality are actually a frequently given reason why Roman Catholic and Episcopalian Christians leave one Church and enter the other.”<sup>1</sup> This statement of the commission for the dialogue between the Anglican and the Roman Catholic churches in the USA indicates the following: at least for the *individual* Christian the *status confessionis* is reached when his or her church adopts some specific teaching or endorses a certain behaviour

that he or she judges incompatible with his or her understanding of Christian faith and life. And this Christian doesn't hesitate to draw the necessary consequences in leaving his or her church. It is not up to us to evaluate the validity of decisions like this. However, we should take into account what this process indicates: It shows that the sanctioning and propagating of certain ethical positions as authentic theological and spiritual expressions of the Christian church is causing *skandalon*, i.e. a fundamental theological and spiritual offence that leads Christians to leave their respective churches. In other words: These Christians have – for them-

selves – identified these positions as heretical.

In this paper an answer to the initial question will be given by dealing with the following areas: The complex in question will be examined by looking at one specific example, the problem of homosexuality. In the first part, various ways in which this topic is being handled within Christian churches will be listed. In the second part, a biblical-theological evaluation of the problem of homosexuality will be given. In chapter three the consequences of this example for a Christian church that is defined *sola scriptura* will be traced. The concluding passage will seek to indicate some steps which ought to be taken within our service for the church of Jesus Christ.

### 1. The handling of the topic “homosexuality” within the Christian churches

Roughly speaking, we come across four different types of evaluation of the phenomenon “homosexuality” within the Christian churches:

a) The examination of the biblical teaching on homosexuality leads to the result that homosexuality is considered sin within the OT as well as the NT and that therefore it has to be declared sin within the Christian church, too.

b) The examination of the biblical teaching on homosexuality leads to the result that homosexuality is considered sin within the OT as well as the NT. However, the principle of love overrides these biblical commandments as they have been superseded by the progress of history.

c) The examination of the biblical teaching on homosexuality leads to the result that in the OT and NT the term “homosexuality” refers to an unequal relationship between a powerful partner who is exploiting a weak one (slave, adolescent etc.). This cannot be compared with the modern phenomenon of homosexuality which is defined as a relationship between equals.

d) The biblical teaching on homosexuality is considered outdated and therefore declared irrelevant. On the basis of certain hypotheses homosexuality is seen as a variant of creation, parallel to the relationship between husband and wife in marriage.

On the basis of these differing views various statements of church councils, governing boards, committees etc. have come to quite differing conclusions on how to deal with this question and the people concerned within the Christian church.

### 2. A biblical-theological evaluation of the problem of homosexuality<sup>2</sup>

Basically speaking, the NT has adopted the instructions of the OT concerning homosexuality: In 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 homosexuals are mentioned in lists of persons who do things that are unacceptable to God. It should be noted that the Greek term *ajrsenokoivhtai* in 1 Cor 6:9 is probably the translation of the Hebrew *אִישׁ אִשָּׁה* (cf. Lev 20:13) where the Septuagint reads *καὶ ὁς ἂν κοιμηθῆ μετὰ ἄρσενοι κοίτην γυναικός.*

In addition to these texts the main passage for our question is undoubtedly Rom 1:18-32. Without going into details one can summarize the intention of these verses as follows: Paul is using the example “homosexuality” in order to illustrate the background, development and consequences of sin which can be summed up in the term “exchange” or “pervert” (Greek: *μεταλλάσσειν*<sup>3</sup>): the fundamental perversion of man’s relationship to God (although creatures “they neither glorified him [i.e. the creator] as God nor gave thanks to him, . . . and exchanged [Greek: *ἠλλάξαν*] the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” – Rom 1:21.23) indicates the transgression of the first commandment (Rom 1:18: *ἀσέβεια*: “godlessness”). This perversion results in the perversion of all other relationships (“Therefore God gave them over [Greek *παράδομι*: Rom 1: 24.26.28] in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity. . . Even their women exchanged [Greek *μετήλλαξαν*: Rom 1:26] natural relations for unnatural ones”) and denotes the transgression of the second table of commandments (Rom 1: 18: *ἀδικία*: “wickedness”). Bearing in mind that marriage between man and woman aims at mutual complementation and is placed explicitly under the blessing of God, homosexual practice can be identified as a “sacrament of antireligion”: people are giving an outwardly visible sign of an inner spiritual reality: They reject the salutary will of the creator.<sup>4</sup>

This doesn’t mean that homosexuality is seen as a sin which would be “worse” than all the others that are also listed in Rom 1:28, 1 Cor 6:9s et al. The fact that homosexuality is being integrated into these lists clearly shows that all sin is deadly. This will have to be taken into account when discussing the question of how to deal with each sinner. And keeping in mind that Rom 1 is followed by ch. 2 and especially ch. 3 there can’t be

any doubt at all that it is impossible to condemn a person because he or she is involved in one kind of sin or another. Paul refers to each and every one when he concludes: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else” (Rom 2:1) and: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).

On the other hand, however, these insights should not lead us to forget that sin has consequences for the respective community, and especially the Christian community, and that it can't be limited to the sphere of the individual: The body is not – as the Corinthian enthusiasts would have it – indifferent to the realm of the spiritual: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!” (1 Cor 6:15). “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, . . .? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.” (1 Cor 6:19s.). Therefore everything that we do, including sexual practice, is influencing the whole of the body of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Concluding this short sketch of the emphases of biblical teaching on homosexuality we will have to state: We are not dealing here with some remote and outdated instruction for human relationships that no longer exist nowadays, but rather we are confronted with a kind of test case where our relationship as creatures towards our creator, as sinners towards our saviour is at stake. If this is the case, however, the consequences for the Christian church who has its basis in God's word of the Holy Scriptures will be crucial. This will have to be discussed in the following section.

### 3. Consequences for a Christian church that is defined *sola scriptura*

500 years ago, *sola scriptura* was a kind of war-cry against the Roman-Catholic principle of tradition as a second source of revelation besides the Holy Scriptures. At the same time Luther strongly opposed all spiritualistic attempts to get a direct access to God's revelation through individual experience or guidance of the Holy Spirit, i.e. besides the *verbum externum*. Yet it is exactly this kind of attempt which marks one of the leading approaches to contemporary interpretation of the Bible. This approach can be characterized by the phrase: “In the beginning there was the affectedness [German: *Betroffenheit*]”<sup>6</sup>. The fact

that people are being affected by and have had experience with homosexuality (or, in other cases: exploitation, oppression, non-Christian religions etc.) seems to create a reality that becomes more important and more relevant than the word of God. In other words: The individual experience or history becomes the norm for the interpretation of the Scriptures. In this context, it might be helpful to recall a passage of Luther's “Smalcald Articles”, where he finds the “enthusiasts” along *the same frontline* together with Adam and Eve and the Roman pope: “(3) And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiasts, i.e., spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and *accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure*, as Muenzer did, and many still do at the present day, who wish to be acute judges between the Spirit and the letter, and yet know not what they say or declare. (4) For [indeed] the Papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with [in] his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word. (5) All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words. (6) Just as also our enthusiasts [at the present day] condemn the outward Word, and nevertheless they themselves are not silent, but they fill the world with their pratings and writings, as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the apostles, but [first] through their writings and words he must come. Why [then] do not they also omit their own sermons and writings, until the Spirit Himself come to men, without their writings and before them, as they boast that He has come into them without the preaching of the Scriptures? . . . (9) In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning [from the first fall] to the end of the world, [its poison] having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power [life], and strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mahomet. (10) Therefore we ought

and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments.”<sup>7</sup>

In interpreting the Scriptures we are constantly confronted with the following alternative: Do we want to interpret the word *secundum Deum loquentem or secundum hominem recipientem*<sup>8</sup>, i.e., according to the God who speaks or according to man who receives? One might also put this question like this: Who is allowed to criticize whom? May God’s word criticize our lives, thoughts, acts, experiences? Or will our experience, emotion, expectation criticize the word of God? We should be aware that both ways are possible and are being adopted. But we should also be aware of the consequences of this decision: If we have silenced the critical potential of the Holy Scriptures through our way of interpreting it, we will end up in only hearing in it the echo of our own voice and conviction, i.e.: I am actually left alone, *incurvatus in me*.

The perception of these relationships which are fundamental to the Christian church implies necessary consequences for the ways it has to deal with the problem in question.

As *creatura verbi* the church has its beginning, continuance and consummation in the word of its Lord alone (cf. Js 1:18; 1 Cor 3:11). It doesn’t “own” God’s word, but receives it as condemning law or saving gospel. It is its task to pass this word on to the world, confident of the promise that it will “achieve the purpose for which God sent it” (Is 55,11), i.e. create faith in Jesus Christ, call people out of the realm of judgement and death into the fellowship of salvation and eternal life. The Holy Scriptures form the instrument to distinguish between the word of God and the word of man; but this can never mean the – ultimately futile – attempt to distinguish between word of God and word of man within the Scriptures (as it is the case within wide areas of the historical-critical exegesis of the Bible). The effect of Scripture (*efficacia Scripturae*) is not dependent on nor limited to a historical interpretation nor the interpreter’s genius “to bring an ancient text to life”; but its effect is rather a spiritual one in the sense that the Scriptures confront us with the will and promise of the holy God and his condescence to man in Jesus Christ.

Applying this to the question of homosexuality we have to conclude:

Faith in Jesus Christ and life with Jesus Christ (defined as ἀξίως τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ καλοῦντος ὑμᾶς

εἰς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ βασιλείαν καὶ δόξαν : 1 Thess 2:12) cannot be separated from one another. At the same time 1 Cor 6:9s states that people practising homosexuality – among other forms of sinful behaviour – “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (τὴν εἰς αὐτοὺς βασιλείαν)! The whole context of 1 Cor 5-7 deals with the boundary between the kingdom of God and the world which is marked and effected by baptism and new birth. This implies that the Christian church has neither the right nor the authority to declare a certain form of human relationship (i.e. a homosexual one) as being blessed by God. This so-called “blessing” is at the same time vain and misleading: It is vain because the church can only bless what God blesses, and it is misleading because it confirms a person on his or her way to divine judgement instead of calling them to conversion and repentance, i.e. to the way of salvation. The blessing of homosexual relationships in analogy to the matrimonial blessing within the Christian church must be seen as the perversion of the justification of the sinner into the justification of sin.<sup>9</sup> It also reveals the abuse of the spiritual ministry which isn’t meant to be involved in the destruction but rather in the upbuilding of the church.

#### 4. What is our task?

a) In a situation where not only in society but also in the Christian church the vital and fundamental role of God’s word of the Holy Scriptures is being forgotten or intentionally disregarded, it is of primary importance that this basis is being pointed out over and over again: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). Every Christian who has been enlightened by the word of God (cf. 2 Cor 4:6; Eph 1:18 et al.) is called to bear witness of the changing power of this word. Every preacher and everyone carrying certain responsibilities within the church is obliged to point to the source of eternal salvation and life. Against the illusionary strength and popularity of human experience, conviction and persuasion the disciples of Jesus Christ are sent to testify to the quiet but truly revolutionary work of the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the gospel. The Christian church is well aware that it isn’t success that is promised to it and that this proclamation will often be met by scorn and refusal, even outright opposition (cf. e.g. Acts 17:32). And yet it will not waver in the certainty that the message of the cross will forever

be the power and the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:24).

b) Testifying in this way to the unwavering scriptural basis of the Christian church aims especially at the strengthening of the local churches and groups as well as at the sharpening of the individual Christian's conscience. This is of tremendous importance in view of the disintegration of ethical convictions not only in society but also within the Christian churches. It should be made very clear that this disintegration within the realm of ethics must be seen as the result of the disintegration of faith in the triune God. As we have noticed, Christian faith and Christian life are inseparably linked to each other. In a post-Christian society, we cannot expect that Christian ethical values are being shared by people who don't have any relationship of faith with the Lord who established these values as the salutary basis for human relations. This does not mean, however, that political parties should not try to fight for these values within politics, motivated by the firm conviction that this ethical basis only will enable the survival of our western democracies as we have been used to them for a long time.

While the church has only indirect possibilities of influence on the political scene (i.e. through the Christians who are involved in politics), it has – by its very existence – a fundamental obligation of strengthening and instructing the Christians in the different fields of Christian education, i.e. in family, school, church etc. The importance of this ministry should by no means be underestimated, keeping in mind Luther's introduction to the Small Catechism where he exhorts parents and authorities: "Especially should you here urge magistrates and parents to rule well and to send their children to school, showing them why it is their duty to do this, and what a damnable sin they are committing if they do not do it. For by such neglect they overthrow and destroy both the kingdom of God and that of the world, acting as the worst enemies both of God and of men. And make it very plain to them what an awful harm they are doing if they will not help to train children to be pastors, preachers, clerks [also for other offices, with which we cannot dispense in this life], etc., and that God will punish them terribly for it. For such preaching is needed. [Verily, I do not know of any other topic that deserves to be treated as much as this.] Parents and magistrates are now sinning unspeakably in this respect. The devil, too, aims at something cruel because of these things."<sup>10</sup>

c) Finally, the assistance and consolation of pastors and those with responsibility by other pastors and fellow Christians should be especially mentioned. Often, their endeavour to proclaim the lordship of Jesus Christ and its implications on the lives of his believers will be confronted with opposition not only from outside the church but also from within. They will experience in their work that discipleship is often not followed by success but by persecution<sup>11</sup>. Therefore they, too, need the support and strengthening of fellow Christians, the *mutua consolatio fratrorum et sororum*.

Thereby the Christian church will be edified by its Lord through his word and sacrament, drawing on the sustaining power of his Holy Spirit and being made ready for the return of Jesus Christ and the consummation of the world. On this way it will also encounter opposition and rejection within the various organisational forms that the "official" church has adopted through the centuries. Something of this reality can be experienced in our days in relation to the problem of homosexuality. But even in this question related to the ecclesiological structure the example of our reformation fathers will be helpful: They have firmly stuck to their conviction that the church of the reformation was the old, real, true, one church of Jesus Christ, discerning the dogmatic deviations of the Roman church as new and therefore heretical. They have stayed within this church that had gone astray from the truth as the reformatory movement that was calling the whole church back to its foundation, the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it wasn't before they were declared heretics on their part and thrown out of the Roman church that they were obliged to seek an independent structure. In the same way, the various challenges of the Christian church – ethical as well as dogmatic – should be approached with the confidence and certainty that the Lord of the church will continue to fulfill the promise that he has given right at the beginning of its history: "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18).

## Notes

- 1 ARC-USA Statement "Christian Ethics in the Ecumenical Dialogue: ARCIC-II and Recent Papal Teaching", One in Christ 31 (1995), 286-289: 289; cf. W.Schöpsdau, "'Dienst eint – und Lehre muß nicht unbedingt trennen'. Sozialethische Differenzen und Kirchengemeinschaft", MD 47

- (1996), 10-14: 14.
- 2 Cf. the detailed discussion in R.B.Hays, "Homosexuality: The ethical view of the New Testament", in: R.Hilliard, W.Gasser (ed.), *Understanding Homosexuality*, (Zürich: VBG, 1997, 30-46.)
  - 3 Cf. the article by the philosopher and theologian Thomas S. Hoffmann, "METALLAGH. Gleichgeschlechtliche Ersatzhandlungen und Eheimitate als theologisch-ethisches Sprach- und Sachproblem", *Kerygma und Dogma* 41 (1995), 176-195.
  - 4 Cf. R.B.Hays, 'Homosexuality',. 34.
  - 5 Cf. R.B.Hays, *Homosexuality*,. 37.
  - 6 This approach can adopt quite divergent forms and can also be traced within feminist theology, theology of liberation or theology of religions.
  - 7 AS VIII, 'Of Confession', *Book of Concord*, 1580.
  - 8 Cf. Luthers statement on H.Bullinger from 10.5.1538 (Nr. 3868, WA.TR 3,669-674): "Sed ipsi schwermeri adhuc sunt papistae; non intelligunt virtutem verbi Dei." (loc.cit. 672,9). Especially they do not perceive the relationship between God's word and his Spirit: "separabant verbum a Spiritu, hominem praedicantem a Deo operante, ministrum baptisantem a Deo mundante, et sentiunt Spiritum dari et operare sine verbo. . . Et ita mentiuntur et definiunt verbum non secundum dicentem Deum, sed secundum recipientem hominem." (loc.cit. 670,12.17).
  - 9 Cf. R.Slenczka, "Verbindlichkeit und Unveränderlichkeit der Gebote Gottes in Predigt und Unterweisung", *Lutherische Beiträge* 1 (1996), 121-136: "Auf diese Weise wird. . . die Rechtfertigung des Sünders durch Erkenntnis, Bekenntnis und Vergebung der Sünde umgewandelt zu einer Rechtfertigung der Sünde durch Veränderung der Gebote Gottes. Das ist das Schlimmste und Unbarmherzigste, was in Verkündigung, Unterweisung und Seelsorge geschehen kann. Denn damit stoßen wir den Sünder ins Gericht und verweigern ihm im Schein der Liebe und aus falschen seelsorgerlichen Erwägungen die Rettung aus dem Gericht. Gleichzeitig zerstören wir das, was die erhaltende Grundlage nach dem Willen Gottes für das Zusammenleben der Menschen ist." (loc. cit. 135s.). The dissolution of the word of God of the Holy Scriptures leaves a vacuum that leads to a "Naturalismus in der Verselbständigung natürlicher, geschichtlicher und gesellschaftlicher Größen und Kräfte sowie zu einem entsprechenden Polytheismus, unter dem dann Natürliches als göttliche Kraft verehrt, angestrebt und gefürchtet wird." (loc. cit. 127).
  - 10 M.Luther, *Small Catechism*, Introduction.
  - 11 This reality is expressed in German in a play on words: "Auf Nachfolge folgt weniger der Erfolg als viel eher Verfolgung."

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