



Thoughts on Church Structure and God's Ideals for His Children

Celebrating Progressive Steps at the GC

THE REPORT OF the Commission on Ministries, Services, and Structures adopted by the General Conference executive committee is a progressive step. I believe that Michael Cafferky's article in the winter issue of *Spectrum* could have done more to celebrate the progressive steps taken by the GC committee.

1. The recognition of diversity is unprecedented since the turn of the 20th century. The past several commissions and committees that have studied re-structuring of the denomination have all sought to discourage diversity, while this report embraces it.

2. The affirmation of the "union of churches" type of structure opens the door to reducing the size of the denominational structure in North America significantly. It allows the functions of the local and union conferences to be merged into a single entity. This could save millions of dollars in each union territory that could be returned to local ministries. It would also open the door to reducing the number of boarding academies to a level that better matches the actual need and saving further millions of dollars.

In fact, the potential for change in these actions is so far-reaching that it cannot be expected to be fully realized in short order. It will take years of studied, persistent pushing on the part of lay leaders and pastors to encourage some conference administrators and union committees to walk through the door that has been opened. Others are ready for this kind of change, but the consensus is uneven at present and will need to be built over time in order for change to be implemented. But, no one can use GC policy to block change.

MONTE SAHLIN

VIA THE WEB SITE

God's Ideals for His Children

THE ARTICLE BY John R. Jones took almost nineteen pages to make a case in favor of homosexuality. It read to me

like the theological equivalent of Bill Clinton's argument on the definition of "is."

I don't think it takes very many words to say that homosexuality is NOT God's ideal for his children—it is falling short of that. A loving Heavenly Father's heart is broken when we experience less than the best that he intended for us.

Mitch Tyner's article that followed made some excellent points. However, there is such a thing as being an elder brother who stays home and faithfully serves—but then also joyfully joins with the father in welcoming the younger brother back home.

It feels to me that there is a strong push in the church to deny that homosexuality is living in a far country and eating with the pigs compared to what God intended for Christian marriage.

JERE WEBB

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JOHN JONES'S ARTICLE takes many of us outside the old square into a rather uncomfortable place. I am impressed with the amount of thought and work he has put into the subject. It would all be so much simpler if Paul had not written Romans 1:26–27.

Although I have no settled convictions on this matter, I am still more comfortable with the position that our salvation depends solely upon the free gifts of God's forgiveness and righteousness. If we have that root, we will produce its fruit. Apart from these absolutes, everything else is religious culture, which, although it cannot save us, either enhances or diminishes our salvation.

Although Christianity, in the culture of Paul's day, was enhanced by forbidding women to speak in assembly, and by condemning all homosexual acts, those same restrictions could diminish it in our culture today. After all, the ultimate test of whether homosexual acts are right or

wrong is not religious culture, but the Ten Commandments. In that context, the seventh commandment promotes fidelity and condemns promiscuity.

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VIA E-MAIL

Old Testament Sexual Laws

IT IS ALWAYS PAINFUL for a hardcore Bible scholar to read a biblical study by someone of a more theological bent (John R. Jones, "Examining the Biblical Texts about Homosexuality," winter 2008). Of course, we all have to work together in the church, but we must also make sure our voices are heard, as well. So, for those willing to read on, here are some details to consider.

Leviticus 18. This chapter, along with chapter 20, are the two largest collections of sexual law in the Bible. Leviticus 18 is neatly divided into two sections: incest law (18:6–18) and other sexual laws (18:19–23). The incest laws are about family order and are defined as "uncovering the nakedness" of a near relative. But do the other sexual laws have a common factor?

The first clue is that the person addressed in the law, "you," is assumed to be male. The second clue is the presence of the molech law (18:21; 20:2–5). Sure, sacrificing children to molech is terrible, but why put it in with sexual laws? Another clue is that the ancient Greek and Syriac texts of 18:23 independently witness to the word *zera'* (seed), which apparently fell out of the Hebrew text we have today.

The word *zera'* is used for plant seeds as well as for semen. It occurs in the molech law in chapter 18, and it occurs three times in the molech law of chapter 20:2–5. Only in Leviticus 18 and 20 is *zera'* used in connection with molech worship.

To summarize—when a male has sex, semen (*zera'*) tends to be present, *zera'* occurs three times in Leviticus 18:19–23, and the term *zera'* probably explains what the molech law is doing in these collections of sexual law. Is *zera'*—semen—a controlled body fluid in the law?

In Leviticus 15:16–18, the emission of *zera'* makes a man, and anything the semen touches, unclean. In Leviticus 22:4, an emission of semen makes a priest unclean for Sanctuary duty. In Exodus 19:15 and 1 Samuel 21:4–5, men must keep themselves from women (that is, don't have sex) to be fit for the divine presence or to eat bread from the Sanctuary.

In Deuteronomy 23:9–11, even though a woman is

not present, an emission of semen makes a man unfit for battle (which may be why Uriah resisted visiting his wife, so he could return to battle—2 Sam. 11:8–11). Spread through a variety of texts, we have evidence that semen is, indeed, a controlled body fluid in biblical law.

So, in light of biblical law on *zera'*, its use in Leviticus 18:19–23, and the oddity of molech law in chapters 18 and 20, it is reasonable to conclude that *zera'* unites the non-incest laws of Leviticus 18. *Zera'* should not contact menstrual fluid, another controlled body fluid (18:19); it should not enter a woman under contract to receive another man's *zera'*—adultery (18:20); *zera'* should not be sacrificed to molech (18:21); *zera'* should not enter another *zera'* producer—male homosexuality (18:22); nor should it enter an animal (18:23), nor should an animal's semen enter a human female (also 18:23).

The mystery is solved of why female homosexuality is not addressed—no *zera'*. Verse 23 makes it clear that these laws can address women if desired, even though a male is addressed, so the absence of mentioning female homosexuality is significant.

A couple of additional points. The early church, in at least some areas, forbade the Lord's Supper to couples who were unclean because of seminal emission (Bede 1.27). This law about *zera'* did not stay confined to the Old Testament. Also, Romans 1:26 is not specific about the woman's sexual partner, or about what is "likewise" between verses 26–27.

In our culture, we assume a single category for homosexuality and understand verse 26 as homosexual. However, Clement of Alexandria (second century), Augustine (fourth to fifth century) and Anastasios all understood Romans 1:26 as heterosexual and the "likewise" to refer to the sex act. They assumed that the problem with the sex acts in Romans 1:26–27 was their infertility, something they got from Plato, whereas modern commentators are more likely to cite the abusiveness of these acts.

Very briefly, here is a small slice of what may be found with careful exegesis, using the Bible to interpret the Bible.

I have published some articles relevant to points made in this study: *Zeitschrift für de Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 119 (2007):86–89; 112 (2000):401–403; *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 90 (2000):41–53; *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (1997):861–66; and *Novum Testamentum* 37 (1995):1–11.

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