A conversation on tradition and homosexuality

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
T. Grayson Dashiell:
Secretary and Envoy
A Tale of Two Grandmothers
$3.50 livingchurch.org
Tradition, Novelty, and the Need for Discernment

By David Newheiser

Under the pressure of social and legal changes that appear to be gathering pace, Christians face a pressing question concerning the status of same-sex partnerships. In August 2010 a federal judge in California ruled that denying marriage to same-sex couples violated their constitutional right to equal protection and due process; in January 2011 Illinois legalized civil unions for same-sex couples; and in June New York passed legislation providing for same-sex marriage. These developments, together with a host of other legal and legislative initiatives, force Christians to face a difficult question: can fidelity to Christian tradition accommodate such an unprecedented development?

(Continued on next page)
From the beginning, Christians have developed new ways of thinking in order to address disputes not directly resolved in Scripture and tradition.

(Continued from previous page)

Some answer that Christian tradition emphatically condemns homosexuality. In response to the California case, Albert Mohler, Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote that “in one brazen act of judicial energy … thousands of years of human wisdom were discarded.” Likewise, a group including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints criticized the decision by appealing to “the age-old and nearly universal understanding of marriage as a male/female union.” This echoes the Vatican’s 2003 instruction on same-sex unions, which states that “Sacred Scripture condemns homosexual acts ‘as a serious depravity,’ adding that “this same moral judgment … is unanimously accepted by Catholic Tradition.” On this view, Christians are required to maintain continuity with established patterns, but the conclusion rests upon a misunderstanding of the character of Christian tradition.

From the beginning, Christians have developed new ways of thinking in order to address disputes not directly resolved in Scripture and tradition. Although these innovations were hotly contested, those who opposed them failed to appreciate that revolutions in language may allow the past to speak to the present in new ways. The debate over same-sex unions includes a complex web of ethical issues (concerning procreation, child-rearing, and the nature of justice), but we may nonetheless disentangle the crucial thread of history. A glance back at early debates concerning the nature of Jesus Christ suggests that the process of reflection upon the status of same-sex unions cannot be circumvented by appealing to the past: discerning the significance of tradition for a new situation requires careful and creative attention.

The Character of Tradition

The fourth-century debate about the nature of Christ provides an instructive case study in the perils of conservative appeals to tradition. Although the creed that many Christians recite states that God the Father and the Son are “of one substance” (or “of one being” in some translations), the corresponding term in Greek, homoousion, was long seen as suspect. Prior to the council of Nicaea in 325, most Christians agreed that the Father and the Son are united in one sense and distinct in another, but there was broad disagreement about how this relationship is best described. Although the New Testament suggests an intimate connection between the Father and the Son, it never specifies the nature of their relation. Because the gospels describe a Jesus who sleeps, weeps, dies, and prays to God, a group of Christians associated with a cleric named Arius could reasonably conclude that the Son is the only-begotten God, a sort of intermediate being between the created world and God the Father. Since this made sense of the biblical material without apparently contradicting it, versions of this view were widely held among early Christians.

Although the question at stake had not been answered before this point, the bishops who gathered at the Council of Nicaea concluded that the gospel narrative implies that the Son is of the same substance with the Father, homoousion to patri. This had the virtue of allowing the Son full divinity, and it excluded the implication that Christ was a mere creature, but it brought a host of problems as well. For one thing, whereas substance tended at the time to denote physical matter, Christians on both sides of this debate agreed that God is immaterial. More seriously, one of the most prominent early theologians to affirm that the Father and Son were of one substance was the heretic Sabellius, who used the term homoousion to deny any real difference between them. Because the word never appears in Christian Scripture, the Arians rejected it as a dangerous innovation, but in this they failed to appreciate the prospect of a revolutionary advance in Christian theology.

The pro-Nicene stalwart Athanasius inveighed against the Arians: “What sort of faith have they who stand neither to word nor writing, but alter and change every thing according to the times?” But in fact the Arians came to be seen as heretics precisely because they refused unforeseen developments. It was Athanasius who, 35 years after Nicaea, stipulated a new meaning for the disputed term homoousion, one that allowed Christians to articulate with
new clarity the unity-in-distinction of the Father and the Son. He wrote that the Nicene affirmation that the Son is “of one substance” with the Father indicates that they are inseparably one in their shared (immaterial) essence while truly distinct in their individual existence. Because the Arians insisted on maintaining the formulae with which they were familiar, they refused the advantages of this new way of thinking. On this occasion, the conservative repetition of the past was left behind in favor of a momentous revolution in language.

The Invention of Homosexuality

Like the ancient debate about the Nicene homoousion, the modern conflict over homosexuality responds to a question that finds no direct answer in Christian tradition. The term homoseualitāt entered German in 1868 and made its way into English 24 years later; before this point, no equivalent category existed. Although homosexuality is often conflated with a range of terms that preceded it, they are by no means equivalent: sodomia (an 11th-century coinage of Peter Damian) typically described any male sexual activity without a procreative aim, including most varieties of intercourse between a husband and wife. Nor is it clear that the Old Testament material to which “sodomy” refers has anything to do with sex; although some Patristic authors associated the story of Sodom with what we would call sexual sin, the prophet Ezekiel interprets the Sodomite sin as arrogant maltreatment of the poor. The Apostle Paul is often taken to condemn all same-sex intimacy, but one of the terms he uses in this context, malakoi, refers in fact to effeminacy, while the other, arsenokoitai, is ambiguous because Paul invented it. Each of these terms is different, and

(Continued on next page)
each of them is different from the modern coinage homosexuality.

The word homosexuality first appears in Christian Scripture in the 1946 Revised Standard Version; because the authors of Scripture did not have an equivalent concept available, they could not have used it themselves. For this reason, homosexuality cannot be read into Peter Damian's sodomia and Paul's arsenokoitai; painstaking work is required to relate these terms to the modern situation. That is not to say that Paul and Peter Damian have nothing to contribute to modern debates, but the linguistic gap between their past and our present entails that their relevance here is necessarily indirect. Although many assume that the condemnation of homosexuality has an ancient lineage, it has existed for barely a century. As with the Nicene homoousion, the Church is faced with a new, unresolved situation.

Until the 19th century, no one could have considered affirming homosexual partnerships, but it was likewise impossible for anyone to condemn them, for the concept of "homosexual partnership" would have been as incomprehensible as "online dating." (After all, both online and dating are modern inventions.) The relevant question for faithful Christians is thus not whether Paul would have affirmed homosexual marriage: on the basis of the conceptual apparatus he had available, he would have been able to grasp neither the concept homosexual nor the Nicene affirmation that the Son is "of one substance" with the Father. Even if, as is likely, he would have been alarmed on both counts, this does not settle the issue, for the force of Paul's teaching may point toward developments that he would not have expected. Just as Athanasius argued that the teaching of Scripture recommends ways of speaking that the authors of Scripture would not have recognized, it may be that fidelity to tradition requires new ways of thinking about the status of same-sex unions.

The Demands of Discernment

This historical survey suggests that the question concerning same-sex unions is complicated in ways that some polemicians neglect. Against the spurious assertion that the question is settled by "thousands of years of human wisdom," allowing gay and lesbian couples to wed does not overturn the consensus of history concerning same-sex marriage, for the question at stake is genuinely new. While this recognition does not itself determine how Christians should respond to the prospect of same-sex marriage, it does mean that appeals to "the age-old and nearly universal understanding of marriage as a male/female union" are strictly irrelevant. The prevalence of past practices is itself no argument: any conclusion ought to follow careful reflection, for fidelity requires creative engagement with a tradition that rarely speaks to contemporary questions with an unambiguous voice.

The debate over the status of same-sex unions calls Christians to reflect upon the theology of marriage, the character of families, and the demands of justice, and it requires attention on the level of human lives. Insofar as terms like homosexual, lesbian, and gay were invented at particular times, they represent an active attempt to structure and understand human existence. Since they are not natural constants, they are fungible in principle and may be misleading. After all, much as the meaning of the Nicene homoousion was only clarified after decades of debate, the term homosexuality is likewise contested. Just as some assume that the New Testament contains a theology that only emerged after Nicaea, there is a risk that the categories we apply to same-sex relationships may obscure the character of actual lives. For this reason, we must be wary of comforting abstractions and instead attempt to appreciate the particularity of the voices that surround us, past and present.

The responsibility of Christians is to discern the significance of our tradition for a landscape that is continually changing. It would be reassuring to assume that tradition provides ready-made answers that may simply be applied to same-sex unions in their modern form, but the novelty of the modern situation precludes careless confidence. While some suggest that Christians must repeat established patterns, fidelity to tradition sometimes calls for new ways of thinking. Whereas obscuring the particularity of the past flattens the authority of tradition by reducing it to the scope of prevailing presumptions, admitting the need for unprecedented development respects the importance of our forebears by acknowledging their distance from us. There is no way to circumvent the strenuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation, for fidelity requires careful discernment. The past may continue to enliven and surprise precisely because its lessons for the present are indirect and ambiguous, requiring of us ever-greater attention.

David Neweiser is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Chicago Divinity School. His work aims to illuminate the character of hope, love, and theological discourse by attending to affinities between classic Christian texts and recent continental philosophy.