Christian Perspectives On Teaching Composition--the Issue of Homosexuality

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Moral/Religious Growth--The
By-product of Freshman Composition

Often in a composition class a teacher is confronted with the task of dealing with moral or religious issues that seem to go beyond the job of teaching writing. Last spring in one of my sections of English 103 two students wrote on the topic of homosexuality. The topics involved interpretations of the Bible (Old and New Testaments), the moral positions of various Churches, and rather controversial judgments on the place of homosexuality in society at large. I thought at the time that it was not my job to tell other people how to think, especially on moral issues, but at the same time it is a challenge to keep the students probing an issue through their writing without prejudicing their judgments. In this paper I would like to recreate the context in which these papers were written and suggest ways of handling the rather sensitive topic of homosexuality--or any moral/religious topic for that matter--while trying to help the students improve their writing.

First let me review the goals of our freshman writing program at NDSU in Fargo. Basically, we try to lead young writers through a process of growth in three areas--reading, thinking, and writing. For this we have developed a reader, written our own rhetoric, and, using such theorists as Piaget and Perry, adopted guidelines for what we expect of students in the line of cognitive growth. The subjects we center on in 101 are those which involve some kind of
conflict, particularly in their local communities and in the educational process itself. Emphasis here is on finding a thesis, writing with descriptive detail, and generating thought around a topic where there are clearly two sides involved.

In 102 we try to expand the student's perspective by examining historical topics, such as immigrants or pioneers or Native Americans, related to the writer if possible, but again involving some kind of conflict or dilemma. Then, coming closer to the present, we cover various types of social discrimination—sex, race, and age. In this quarter we move rhetorically to exposition, concentrating more closely on sentence structure and precise reasoning. By 103 we are into more difficult topics, like the economic issues of poverty, unemployment, or the farm crisis, conflicts between science and religion (such as creationism vs. evolution), and religious toleration. Now we expect a sound focus, clear overall development, and argumentation where a writer commits to a position and defends it while recognizing other viewpoints and the reasoning behind them.

Clearly, then, the third part of the sequence is the most difficult and challenging. Here the students must do considerable reading on a complex topic, then they have to argue something related to that topic while representing the best thinking on the other side, and they must make their case for the most part in areas involving ethics and religion. The two essays I mentioned (and of which you have
copies) were written in this context, and I mimeographed these for the class to evaluate in groups. The framework we use for this evaluation involves looking at five areas: thesis, development of thought, sentence structure, depth of thought, and grammar or mechanical problems.

The general response of the class to the first paper was that they liked the personal touch in the beginning, culminating in a definite thesis. They thought the personal change in the writer was genuine and that she expressed herself in their language. For the most part they responded positively to her sympathy for the homosexual and agreed that most churches use the Bible as a whipping block to denounce homosexuals. One individual in the class refused even to talk about the paper, claiming that it was too personal a topic to discuss in public, and another said that the writer was too flippant and definitely not a good Christian. But generally the students found the paper interesting overall and fairly original.

When asked about some of the problems with the paper, one group said that it was too scattered, that it didn't develop very well. They found the first part, the biblical refutation, too long and oversimplified, and the second part on the church's limiting marriages to heterosexuals too brief for its shocking content. Another group thought that the biblical part had some loopholes, and a third group said the notion that homosexual marriages were natural couldn't be defended. So smooth development
and logic were the major objections. A final group had trouble with terms, such as "church" and "celibacy," and wanted them clarified by the writer; these students also pointed out problems with phrasing, grammar, and spelling.

My own response to the class was that the person did seem to get into the subject with her own voice and tried to deal with the subject with feeling and logic. She wrestles intelligently with biblical interpretation and comes up with her own moral position on homosexuals and marriage. Perhaps the most serious problem is lack of balance—most of the paper is a quarrel over biblical interpretation, followed by short statements on the church's attitude toward homosexuals, as well as the problem of cultural pressures. There are also problems with logic. In the biblical part she is right in saying that people may be more impatient with homosexuals than with other sinners—the greedy, and so on—but she seems to imply here that homosexuality is wrong, while later on she defends homosexual relationships as loving and good. And when she speaks of some parts of the Holiness Code in the Old Testament as out of date, she may want to consider that there are different levels of moral acts, some of which become outdated, while others do not. I'd ask whether homosexuality is in the same class as the other practices she mentions, and if there some moral acts that are more serious and essentially don't change?

I'd then point out that perhaps the most provocative
part of the paper is her accepting homosexuality as a natural act. Since this is bound to generate the most opposition, it might be good to defend it. She does recognize the opposing argument that homosexuals cannot have children, so in that sense it is unnatural. But are there any biblical, historical, or philosophical arguments for homosexuality as natural? Are there other reasons that homosexuality might be unnatural other than the fact it doesn't generate children? Here the writer might also recognize the claims of those Christians who say homosexuality represents the breakup of the family. In short, it's good to anticipate the arguments of opponents and try to answer them in order to make your own case more forceful.

The reaction to the second paper was quite different from the first. Here the class had mixed reactions. About half liked the essay because it was about one thing—whether or not a homosexual should be allowed to hold a ministerial position when he doesn't agree with the church's position. They thought that the author recognized that others felt differently, but liked the fact that he stuck to his point, that is, rules are to be obeyed. The other half thought the paper was a "cop out," first because it doesn't say anything about why homosexuality is right or wrong, other than the fact the Church says so. Then, the essay raises the key issue of whether or not it's possible for one who disagrees with a church's moral position to remain a worshiping member, but the writer doesn't discuss
that at all, other than to say that some feel it's unjust
for authorities to exclude you from a church you love because
of your sexual habits.

My own feeling is that the paper is certainly more
contained than the last one, simply because the writer limits
his subject to the justice or injustice of homosexuals
worshipping in a church which tells them they are morally
wrong. He then adequately describes two cases wherein
the priest and scholar know their positions are not in tune,
but go ahead anyway. And there is development in the sense
that he recognizes that others think differently, and makes
analogies to adultery and stealing—if they are wrong, they're
wrong, he says, and you can't make exceptions.

The problem with the paper lies partially in interpreting
the assignment. One was suppose to recognize the other side,
which he does, but he doesn't develop that case, so there
really isn't another side. The fact is that in the Catholic
Church two thirds don't accept the Church's teaching on birth
control or abortion, but still remain worshipping Catholics.
Doesn't this apply to homosexuals? The paper is also confusing
in that the author is more general in the beginning than
later on; in his thesis he says many homosexuals feel they
deserve to worship, even though they're homosexuals, but then
he limits his cases to public representatives of the Church,
which is another kind of problem--perhaps more political
than moral. Church authorities (whether they should or not)
can and do control their public representatives in a way they
cannot control the general membership. So in a way he switches
ground and thereby makes the paper far less challenging.

The difference between the two general types of reaction
in the class to this paper seems to be that some individuals
like things neat. And this paper is more contained than the
first. The other half of the class, however, is more perceptive
in that it recognized that a thesis and its development are
not enough if you don't have depth of thought. And that is
precisely what this essay lacks. In cognitive terms, it
it is dualistic, which means it is black and white, either
or, this way and no other. There is really no discussion
of homosexuality as such and there is no significant analysis
of a problem involving homosexuals. Perhaps if the writer
had taken the notion of what it means to be a homosexual
and ostracized by your chruch, he might have been able to
treat the theme of justice more deeply. That is an inviting
topic, and the seeds of a good paper, but it is not what the
essay is about.

Now let's take the two papers together, and some of the
implications of writing about a subject like this—which
involves the Bible, Church positions, and moral judgments--
and the responsibilities of composition teachers who must
deal with the paper and the whole class. Perhaps the best
approach is to do pre-writing, that is, to prepare students
to write on a subject like homosexuality--before they write,
but also after they have produced a first draft. Here one
might take the social background of a piece like St. Paul's
Letter to the Corinthians, showing the highly abusive sexual climate that existed in Corinth at the time. This would help to distinguish between his readers and the modern homosexual, who might be a very serious person trying to come to terms with his identity. Audience is important to all writers--St. Paul and the modern student. Then one might take some of the history of Christianity where homosexuals appear. Michelangelo, for instance, was a homosexual, and he expressed some of the great Mysteries of Christianity in art that has never been equaled. Cases like this help students to see homosexuals in new and different contexts.

Modern views of homosexuality are also important. Christian fundamentalists, for instance, strongly oppose any acceptance of homosexuality as moral because of their literal reading of the Old and New Testaments. Moreover, they also emphasize that the family as sacred, claiming that any recognition of homosexuality (as well as other movements like feminism or humanism in the schools) will undermine the family. At the same time psychologists point out that there is a great fear of homosexuality among American males, largely because of the macho image we have fostered historically regarding men, and the refinement or sensitivity that characterize many male homosexuals is considered to be a feminine trait. Finally, we might point out that philosophically it is difficult to treat homosexuality like other moral evils where a clear moral choice is involved.
It is not certain whether homosexuality is something one chooses or simply discovers. If the latter, or even if both, then we are dealing with a much more complex matter than simply evaluating choices. All these approaches—biblical, historical, cultural, psychological, and philosophical—are ways to immerse the students in the total moral problem surrounding homosexuality. Such pre-writing exercises can stimulate their thinking and guide their reading.

Once the students are thinking about homosexuality, it's important that they write about it by trying to develop opposing arguments. A good exercise is to have the students develop one aspect of a subject from several viewpoints as thoroughly as possible. Or have them defend a side that they don't agree with. This helps to put themselves in another's shoes, to get beyond prejudices or canned positions, and in this way to see one's own side more clearly. What's important is to avoid parroting religious positions by thinking them out to see where they came from. Also extremely valuable in developing an essay on a subject like homosexuality is to go through more than one draft. A second draft enables the student to revise, or to re-see the matter after getting feedback from other students and the teacher.

Let's look again then at the two papers we've considered and see what we might say to these writers as they look forward to second or third drafts. The second paper needs
the most revision, so let's begin there. I'd say that he needs to clarify his thesis and stick to it. Perhaps the best focus here is why is it just or unjust for a church to exclude a member from worship because of his sexuality. Here the writer would want to get into what homosexuality is—whether a person can help it or not and whether this makes a difference, whether the Church's saying "love the sinner but hate the sin" applies to homosexuality as it does to other "sins," whether expressing one's sexuality with another of the same sex is always wrong and under what conditions is it not, and finally whether one ought to be excluded from worship for being a practicing homosexual if Catholics are not for practicing birth control when the Church says it is wrong. These are tough questions and demand some serious thought on the part of the writer—thought that can't be expressed in a simple either/or proposition.

Revision of the second essay is easier because the student has a good thesis and some good ideas to work with. Overall balance and development of thought are the things to work for here. The student's struggle with the Bible is praiseworthy, both in trying to balance condemnations of homosexuality with compassion for individuals, and in noting the change in thinking with regard to some practices as the Old Testament progressed. I would challenge the writer to sharpen her logic to distinguish between homosexuality and other less important practices (like dress codes) and in the New Testament between the sinner and the sin. If
homosexuality is not always a sin, in what circumstances is it not? And is there any biblical support for this?

Then I would suggest she might widen her scope to include historical or philosophical attitudes toward homosexuality. She already makes the point that culture is an important determiner of attitudes and morals. What are some of the specific ways in which American culture influences the way we think about homosexuality? How does one distinguish between culture and morality? Finally, I would encourage her to develop her notion of the relationship between homosexuals as natural and something to be treated in the same context as husband and wife. How could such a context help to determine when particular sexual acts are moral or immoral, loving or abusive? This is a particularly sensitive area for most religions, since the family has always been sacred in Christian history, but it's worth developing, since historically most Christian husbands were allowed to abuse their wives as long as they were married and we're only now discovering that loving and respectful relationships are basic to Christianity, in or out of marriage.

The task of the teacher in the class, then, is to encourage the students to develop their thought on a subject to the fullest. Moral questions like homosexuality are particularly difficult because they are so complex. But the students' writing is related to their thinking, and writing about what they think is one of the best ways to
develop thinking, and therefore to learn. And when they're in the process of discovery, we shouldn't be shocked or angered when they come up with positions that are unorthodox or heretical. Rather we need to challenge them on their logic and total rationale.

Many times students' lack of depth simply means they are not reading; many simply resist this. In the first paper the reading is limited to a few issues of one magazine and then the writer's thinking doesn't seem to go beyond his reading. In the second paper there is a good bibliography, but there is little evidence that it's used in the paper, and though the second writer is a better thinker, she still needs to show us she's read deeply, and to compare ideas and their consequences.

Finally, students need to keep writing--practicing, as one practices tennis, for writing is simply a good way to grow morally and religiously. Keeping a journal helps a writer to keep writing (and thinking) about important things. And again, drafts are a form of practice. The most accomplished writers say new discovery comes through constant revision. The fact that the subject of a paper is a difficult issue like homosexuality is all the more reason to keep trying different ways of saying what your thinking. This demands hard work as well as good moral acumen, and to encourage these things is what the composition teacher is about.