

Book review

Helmut Harder

Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment, by Willard M. Swartley. Scottsdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2003.

Willard Swartley is known for tackling difficult ethical and moral issues that the church has needed to face. His earlier book, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (1983), was widely read and highly acclaimed. Now he broaches a fifth issue that has preoccupied the church recently, homosexuality. Swartley had originally considered treating homosexuality in the earlier book, but chose not to at the time because that issue did not parallel the other four. That is, while the biblical

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texts on slavery, sabbath, war, and women give evidence of a progression of thought within positive and negative parameters, homosexuality is consistently surrounded by a negative aura in the scriptures. Having waited until 2003 to publish on this latter topic, the writer now benefits from an additional twenty years of discussion on the issue.

After the introductory chapter, the book moves through three parts. First, Swartley enters into dialogue with numerous *biblical studies* published on homosexuality over the past twenty years (chapters 2–4). Second, the author discusses twentieth-century *western cultural forces* that have contributed to the moral predicament we are in, and offers his analysis of their influence (chapters 5–6). Third, he offers *practical guidance* for the church (chapters 7–9).

What are Swartley's conclusions? The eight chapters (excluding chapter one) can be summarised as follows: (1) In the Old

Testament sexuality is based on a theology of creation that differentiates male and female, and hence regards sexually intimate same-sex relations negatively, as sinful. (2) Jesus extends compassion and mercy to all, including those mired in sexual sin, and calls people to holiness. (3) For Paul, the theology of Genesis 1–2 lies at the heart of his negative view of same-sex relations. (4) Biblical sexual ethics has suffered hard times in a culture that insists on writing its own moral script. (5) The biblical teachings on homosexuality are morally transcultural, applicable to all cultures throughout time. (6) With respect to gays and lesbians, the church is called to respond with both compassion and judgment. For example, homosexual people can be members of the Christian church, but participation in same-sex erotic activity is sinful. (7) What matters most is our identity in Christ. Sexual identity is important, albeit of secondary concern. (8) Three matters are of primary importance in our day: to uphold the authority of scripture; to listen to voices from outside western culture; and to be proactive in the pastoral care of people across the entire range of sexual morality.

In the opinion of this reviewer, the importance of Swartley's book is twofold: First, his hermeneutical approach to biblical texts on homosexuality has integrity, and is thus a compelling model for the church today. Those who may want to challenge Swartley's conclusions will have to debate his hermeneutical approach and will have to appeal to some other authority than the scriptures. Second, his presentation of trends in modern western culture signals a necessary and vital aspect of the background considerations in the church's current struggle with the issue of homosexuality.

Swartley has made a significant contribution to the church's discussion of homosexuality. Here is a study that can provide positive steps toward a resolution to the debate. Yet this reviewer would echo the author's challenge: "Let us not neglect the church's call to mission by haggling endlessly over this intractable issue of homosexuality"(47). Might this book serve to put some arguments to rest?

About the reviewer

Helmut Harder is emeritus professor of theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba.