

## Gays in the Church

# A Different Baptist Approach: "Our Neighbors as Ourselves"

The Olin T. Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill has long had the reputation for being a bit non-traditional in its preaching and practices. The church has, for example, been integrated for many years and has had a number of interracial couples in its congregation who have, for the most part, been accepted as members of the church community.

The current pastor of the church, the Reverend Robert Seymour, continues this non-traditional approach to controversial issues in his preaching about homosexuality. He gave a sermon on the subject in February of this year in which he projected a tolerant, Christ-centered approach to the subject.

In a recent interview with LAMBDA, Rev. Seymour reflected on that sermon and the subject of homosexuality. He pointed out that many of the scriptural references used to condemn homosexuality are highly questionable as to their context; that is, they are used without proper regard for the whole setting of scripture in which they occur. This has led to a fundamentalist view which condemns homosexuality as sin and the practicing homosexual as a sinner. The homosexual is placed outside of the Christian community.

Rev. Seymour's view is that homosexuality is not a sin but rather is "part of the givenness of life."

Givenness is defined as the state of being endowed by God with certain gifts. Just as there are people who are left handed or right handed, those with blue eyes or black eyes, there are those of us who are heterosexual and those who are homosexual. Each of us has been "given" our own particular sexual attributes as part of our endowment from God.

He believes, further, that God has created humans to be both male and female--meaning that each of us has attributes of the opposite sex. Homosexuality, when viewed within this context, can be considered to be part of the creative work of God.

Rev. Seymour believes that society, in persecuting homosexuals, has afflicted persons for a part of their personalities over which they have no control. Additionally he feels that society has imposed a more stringent standard of morality on gays than on heterosexuals. This comes about when the condition for acceptance of the homosexual as a person within the Christian community is abstinence from homosexual behavior. This double standard stems from the view that homosexual expression of love is a sin. Rev. Seymour rejects this view.

He says society is hypocritical to dis-

miss gay persons as promiscuous and then deny them the blessing and support of society in establishing relationships in which they can demonstrate love and commitment to another person.

Rev. Seymour has come to this belief after many years of counseling and study. He has held a number of seminars at his church on homosexuality. Inevitably afterwards he has been approached by parishoners who either sought personal counseling concerning their own homosexuality or advice in dealing with an acquaintance who was gay. From this experience Pastor Seymour has gained a better understanding of the pervasiveness of homosexuality within the church and within the larger society. Within his own church, he feels that the gay members are, for the most part, accepted and loved as part of the beloved community of believers.

In his sermon, Rev. Seymour described the homosexual as neighbor. "When Christ said that we ought to love our neighbor as ourselves, he did not exclude anybody; that includes everyone. The homosexual is our neighbor. They are in every community. It is as simple as that."

The concept of "the neighbor" has many significant social implications. First of all the neighbor is to be loved--which means, in part, that he or she is to be treated as one would want one's self to be treated. Second, the needs of the neighbor--both spiritual and physical needs--are to be met to the extent that one is enabled to do so.

Pastor Seymour believes that it is part of his mission to sensitize his fellow clergy to the need for a more loving and accepting approach toward the homosexual. Currently many clergy are opposed to any alteration in the traditional church's dim view of homosexuality. However, a lively debate is now brewing on the subject within most major denominations. Rev. Seymour believes that this debate may well yield a more tolerant and accepting approach toward the homosexual at the congregational level.

As for the future, he foresees a time when homosexual relationships will be more fully accepted within the church and the larger society. Indeed, he believes we are moving toward a time when unions between homosexuals will be performed within the sacred context, with societal blessing and recognition.

In closing his sermon, Rev. Seymour said, "I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every sexual orientation everyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable."

-Harold