

# Theology Matters

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## The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Theology, Analogies, and Genes

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*This article is adapted from Dr. Gagnon's workshop at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering on October 1, 2001, in Orlando.*

### A Theocentric and Christocentric Preface to the Sexuality Debate

#### Light from Paul

Let me say by way of preface what this debate on sexuality is about. It is not about us. It is about God. We have lost our way because we have converted the theocentric posture of Scripture into an anthropocentric posture. We have made the satisfaction of human desires and aspirations paramount. Yet when we look at Paul's letter to the Romans, we find that the first crescendo reached in the letter couches everything in terms of *God's* righteousness:

But now . . . *God's* righteousness has been brought to light, . . . that is, *God's* righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ . . . , whom *God* set before *himself* as an offering that makes amends by means of his blood, through faith, serving as a demonstration of *his* righteousness, . . . with a view to the demonstration of *his* righteousness in the present critical time, in order that *he himself* might be righteous and the one who

makes righteous the person whose life is based on faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:21-26; cf. 1:16-17)

Here Paul proclaims that God is showing himself to be in the right, definitively and at long last, in the way that God chooses to be right, on the basis of saving people through Jesus Christ and through no other. The only way that message can ever be heard properly is if the preceding material in Romans is also heard (1:18-3:20, especially 3:19-20), which brings people ultimately to one appropriate position, which is face on the floor, open to whatever way God chooses to redeem us because we have nothing to bring with us. With that overwhelming gratitude—in a sort of theophanic experience, like Job had—we receive what God has for us. Make no mistake about it: God insists that God will be in the right and God alone. And no one has any right to question that, because we are but dust. Much of the sexuality debate revolves around human demands about what God allegedly must do if God is to be considered loving and just, rather than

#### Table of Contents

The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Theology, Analogies, and Genes.....	p. 1
Vote "NO" on Amendment H .....	p. 14
Repent, Remember, Overcome.....	p. 15

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accepting with open hearts the singular way God has provided for acceptable sexual expression.

That God would allow his own Son to die for us is the greatest possible testimony of his love for us, and at the same time of the sole efficacy of Christ's atoning death (Rom 5:5-11). For if God could have done it any other way, surely God would have taken another approach. Indeed, the greatest theodicy question of our time does not have to do with cataclysmic events such as the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy, as bad as such events are. No, the greatest theodicy question of our time is how a just God could allow his own Son to die for us. The answer to that question is resolved only in that boundless depth of God's love for us that we spend the rest of eternity unraveling.

Yet that boundless love is expressed in a profound and, for us, often frustrating way. For God is not the Great Rubber Stamp in the sky that puts the seal of approval on all our inner desires. A better metaphor is to view God as the great plastic surgeon, with the caveat that God is not interested in mere cosmetic surgery. God is interested in deep-tissue surgery. God intends "by any means necessary" (to borrow a phrase from Malcolm X) to form Jesus in us. Our whole destiny moves toward the goal of being "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29), like Christ being dead with respect to carrying out sinful urges but alive with respect to obeying God (Rom 6:1-14). It is this that explains Paul's exasperated yearning for the Galatians that "Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19); that they, like himself, should learn to "no longer live" so that Christ may "live in" them (Gal 2:20). Or, as Paul could say to the Corinthians about himself and his associates, we are "always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:10). Or, as he could say about himself to the Philippians, "I suffered the loss of all things, and regard them as excrement, in order that I may gain Christ . . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the partnership in his sufferings, being conformed to his death" (Phil 3:8, 10).

That is ultimately what this whole sexuality debate is about. It is about whether or not we have the right to define for ourselves what we can do on the basis of desires that we experience in life, or whether God has the right to transform us into the image of Jesus as God sees fit. That is the alternative before each and every one of us, "my way"—as Frank Sinatra once said but no longer says—or God's way. God "who did not spare even his very Son but handed him over to death for us all, how can he not also graciously grant us all [good] things with Jesus?," Paul asks rhetorically in Romans 8:32. And is it not also true by the same token that, even sometimes when it is painful for us and contrary to our personal desires, God will require of us what is ultimately in our best interest? That denial of the urges of the flesh will sometimes be tantamount to a death of sorts? God is utterly in earnest to make us look like Jesus. Grace and a demanding ethic, including sexual ethic, go hand in hand. They are not in

conflict as stereo-typical presentations of an "accepting God" or "accepting Jesus" would have us believe. At the forefront is always "grace to become what God wants us to be" (so the center section of the first 11 chapters of Romans: 6:1-8:17), never "grace to free me up to do what I want to do." The latter is a truncated gospel; or, more to the point, no gospel at all.

### **Light from the Gospel of John**

I love the opening chapter of the Gospel of John—in fact the whole of the Gospel of John if you press me. But we'll confine ourselves for the moment to the first chapter. Remember how Jesus meets Nathanael and he knows immediately who Nathanael is from a distance. Nathanael is just thrilled by this. Yet this is a sort of equivalent of a "David Letterman stupid pet trick" in relation to what John is really getting at in the Gospel. Jesus adds: If you think that is something, "you will see . . . the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (1:51). Now already Jesus had said with respect to Nathanael, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (1:47)—a play on words with Jacob's alternate name "Israel," the one who is the stereotypical trickster in the Old Testament. When Jesus speaks at the end of John 1 about the ascent and descent of angels he once more recalls the Jacob cycle, in what is called in contemporary parlance an intertextual echo. Jacob had a dream at Bethel (Gen 28:10-22; Jacob did not yet know it was "Beth-El"; only later would he refer to the place as "the House of God"). Jacob dreamed about a ladder of God on which the angels of God were ascending and descending. Jesus says: You will see something greater, you will see the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Who or what is Jesus comparing himself to? The ladder. That is an astounding text. The Jesus of John's Gospel is basically searching for metaphors in the Scriptures with which he could be compared. Not Jacob. Who is Jacob that Jesus should be compared with Jacob?

Throughout the Gospel of John one finds a rejection of strict comparisons between Jesus and the great human figures of Israel's past. Instead we find comparisons with objects in the Old Testament that symbolize life itself. Why the ladder? Because the ladder symbolizes a link between heaven and earth. And if you want to encounter heaven on earth it has to be through Jesus. Moreover, as an instrument made of wood it beautifully symbolizes the wood of the cross. Jesus becomes the link between heaven and earth most profoundly at the point of his death (hence: "for you *will* see . . ."). Likewise, Jesus is likened in John 4 not to Jacob but to Jacob's well because flowing from Jesus' glorification at his death and departure is the living water that consists of the Spirit of Jesus (cf. 7:38-39). So too Moses is not the mold to which Jesus must conform. Compare Jesus not with Moses but with the bronze serpent that Moses "lifted up" in the desert and by which people bitten by poisonous snakes lived; for nobody ever looked on Moses and lived (John 3:14-15; cf. Num 21:6-9). Yet when people look on (i.e., believe in) Jesus "lifted up" on the cross, they live forever. Compare Jesus

not with Moses but with the “bread from heaven” associated with Moses’ desert sojourn (John 6:32-51; cf. Exodus 16). Nobody ever ate Moses and lived; but the manna was the “bread from heaven” (Ps 78:24) by which people were delivered from death. Similarly, when people believe that Jesus’ flesh was given for the life of the world (i.e., accept him as Savior by virtue of his atoning death), they live forever (6:51).

But that is not all. Jesus intensifies that offence by talking about “eating my flesh and drinking my blood” (6:53-58). For a Jew in antiquity, to speak about drinking blood—which is reserved for God—is the height of blasphemy. It is intensely scandalous; it is intensely offensive. That overlay of offensiveness and scandal is there by design. It is there to say: If you think you can do an end run around Jesus in some way, you are sadly mistaken. This is the one and the one alone through whom life is achieved and not just at any moment but at the moment of the cross when Jesus makes amends for human iniquity. By virtue of his sacrificial death on the cross Jesus becomes *the sole, indispensable soteriological medium for the cosmos*. Period. The offensiveness of this exclusive claim is underscored when the narrator notes that “From this point on many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him” (6:67)—quite understandably. If one had any queasiness about the centrality of Jesus in God’s plan, that would be the time to bow out. So Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “Do you also wish to go away?” Peter in effect responds, “Well, this is really strange stuff, but you have the words of eternal life. Where else are we to go? Now if there were some other alternative, and somebody else had the words of eternal life, I would be there. But that looks not to be the case, so we are staying with you, *the Holy One of God*” (cf. 6:67-69).

What we are now being asked to do in the current amendment A is to carve out a segment of our life—sexuality—and say in effect, “I will be the master of my domain. I will dictate to God what I need in life to make me happy.” That cannot be allowed in the church. Is it any wonder that the metaphor of dying with Christ is used by Paul (and implied by John’s image of being “born from above,” 3:3, 7)? When have we ever known death to be painless? Death is not an easy experience, and the metaphor is there to remind us that the human flesh does not go quietly. We hear the gospel: “Jesus is Lord” (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5; Phil 2:11; Col 2:6). The flesh says, “Oh, thank you very much, that resonates exactly with my personal interest.” Not exactly. That certainly was not the way it worked in my case. I am sure it probably was not in yours, and still is not in ours. The flesh goes only kicking and screaming; it constantly opposes the will of God because it sets its own will in place of God’s (Rom 8:5-8). It insists: “I want to do what I want to do, when I want to do it, and with whom I want to do it.”

The gospel is there to tell us: You may think you want this or that thing outside of Jesus, but it is not what you really

want. What you really want is Jesus, not even something that Jesus gives. Consider the other totalistic metaphors about Jesus in John’s Gospel, in addition to the Ladder and Well of Jacob and the Bronze Serpent and Manna of Moses. Jesus is not only the Good Shepherd but also the Gate itself by whom alone one enters the sheepfold of God’s redeemed community (John 10). He is the Glory of God that appeared on Mount Sinai (2:1-12; cf. Exod 19:16-20), the Temple (2:19-22), the Vine of Israel (15:1-11), the Resurrection (11:25), and the Light of the world (8:12; 9:5). And he is the Way or Road (the Greek word *hodos* carries both meanings). “How can we know the way or road” to the place you are going, asks Thomas (14:5). Jesus responds, “I am the Way (or Road), *and* the Truth, *and* the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). Ultimately, Jesus is nothing less than the “I am” (8:58; 18:6; cf. Exod 3:14), the Word or Mind of God made flesh (John 1:14).

It is as if you drove up to a McDonalds and said, “I’d like a cheeseburger and a coke, please”; and the person at the counter responded, “I am a cheeseburger.” Now that would probably be the last time you would see that person working behind the counter. But odd as it may sound, in effect, that is what Jesus is saying—although bread sounds better than cheeseburger as a staple of life. What Jesus is saying is: “Your deepest yearnings are satisfied in me. Every human quest is stilled in me. You may think you want something else, but what you really want is . . . me. You may think you want sex as you would like it, but what you really want is . . . me.” That is what we are fighting for with respect to the church in the sexuality debate.

Because sex is neither a god to be worshipped nor an essential component of authentic human existence, God is able to restrict access to sexual intercourse in a host of ways—to relationships that are monogamous, non-incestuous, adult, non-commercial, non-bestial, lifelong, and heterosexual. The only absolutely essential thing in life is Jesus himself. A church that attempts to supplant a consistently and strongly held sexual norm in Scripture is a church that has given up hope that Jesus is Answer enough. It is a church that refuses to accept the word from God that “My grace is sufficient for you, for [my] power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 11:9). It is a church that views self-fulfillment as more basic to the Christian life than denying oneself and taking up one’s cross (Mark 8:34). It is a church, in short, that no longer believes that God can bring life out of a dying to self. Therefore it stands incredulous at the notion that Scripture could actually, and rightly, close off one whole form of sexual expression to people with strong proclivities to only that one form.

## A Sensitive Issue

The homosexuality issue is very difficult, and the reason why the issue is very difficult is its very personal nature. It

involves, for example, people's children. But I think what often gets left out of the discussion is that it is not just a question of feeling compassion for people who have homosexual passions. It is also a question of whether culture can impact the incidence both of self-identifying homosexuality and of homosexual behavior in the population. As I will attempt to show, cultural influences can have an enormous impact on those numbers. And an increase in homosexual self-identification and homosexual practice in the population will, in turn, increase in the population the host of ancillary problems that typically arise from such behavior (see pp. 452-60, 471-79 of my book). We should feel as much for children who, through vigorous societal endorsement of homosexual behavior, are encouraged at a crucial stage of sexual development into cultivating homosexual self-identification and behavior, with its disproportionately high risks to health, relational dynamics, and gender identity. That is, we should feel as much for these children as for children already beset by homosexual urges. Moreover, feeling compassion for those already beset by homoerotic impulses by no means mandates endorsement of homosexual practice. Rather, true compassion for someone engaged in self- and other-harmful sexual behavior—whether it be homosexual behavior, incest, plural unions, serial short-term unions, adultery, commercial sex, adult-youth sex, or bestiality—requires sensitive and caring efforts at helping the participants out of such behavior.

### The Three Main Arguments For Supporting Homosexual Practice

There are three main arguments for endorsing homosexual behavior.

(1) *The "Love-Tolerance-Unity" Argument.* This argument is usually used as a preemptive first strike to cut off an appeal to Scripture. It simply asserts: "Look, I know what love is; I know what tolerance is; and I know what unity demands: the affirmation of consensual, loving same-sex erotic unions. Case closed, no matter what some Scripture texts espouse on same-sex intercourse" (for a response see pp. 33-35, 210-27, 241-43, 282-84 of my book).

(2) *The "Non-Essential Issue" Argument.* This argument contends that sex, and certainly "homosex," do not really matter a great deal. To be sure, one can find a rejection of same-sex intercourse in Scripture, but it is not a core issue or does not address the phenomenon of loving homosexual relationships. This argument can take many specific forms:

- a. Only a few isolated texts speak against homosexual intercourse, and nothing from Jesus (for a response see pp. 432-41, 185-228 of my book).

- b. The Bible disapproves of only exploitative forms of homosexual behavior (see the discussion of individual Bible texts in my book).
- c. Homosexual intercourse is regarded as sin but a sin no worse than any other sin, indeed less of a sin than judging others (see pp. 69-70, 74-78, 94-97, 113, 117-20, 264-69, 273-84, 305-308, 331).
- d. The church over the centuries has departed from Scripture's position on a number of issues. Given these analogous cases, what's the big deal about circumventing the Bible's opposition to homosexual behavior (see pp. 442-51, 460-69)?

(3) *The "New Knowledge" Argument.* The claim here is that we have acquired some new insight recently that the biblical authors did not have, which puts at jeopardy their viewpoint. This allegedly new knowledge has in view one or more of the following claims:

- a. The Levitical prohibitions of male same-sex intercourse are no more relevant today than a host of other discarded purity regulations in the Holiness Code (for a response see pp. 113-28 of my book).
- b. The Bible rejects homosexual practice because it sees the purpose of sex as procreation, not sexual intimacy (pp. 132-34, 270-73).
- c. The Bible's opposition is based on misogynistic biases: homoerotic relationships threaten the heterosexual paradigm of male dominance (pp. 138-42, 361-80).
- d. Biblical authors were ignorant of the genetic immutability of homosexual orientation, basing their opposition on the misunderstanding that homoerotic desires arise from overheated or excessive heterosexual passions (pp. 384-432).

These, then, are the three main arguments employed in the church for justifying the acceptance of homosexual behavior despite apparent opposition from biblical texts.

In the following remarks I am going to concentrate on two subset arguments from the list above: first on a subset of the "non-essential issue" argument, namely, the use of alleged analogies for deviating from the clear word of Scripture (2.d.); second on a subset of the "new knowledge" argument, namely, the contention that modern understanding of homosexual attraction as an immutable genetic condition renders the biblical view passé (3.d.).

Beyond that it will have to suffice to assert here (and answering to 2.a-c. above) that the Bible's opposition to homosexual practice is *pervasive* (with no dissenting voices in Scripture), *absolute* (with no exceptions for certain alleged non-exploitative forms), and *severe* (with no indication that the behavior is anything less than an egregious form of misconduct); moreover, that the rigor of its opposition exceeded anything else that developed in antiquity. The "big picture" of the Bible on the issue of homosexual practice is the complementarity of male-

female sexual bonds and the universally strong restriction of acceptable sexual activity to heterosexual marriage.

## The Argument from Alleged Analogies For Disregarding Scriptural Views

The particular analogies that are most commonly drawn for circumventing the biblical witness against homosexual practice are four. One has to do with a change to Old Testament Scripture, or its interpretation, already by the first-century church: the analogy of Gentile inclusion. The early church did not initially think Gentiles should be recipients of the message of the gospel, at least not apart from full observance of the Mosaic law. They learned to change their mind about that when they saw the work of the Spirit in the lives of believing (but law-free) Gentiles. Likewise we should also change our minds on the issue of homosexual behavior. Then, in a more contemporary vein, pro-homosex advocates argue that the church has changed its mind about such things as slavery, women's ordination, and divorce/remarriage.

### (1) Problems with the Gentile-inclusion analogy

The main problem with the analogy is that it involves *a series of category confusions*. Think in terms of two headings here: one for the inclusion of Gentiles, and the other, for inclusion of practicing homosexuals. I'm going to try to point out ways in which they are not analogous.

First of all, ethnic identity is based on an immutable objective condition that is 100% heritable: ancestry. For example, if two people of French ancestry have a child, that child, 100% of the time, will be of French ancestry. (I'm not a doctor but I believe it works out that way.) Homosexual self-definition, however, is based on mutable subjective desire that is not directly heritable. What this means is that one (ethnicity) is a given of birth, always; while the other (homosexual identity) is not an inevitable product of one's birth but rather is largely shaped by familial and extra-familial cultural/environmental factors. Practically speaking, church and society cannot do anything about the former but can play an important role in affecting the incidence of the latter.

Secondly, one (being a Gentile) is a self-definition only *incidentally* linked to sinful behavior, while the other (homosexual behavior) is a self-definition that is *directly* linked to sinful behavior. While first-century Jews could speak of righteous or God-fearing uncircumcised gentiles, the concept of a righteous participant in same sex intercourse would have been a complete oxymoron. In scriptural terms, same-sex intercourse was *by definition* sinful, not in some cases but in all cases. Gentiles, however, only *typically* engaged in sinful practices; a distinction could be made, and often was made, between being a Gentile and engaging in sinful practices.

Thirdly, one (the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles) involves the non-commission of a positive ritual act enjoined by Scripture on Jews. The other (homosexual sex) is more basic still, involving the commission of a negative moral act proscribed to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, one has to do with welcoming people (Gentiles); the other has to do with accepting behavior (same-sex intercourse). According to Acts 15, Gentiles were accepted into the church on the basis of faith in Christ without any concomitant acceptance of the behaviors, especially sexual behaviors, that made Gentiles sinful in the eyes of Scripture and in the eyes of first century Jews. Indeed, the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15 specifically enjoined Gentiles not to engage in *porneia* ("sexual immorality"). And since the Decree as a whole echoes the regulations imposed on Jews and resident aliens alike in Leviticus 17-18, it clearly has the sin of homosexual intercourse in view, among others. There is a clear distinction here between people and behavior.

Fifthly, the one (the expansion of salvation for uncircumcised Gentiles) has some Old Testament precedent (see pp. 466-69 of my book), while the other (a positive assessment of same-sex intercourse) has none.

Finally, the one (inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles) has uniform New Testament approval: there is no New Testament author who argues otherwise. The other (acceptance of homosexual practice) has no New Testament support.

Consequently, there are a series of significant category confusions that make any attempt at analogy between the inclusion of Gentiles and acceptance of homosexual practice highly unconvincing.

We are not finished yet, however, with the problems in drawing such an analogy. There is also the problem of *sloppy application*. If one were to apply pro-homosex arguments consistently, numerous kinds of immoral sexual activity could be justified, so long as:

- a) One demonstrates the presence of the Spirit in other areas of one's life.
- b) Indisputable evidence cannot be produced that the behavior in question harms each and every one of the participants under all circumstances and in scientifically measurable ways.

Now these are simply naïve and unreasonable standards. With respect to the first point, is it impossible for a person who solicits sex from prostitutes to give to the poor? No. In fact, humans bifurcate their lives all the time, acting nobly in some areas and ignobly in others. This is endemic to human nature. With respect to the second point, is it true that every single case of plural marriage or incest that we know of involves behavior that can be demonstrated to produce personal distress or scientifically

measurable maladaptiveness in each and every one of the participants in all circumstances? No. So basically you can drive a truck through this sloppily applied analogy. For the hermeneutical ground rules employed in the acceptance of homosexual practice you must ignore the following factors:

- The degree to which a behavior is categorically rejected by the Old Testament in contradistinction to the surrounding culture.
- The question of whether that rejection is strongly and pervasively renewed in the New Testament, again in contradistinction to the surrounding culture.
- Commonsense standards for sexual complementarity, avoiding the twin extremes of too much similarity (as with incest) and too much dissimilarity (so bestiality).
- The statistically verifiable association between the behavior in question and a substantially increased risk in a host of negative ancillary effects.

Regarding the first two points above, early Israel, early Judaism, and Christianity did not naively imbibe at the cultural well on this issue; they were distinctly countercultural. We know of no other cultures in the ancient Near East or in the Greco-Roman world that stood more unequivocally opposed towards same-sex intercourse. Early Israel, early Judaism, and Christianity had to think long and hard about what they were doing to buck the cultural trends elsewhere.

So, if ignores the horrendous category confusions and the problems with a consistent application of the naïve corollaries for justifying homoerotic behavior, then, yes, one could use the Gentile analogy. I wouldn't. Let us be clear here. There are a lot of other types of sexual behavior right around the corner and a number of which one could make a better case for, including unions involving three or more partners and at least some forms of incest. If the church were to spend thirty years mulling over the potential for such unions, believe me, the church could make a much better case for their acceptance than the one that some have attempted to make for homoerotic unions.

## (2) Problems with the slavery analogy

Slavery is a very poor analogue because:

- There is no scriptural mandate to enslave others, nor does one incur a penalty for releasing slaves.
- Slavery is not grounded in pre-Fall structures.
- Israelite law put various restrictions on enslaving fellow Israelites (mandatory release dates, the right of near-kin redemption, treating as hired laborers rather than as slaves, no returning runaway slaves), while Paul in 1 Cor 7:21 and Philemon 16 regarded liberation from slavery as at least a penultimate good. The highest good, of course, is having your moral purpose in place, and nobody can take that away from

you, whatever condition in life you happen to be in. It is all the better if you can be released from slavery, because then you have more free choices in your use of time—not to do whatever you want, but to be enslaved all the more to Christ.

- In relation to the cultures of their day, the biblical stance on slavery pushed in the direction of its curtailment and eradication; as regards the biblical stance on same-sex intercourse a reverse situation was in effect, pushing in the direction of expanding and deepening the ban on same-sex intercourse.

It is time to recognize that slavery is really quite a silly analogue to choose, one that reflects poorly on the hermeneutical acumen of those who apply it to the issue of same-sex intercourse. Simply put, Scripture nowhere expresses a vested interest in preserving slavery, whereas Scripture does express a clear vested interest in the male-female model of sexuality. The homosexuality issue is put on an entirely different footing by Scripture, where there is not the slightest indication anywhere in the canon that same-sex intercourse is anything other than a detested practice, a practice to be utterly eschewed by the people of God, Jew and Gentile believer alike, at all times and in all circumstances.

## (3) Problems with the divorce/remarriage analogy

Divorce and remarriage also are a flawed analogy, because:

- The failure of the church to uphold the teaching of Jesus on this issue may be just that: a failure of the church. The church must ponder: Is it a virtue to be more consistently disobedient to the will of Christ? If it were, then arguably there would be no obstacle to approving various multiple-partner unions, incest, bestiality, sexual infidelity, and solicitation of prostitutes. Let us be done with the pretense that we are disciples of Jesus. Now, I do not pass any judgment on those already divorced and remarried. Some things are done and can't be undone. But if a person has not yet been divorced and remarried, and that person wants to be a disciple of Jesus, the basic rule of thumb Jesus gives is this: If you decide to get divorced, you have basically one option: be a eunuch for the Kingdom of God for the remainder of your life. No other sex with anybody. If the church held that position—with an obvious exception for physical endangerment and perhaps special consideration for those divorced against their will—the number of divorces and remarriages would decline dramatically, especially divorces and remarriages initiated by the husband. This is *Jesus'* teaching, a teaching that Jesus had to think long and hard about since it bucked the entire cultural trend, not only in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin generally but also in the Israel of his day. To Jesus sex mattered. The view going around today that sex did not matter for the various authors of Scripture and for Jesus has no basis in

Scripture itself. In both Testaments it matters, and it matters significantly, along with idolatry and economic exploitation, a formal triad.

- While there is some diversity within the canon on the question of divorce (for example the allowances for adultery and marriage to unbelievers by Matthew and Paul respectively, to say nothing of the OT), there is no diversity of any sort within the canon on the question of homosexual behavior.
- Unlike the self-affirming view of homosexual unions put forward by pro-homosex apologists, divorce is still recognized as a mark of the sinful failure of those who perpetrate it. The church does not, and never should, celebrate divorce. Yet we are being asked to celebrate homoerotic unions as a mark of the glorious diversity of human sexual behavior. There is no parallel here.
- Most importantly of all, it is precisely *the unrepentant and repetitive* character of homosexual practice that sets it apart entirely from divorce. The church works to prevent members from perpetuating a cycle of divorce and remarriage; it takes an especially dim view of multiple divorces by the same person. A “serial divorcer,” certainly one who spoke glowingly of divorce as a gift of God, would not meet with the church’s approval (and would have a hard time being ordained to church office). The point of comparison here with same-sex intercourse is that the two sins of divorce and same-sex intercourse are forgivable and that it is possible to restore the perpetrators to wholeness—but not by encouraging them to perpetuate the behavior in question. The church does not say to the divorcé(e), “That was a good thing you did, getting divorced. We’ll continue to provide the necessary support so that you can perpetuate the cycle of divorce and remarriage with a minimum amount of negative side effects.” Yet that is exactly how advocates of same-sex intercourse view the church’s role vis-à-vis practicing, self-avowed homosexuals. Homosexual persons are asking the church to look the other way as they engage repeatedly and approvingly in acts that Scripture categorically regards as sin of a very severe nature.

What kind of analogy, then, is divorce? Not much of one.

#### **(4) Problems with the women-in-ministry analogy**

Finally, women in ministry is a bad analogue because:

- As with the Gentile-inclusion analogy, the analogy with women involves significant category confusions. Being a woman is an immutable genetic condition always given in the womb. It is not a mutable condition like the existence of homosexual passions, which can be elevated, reduced, and sometimes even eliminated. In Scripture’s view, too, being a woman is not a self-definition directly linked to sinful behavior, as is erotic desire for a person of the same sex.

- Although the contemporary church has gone further than much of the New Testament witness in affirming the ordination of women as church pastors, there are a number of positive precedents for putting women in leadership roles, in both Testaments: Miriam, judge Deborah, Huldah, and Esther among others in the OT; the women involved in the ministry of Jesus; the example of Priscilla and other women who served as co-workers of Paul’s (Rom 16:1-7, 12, 13, 15; Phil 4:2-3). There are no such precedents for homosexual behavior anywhere in the Bible.
- The Pauline baptismal formula “there is no ‘male and female’” was never intended as a formula eradicating all antinomies between good and bad forms of sexual orientations and behaviors. Nor can it be made to say such a thing in our contemporary context without validating the wide array of sexual “orientations” available in human society, including orientations for sex with animals, family members, children, or multiple sex partners.
- As with the slavery analogy, it is helpful to compare the biblical view to the prevailing views of its own cultural world. Once more: while the Bible’s treatment of women looks reasonably affirming when compared to its cultural context, the situation is exactly the opposite with respect to same-sex intercourse.

What then are the best analogues? If it is not women’s ordination, if it is not divorce and remarriage, if it is not slavery, if it is not Gentile inclusion, what is it? And why are these other, better analogues never introduced?

#### **The Best Analogies to the Bible’s Opposition to Homosexual Practice**

The best analogies to the Bible’s opposition are—obviously—those that most closely match the most salient features of the biblical view of same-sex intercourse:

1. sexual behavior (i.e., not just thoughts but behavior, and behavior that is sexual in nature)
2. that is proscribed (i.e., not just enjoined, a more basic sin of commission rather than sin of omission)
3. by both Testaments, at least implicitly,
4. pervasively within each Testament, at least implicitly (i.e., not just an isolated position in each Testament),
5. severely (i.e., strongly proscribed), and
6. absolutely (i.e., no exceptions, so far as we know),
7. with the proscription making sense.

That is where one is going to find the best analogues for what we do with respect to homosexual behavior. The strongest parallels are not Gentile inclusion, slavery, divorce, or women in ministry, but rather incest, bestiality, adultery, prostitution and soliciting prostitutes. Of course, all of these remain prohibited in the church today.

Incest provides a particularly good parallel. Both incestuous relationships and homosexual relationships are:

1. Regarded by authors of Scripture with similar revulsion as extreme instances of sexual immorality;
2. Capable of being conducted in the context of adult, consensual, long-term monogamous relationships;
3. Wrong partly on the assumption that they all involve two people who are too much alike;
4. Wrong partly because of the disproportionately high incidence of scientifically measurable, ancillary problems arising from many such relationships.

It cannot be demonstrated that incest, conducted between two consenting and committed adults, produces scientifically measurable harm and/or personal distress to the each and every participant in all circumstances. Yet the church does not validate any types of incestuous unions, no matter how “well” such unions are done; and it certainly would not ordain a person involved in a committed and consensual incestuous union. Why, then, should we validate certain types of homosexual unions and ordain self-affirming participants in homosexual intercourse?

If the church follows Scripture in treating a host of sexual behaviors as significant violations of the moral life even when personal distress and/or harm cannot be proven in all cases; and if too Scripture itself invites a closer comparison between these proscriptions and the proscription of homosexual practice, then how credible is the appeal to Gentile inclusion, slavery, divorce/remarriage, and women’s roles? Not very credible. The argument from analogies refutes rather than confirms the notion that same-sex intercourse should be treated as a non-essential matter.

From here we segue to one of the “new knowledge” claims.

### **The Argument From the Bible’s Alleged Ignorance of the Innate and/or Immutable Character of Homosexual Desire**

Many claim that Scripture’s opposition to same-sex intercourse is grounded in an obsolete notion about the origin of homoerotic passion; namely, that *all* who engage in sex with members of the same sex do so as bored heterosexuals looking for additional novel sexual adventures. Since we now allegedly know that homosexual passions constitute a distinct “orientation” that is given at birth, often exclusive, and generally immutable, we can disregard Scripture’s opposition. This view thus banks on the assumption that Scripture opposes same-sex intercourse solely because it believes homoerotic passions to be manufactured in participants who have other options for sexual fulfillment.

We will first examine Paul’s thinking on the subject in his historical context, then delve into socio-scientific data.

#### **On Paul’s thinking:**

1) A number of Greco-Roman sources suggest at least a partial congenital basis for homoerotic attraction—and some of these same sources still argued that same-sex intercourse was contrary to nature. We are not the first culture to theorize this view of causation (see pp. 384-85, 392-95 of my book).

2) It is improbable that Paul was unaware of the existence of men whose sexual desire was oriented exclusively toward other males. For example, there existed in the first-century Roman world people called *cinaedi* (Latin plural; singular *cinaedus*; derived from Greek *kinaidos*, pl. *kinaidoi*, “butt-shaker”). These were adult males who perpetuated an effeminate appearance in order to attract male sex partners. Moreover, they were exclusively attracted to other males. Philo, a first-century Jew, was quite aware of their existence. Since the *cinaedi* appear frequently in the literature of the period, it is highly unlikely that Paul was unaware of their existence.

3) In antiquity “excess passion” never constituted an independent critique of same-sex intercourse. Passion was judged as excessive (e.g., the passion for sex with animals) on the basis of other criteria about behavioral limits. Otherwise, how could one determine which passions were in excess? There has to be some prior determination that something is wrong with the behavior in question in order to determine that it constitutes excess passion. Paul likely viewed any transgression of God-ordained boundaries to be—by definition—an overheating or excess of desire, in the sense of desiring something that God did not ordain humans to desire by virtue of creation intent and design.

4) It is not possible to deduce from Paul’s remarks in Rom 1:24-27 that Paul believed that every single individual who engaged in same-sex intercourse also experienced heterosexual desire at one time (much less that idol worship was a necessary prerequisite for homoerotic behavior!). Paul was referring to collective entities, not individuals, and to widespread effect, not origin.

5) It is illogical to think that Paul only condemned participation in homosexual acts by those “naturally” attracted to the opposite sex. For, if we were to draw that conclusion, we would have to draw that same conclusion for other sexual behaviors that Scripture opposes. In that event we would have to assert that Scripture expresses opposition only to acts of incest, bestiality, and adultery by those not constitutionally predisposed to committing such sins. Incidentally, it is worth pondering that the overwhelming majority of men are constitutionally predisposed to have multiple sex partners. It may be true of many women as well but it is especially a problem for men (the off-the-charts promiscuity of homosexual men,

even in relation to homosexual women, is stark testimony to this reality). In a world that sanctioned and provided cultural incentives for high numbers of sex partners, men generally would have little problem with having sex with large numbers of women. But that is not what God calls us to do because it is self-destructive and other-destructive behavior, even when it is consensual.

6) In terms of Paul's understanding of nature, Paul distinguished between innate passions perverted by the Fall and exacerbated by idol worship on the one hand—and, by the way, one does not have to create a statue to worship idols—and material creation that was left relatively intact despite human sin on the other hand. There is a whole series of behaviors and passions listed in Rom 1:29-31, following the reference to same-sex intercourse in 1:24-27, that certainly have some innate basis. People do not choose to be covetous or envious, for example. They are simply born with an innate proclivity to feel bad when others have attractive things or persons that they do not have. That does not mean that covetousness and envy are *natural* or *in accordance with nature* in the Pauline sense. So the innateness of homosexual passions would not subvert Paul's view of them as *contrary to nature* since by *nature* Paul meant God's intended design for creation untouched by the introduction of sin into the world (i.e., the anatomical, procreative, and interpersonal complementarity of male-female sexual bonds as more secure heuristic clues than innate passions).

7) Current theories of homosexual development are essentially compatible with Paul's own view of sin. In Romans 5 and 7 Paul speaks of sin as an innate impulse operating in the human body, transmitted by an ancestor human, and never entirely within the control of human will. This is precisely how homosex-affirming advocates describe homosexual orientation. And Rom 1:24-27 itself talks about God "giving over" people to pre-existing passions for members of the same sex, passions which, apart from God's help, are beyond control. If Paul could be transported into the twenty-first century and told that homoerotic desires have (at most) a partial and indirect connection to innate causation factors, he doubtless would have said either "I could have told you that" or at very least "That fits well into my own understanding of sin."

### **On current socio-scientific data:**

Here we will focus on four main areas in which socio-scientific data impacts on the question of whether homosexual desires are congenital and immutable: (1) the alleged existence of a distinct *homosexual brain*; (2) the alleged existence of a special *homosexual gene*; (3) indications of *childhood factors in sexual development*; (4) indications of the *cultural malleability of homosexual desire*.

### (1) *A homosexual brain?*

Despite the rush to judgment by the media in the past decade, there is no conclusive evidence that male homosexual brains differ from male heterosexual brains, much less that such alleged differences are present at birth or that they mechanistically determine sexual orientation.

There are a number of problems with concluding that male homosexual brains differ from male heterosexual brains. Simon LeVay's 1991 study of an area of the hypothalamus known as INAH3 in 41 cadavers contended that INAH3 was two times larger in the heterosexual males than in the females and homosexual males. However, his study was inconclusive at numerous points:

- It was a single-author study; multi-author studies are best for checking the accuracy of measurements.
- The study involved an extremely small sample size, rendering suspect any broad generalizations.
- LeVay made problematic assumptions about the sexual orientation of the subjects prior to death, assuming heterosexual orientation for cadavers whose medical charts did not specify homosexual orientation. If all six of the "heterosexuals" who died of AIDS—this at a time when AIDS was even more of a homosexual disease than it is in the United States today—were in fact homosexuals then the average size differences of the INAH3 for the two groups would not be significant.
- Several of the homosexuals had an INAH3 larger than that of the average heterosexual male, while several of the "heterosexual" males had an INAH3 smaller than that of the average homosexual male.
- LeVay's study has not been replicated.

Even *if* brain differences between male homosexuals and male heterosexuals were to exist, it would not establish that these differences arose prior to birth rather than subsequent to birth. Plastic structures in the hypothalamus might be altered by any one of a number of *post-natal* factors:

- The AIDS virus and use of AIDS drugs
- Early childhood trauma or sexual arousal
- Other aspects of sexual behavior such as promiscuity and contact with fecal matter
- Level of physical conditioning (sports, exercise)
- Stress levels

Any one of these, or a combination thereof, might affect the size of INAH3. In this case, differences could be assigned to distinctive environmental and behavioral patterns after birth, perhaps even well into adulthood, rather than to conditions before birth. The notion of someone being born into some immutable condition impervious to the effects of environment and personal behavior would be (to mix metaphors) dead in the water.

## (2) *A homosexual gene?*

More important has been the attention given to the homosexual gene issue. Studies testing for genetic influence have to date demonstrated, at most, only an indirect and subordinate role of genes in the development of homosexual orientation. Here there are two types of studies of note: (a) those that look for a particular gene sequence in homosexuals; and (b) those that check for sexual orientation concordance in identical twins.

(a) As regards two so-called “gay gene” studies by Dean Hamer (like LeVay, a scientist who also happens to be homosexual), one published in 1993 and the other in 1995, the following caveats need to be kept in mind:

- These studies applied, at most, only to a very limited segment of the homosexual population: homosexual brothers who had homosexual relatives on the maternal side of the family. A high percentage of this test group allegedly had a particular genetic sequence in the region of the X chromosome known as Xq28. The results did not apply to other male homosexuals; and none of the lesbian sisters checked carried the chromosomal marker in Xq28.
- In the more carefully conducted second study, two thirds of the pairs of homosexual brothers beyond what would have obtained merely at random did not share the Xq28 variation.
- The media hoopla about a so-called “gay gene” is vastly overdone. There are no single-gene dictated behaviors in humans. Moreover, other studies testing for genetic influence on behavior (e.g., cigarette smoking, criminality, alcoholism) attribute to genes only a secondary and indirect role. Even Hamer himself has admitted: “There will never be a test that will say for certain whether a child will be gay.”
- Finally, a 1999 study by Canadian researchers, using a larger sample size, detected no significant connection between the Xq28 variation and homosexual orientation.

(b) The information from identical twin studies is even more revealing. Most people have probably heard about a series of identical twin studies that were done in the early 1990’s, which indicated that when one identical twin self-identified as non-heterosexual the co-twin did likewise roughly 50% of the time. The studies were hailed by the media as proof of the dominant genetic basis for homosexual behavior. The conclusion was premature.

- In terms of genetic makeup identical twins are 100% identical. Yet even a non-critical acceptance of the findings indicates that 50% of the time genes did not dictate concordance in sexual identity.
- The studies did not subtract cultural influences arising from being raised in a similar environment; nor did it take into account the distinctive socialization of twins, especially identical twins

(prone to imitation, higher trait-related environment, higher rates of child abuse and same-sex peer ridicule, more likely to experiment sexually with each other and to be behind in both physical development and social skills). Ideally, identical twins raised in separate households should be studied to minimize the influence of similar familial and environmental conditions. For obvious reasons it is difficult to find a large enough sample size. However, a 1986 study of four sets of female identical twins raised in different households, where at least one twin identified as lesbian, found that in all four sets the co-twin self-identified as heterosexual.

- Unheralded were the following culture-determined results: concordance rates for non-identical twins were 2 to 3 times higher than that for non-twin siblings despite the fact that both groups share the same genetic similarity (50%); non-twin biological brothers had the same concordance rate as *adoptive* brothers. These differences obviously had nothing to do with genes.
- The studies showing a roughly 50% concordance rate were riddled with sample bias: volunteers were recruited through advertisements in gay publications.
- Most importantly, J. Michael Bailey (author of some of the earlier studies) in his most recent study, published in 2000, corrected the sample bias of earlier studies by sending surveys to a third of the twins named in the Australian Twin Register. This improved study reported that in *only* 12.3% (not 50%) of the identical twin pairs in which at least one twin was non-heterosexual was the co-twin also non-heterosexual (the concordance for non-identical twins averaged only 4%). In other words, almost nine out of ten times, when one identical twin was non-heterosexual the co-twin was heterosexual. Bailey concluded:
  - “Concordances from prior studies were inflated due to . . . [sample] bias.”
  - “In contrast to most prior twin studies of sexual orientation . . . ours did not provide statistically significant support for the importance of genetic factors.”
  - This new study, in contrast to Hamer’s “gay gene” study, suggests that “any major gene for strictly defined homosexuality has either low penetrance or low frequency”—i.e., weak influence.

So while not discounting altogether genetic influence in the development of a homosexual identity, the studies to date suggest that the influence is not major.

What factors, then, are likely to play major roles in the development of homosexual identity and behavior? Two factors are likely to play pivotal roles: societal microstructures (i.e., influences from the child’s immediate network of relationships, sometimes in combination with indirect innate factors) and societal macrostructures (i.e., influences from the larger cultural

environment in terms of expectations and sanctions). For both factors individual choices and decisions can significantly affect the origin and intensity of homoerotic impulses. With respect to an ultimate outcome of homosexual self-identification, such choices and decisions may be direct and conscious, or they may be incremental, indirect, and largely unconscious.

### (3) *Childhood Factors in Sexual Development*

A number of individual life circumstances in childhood may contribute to the development of a homosexual identity:

- Children who exhibit a high degree of gender nonconformity have an increased likelihood (though not an inevitability) of exhibiting homosexual behavior as an adult (so say LeVay and Hamer, among others). Gender nonconformity may serve as a middle term between genes and brain development on the one hand and individual responses to environmental factors on the other (e.g., familial relationships, peer socialization, cultural gender-norm markers).
- Daryl Bem, a homosexual professor of psychology at Cornell, has proposed the “exotic becomes erotic” theory: individuals develop sexual attraction for those whom they find to be dissimilar to themselves in childhood. In this scenario, gender nonconformity precedes homosexual identity.
- According to some psychoanalytic thought, a child’s perceptions of distancing on the part of the same-sex parent and/or later by same-sex peers may intensify yearnings for same-sex acceptance and affirmation to a point where they become sexualized. This may well be the single most important factor, though not a necessary one. Perceived difficulties in opposite-sex relationships (parental and/or peer) may also play a role.
- Another factor in some homosexual development may have to do with relatively early sexual arousal. Self-identified homosexuals and bisexuals are three to nine times more likely to have experienced sex as a child (usually with an adolescent or adult male) than their heterosexual counterparts.
- Finally, human initiative in the face of cultural permissiveness cannot be discounted. The greater the latitude for sexual experimentation, especially in the period from late childhood through adolescence and early adulthood, the greater the incidence of self-identifying homosexuals.

The last point underscores that fact that individual life experiences do not occur in a vacuum but rather are shaped and even precipitated by broader cultural influences. It is to that concern that we now turn.

### (4) *The Cultural Malleability of Homosexual Desire*

Both sociological and psychological data confirm at least some cultural malleability in the manifestation of homosexual desire. For example:

- David Greenberg’s 500-page cross-cultural study, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (University of Chicago, 1988), demonstrates wide variance in both the incidence and form of homosexual behavior across cultures ancient and modern. Greenberg, who is thoroughly supportive of homosexual relationships, concludes:

The years some homosexuals spend trying without success to conform to conventional expectations regarding gender and sexual orientation tell against the most extreme claims of sexual plasticity. However, in the absence of any evidence linking the peculiar sexual practices of Melanesia with genetic difference, it is reasonable to suppose that if a bunch of Melanesian infants were to be transported in infancy to the United States and adopted, few would seek out the pederastic relationships into which they are inducted in New Guinea, or take younger homosexual partners when they reached maturity. Similarly, American children raised in New Guinea would accommodate themselves to the Melanesian practices. *Where social definitions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior are clear and consistent, with positive sanctions for conformity and negative ones for nonconformity, virtually everyone will conform irrespective of genetic inheritance and, to a considerable extent, irrespective of personal psychodynamics.* (p. 487)

- The 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSL), conducted mainly by University of Chicago researchers (Laumann, et al.) and still the most significant study of sex in America, found that:
  - Urban males were nine times more likely to self-identify as homosexuals than rural males; urban females 2.5 times more likely than rural females.
  - Females who were college graduates were nine times more likely to identify themselves as lesbian or bisexual than females who were not educated beyond high school; for males the figure is two times more likely.
  - The researchers concluded that their results did not “fit with certain analogies to genetically or biologically based traits such as left-handedness or intelligence.” Rather, “an environment that provides increased opportunities for and fewer negative sanctions against same-gender sexuality may both allow and even elicit expression of same-gender interest and sexual behavior” (p. 308).
- Other data suggests that lifetime sexual orientation shifts along the Kinsey spectrum, both minor and major, are the norm for those who experience any sort

of homosexual desire (and particularly so among lesbians). Moreover, even the majority of those who identify themselves as “exclusively homosexual” have been sexually aroused by members of the opposite sex at some point(s) during their lives (so say the studies by Alfred Kinsey, Bell and Weinberg, the Family Research Institute, and the NHSLS researchers).

- Reparative therapists and transformation ministries report some success in achieving for motivated clients considerable to complete change from homosexual to heterosexual orientation—a rate of success comparable perhaps to that achieved by Alcoholics Anonymous.

##### (5) *Caveats and Qualifications*

In making the above points, I do not contend that self-identified homosexuals can be easily rid of homoerotic desires. Disordered sexual “orientations” of any stripe, not just homosexual ones, do not change easily. This includes orientations toward multiple sex partners, sex with members of the inner family circle, sex with children or adolescents, sex with animals, commercial sex, sadomasochistic sex, and coercive sex. Patterns of sexual arousal wired in the brain by life’s experiences are usually not easily removed, even after years of therapeutic intervention. Ironically, those who argue that homosexual behavior should not be disavowed precisely because it is resistant to change would—to be consistent—have to contend that non-monogamous relationships be accepted for male homosexual relationships. For statistical evidence to date strongly suggests that male homosexuals have extraordinary difficulty, relative even to lesbians, in forming monogamous unions.

No, my point is more basic: homoerotic desire is not like race or anatomical sex. It is not a fixed, immutable birthright. It is closer to an entrenched (but not irrevocable) taste than to physical differences impervious to cultural shifts. This can be perceived by reviewing (a) the different levels of change that are possible for homosexual tastes and (b) the different mechanisms for inducing change.

(a) It is erroneous to restrict the meaning of *change* in this context to the complete eradication of homosexual desire. As we have seen above, change can include:

- A reduction or elimination of homosexual behavior;
- A reduction in the intensity and frequency of homosexual impulses;
- The experience of heterosexual arousal (whether in place of or in conjunction with homosexual arousal);
- Reorientation from exclusive or predominant homosexuality to exclusive or predominant heterosexuality.

Ultimately, in terms of Christian self-definition, the true ex-homosexual is not only someone who never experiences homosexual impulses, just as the ex-adulterer

is not only someone who never experiences a desire for sex with women other than his wife. The true ex-homosexual (or, more precisely, ex-“homosexer”) is someone who, by God’s grace and the power of the Spirit, no longer acquiesces to homosexual impulses.

(b) Both the level of incidence of homosexual desire and fluctuations in its intensity and degree of exclusivity can be affected by:

- The degree of cultural incentives, opportunities, and indoctrination for or against homosexual behavior;
- Experiences at various points in an individual’s life, including the degree and character of parental and peer-group affirmation (especially same-sex), early sexual arousal, sexual experimentation, unsolicited erotic encounters, exposure to the homosexual subculture, the availability (or absence) of sex partners or satisfying sexual relationships, and vulnerability to outside influences (owing to personality type, stress, etc.);
- Therapeutic intervention.

The different types of change possible and the existence of various external mechanisms for producing change combine to put homosexual proclivities on an entirely different footing than race or sex. Furthermore, the behavior arising from homosexual desire is associated with a disproportionately high rate of health problems (sexually transmitted diseases, mental health issues) and of non-monogamous and short-term relationships, as well as with an annihilation of basic societal gender norms. These negative effects cannot be explained away by one-sided appeals to societal homophobia (for which see pp. 452-60, 471-89). So, since church and society can play a significant role in reducing the incidence of homosexual behavior in the population, they can and should do so.

## Summary and Concluding Thoughts

We may now summarize the main points of this article.

First, we looked at texts from both Paul and John to show that arguments favoring homosexual behavior overturn not only Scripture’s explicit teaching on such but also other basic principles enshrined in Scripture. In insisting that God and Christ could not possibly deny one whole form of consensual sexual expression, pro-homosex arguments not only ignore parallel instances where the church denies consensual sexual activity but also give only subordinate weight to the theocentric posture of Scripture, the basic Christian paradigm of grace amidst cruciformity, and the image of Jesus as the sufficient Answer to all life’s desires.

Second, we analyzed the appeal made to a set of analogies for disregarding Scripture’s stance on homosexual behavior: the analogies of Gentile inclusion, slavery,

divorce and remarriage, and women in ministry. We found such analogies to suffer from significant category confusions and sloppy hermeneutical application. We argued, too, that the Bible's stance on bestiality, adultery, prostitution and soliciting prostitutes, and especially incest constitute much closer and more reliable analogues.

Third, we addressed the claim that the Bible's alleged ignorance of the innate and immutable character of homoerotic desire renders its stance on homosexual practice irrelevant for our own times. We noted that the notion of homoerotic passion having perhaps a partial congenital basis is entirely consistent with Paul's understanding of sin; furthermore, that socio-scientific evidence to date indicates that congenital factors in the development of homosexual desire and identity are largely indirect and subordinate to cultural factors. There is little basis for contending that homosexual desire is to be likened to race and sex. The church's stance can exercise a marked effect on the incidence of homosexuality.

We offer the following concluding thoughts:

- *The early church's critique of an idolatrous view of sex.* Jesus, Paul, and the first-century church generally did not view sexual intercourse and sexual gratification to be God-given rights, nor did they regard sexual intimacy as the highest good. Homoerotic relationships were more prevalent in their cultural world than ours. Yet they accepted one and only one model for acceptable sexual relationships: a lifelong, monogamous union between one man and one woman. In so doing, they were not deficient in the exercise of love and compassion. Conversely, those today who insist that love dictates the acceptance of homosexual behavior are not more loving than Jesus, Paul, and the authors of Scripture generally.
- *Viewing the relationship needs of homosexuals in a broader context.* There is an unfortunate tendency in current church discussions to isolate the intimacy needs of homosexuals from all others. The fact is that Scripture's carefully defined vision for acceptable human sexual expression—and that of any civil society whose law contains vestiges of that vision—leaves a lot of people bereft of sexual intimacy through acceptable channels. For example, there are twice as many people in the United States today who have had no sex partners since age 18 than there are people who classify themselves as (non-bisexual) homosexuals (so the NHSLS study). Probably most of the former are not celibate by personal preference. There is no guarantee in life that suitable sexual partners will be available. And there should be no recourse to a philosophy of "sex by any means necessary," which in the end could only have destructive consequences for society as a whole.

- *What the church's energy and resources should be invested in.* The extraordinary energy that the church has expended in efforts to secure endorsement of homosexual behavior should be diverted instead to exploring ways in which those homosexually inclined, as well as all others who cannot obtain sexual intimacy within the bounds of Scripture's parameters, can have their intimacy needs met through acceptable avenues.

The enormous burden of proof incumbent on those who would circumvent the clear biblical witness has not been met. Approval of homosexual behavior would not be an act of love and tolerance but a harmful and intolerant disregard of God's loving guidance for abundant life.

### **A Prayer for the Church**

In words taken from, and inspired by, Ephesians 4:1-5:20:

Lord, may we walk in a manner worthy of our calling, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love. May we earnestly endeavor to keep the oneness of the Spirit and of the faith by means of the bond of peace and common adherence to the apostolic teaching on sexual holiness, as on other matters. May we as Your body arrive at an adult knowledge of Christ, no longer being blown about by teachings that depart from Your word. May we put off the old humanity, deluded into approving forms of sexual desire that You have rejected, and clothe ourselves with the new humanity, embracing with a renewed mind the standard for sexual wholeness that You have established for our benefit. For, as You have warned us, no one who engages unrepentantly and repeatedly in a form of sexual intercourse deemed immoral by apostolic teaching will have any inheritance in Your kingdom of light. Help us, Lord, to expose to the light of Your word the lie that diversity in types of sexual unions is an absolute good, remembering our own sin and need for daily repentance. May your church quickly restore the penitent, thereby maximizing salvation to the many. Amen.

#### ***The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics***

by Robert A. J. Gagnon  
(Abingdon Press, 2001; 520 pp.; hardcover, \$49)

Available at a 30% discount from [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com)  
or the Cokesbury Bookstore at Pittsburgh Theological  
Seminary ([cokesbury@pts.edu](mailto:cokesbury@pts.edu), 412-362-1691)

# Vote “NO” on Amendment H

## By Carol Shanholtzer

Amendment H is a rewrite of the entire chapter G-14 of the Book of Order (“Ordination, Certification, and Commissioning”), which is accompanied by related changes in other parts of the Book of Order. The stated intent is to make G-14 shorter by eliminating procedural details. Instead, procedures will be determined by each presbytery (which may use “advisory handbooks” which will be prepared by General Assembly entities in consultation with the Office of the General Assembly and middle governing bodies).

The concept of a less detailed Book of Order is a popular one. However, in this particular case, the proposal also 1) allows for temporary pastoral relationships to be made permanent, 2) makes significant changes in the status of Certified Christian Educators, 3) moves the “constitutional questions” (“ordination vows”) to the Directory for Worship and requires them for persons who are not necessarily officers, and 4) also opens the door to other significant changes in ordination. The proposed revision should therefore be defeated.

**1) The proposed amendment allows any minister serving a church in a temporary pastoral relationship to serve that church in a permanent relationship with the approval by 2/3 of the presbytery.** The Association of Stated Clerks writes, “The proposed amendment would permit any minister serving a church in a temporary pastoral relationship (Interim pastor, or associate pastor, organizing pastor, stated supply, or temporary supply) to serve that church in a permanent or designated pastoral relationship with approval by a two-thirds vote of the presbytery.... The amendment also makes the designation of temporary pastoral classifications discretionary on the part of the presbyteries.”

**2) Proposed G-14.0704c will give Certified Christian Educators voice and vote (vote only if they are elders) in presbytery.** Currently they do not have vote in presbytery. The proposed wording does not even require that these elders have to be employed as a Certified Christian Educator in the presbytery to have a vote there. Our polity specifies (G-11.0101) that a presbytery consists of all the churches and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament within a certain district and that when a presbytery meets, each church shall be represented by one or more elders commissioned by the session.

Giving a vote to elders because they are Certified Christian Educators impacts the number of elders who can be commissioned by their sessions to vote in presbytery through redress of imbalance.

Giving vote to Certified Christian Educator elders also departs from the concept that a presbytery consists of

churches (with representatives chosen by their sessions) and Ministers. To give vote in presbytery to these particular elders solely because of the training and certification they have received is not appropriate.

**3) “Constitutional questions” (“ordination vows”) for officers will be moved out of the Form of Government G-14 and into the Directory for Worship (proposed W-4.4003)** The ordination vows define crucial requirements for ordained office, and affirmative answers to the constitutional questions are mandatory for ordination and installation of Deacons, Elders, and Ministers. Having these questions in the Form of Government (where they are now) emphasizes the role of these questions as defining requirements for ordination and ministry, and makes them an appropriate focus for one contemplating or preparing for ordained office. Moving the questions to the Directory for Worship makes the ordination vows appear to simply function as liturgy in a special worship service. Even though all three sections of the Book of Order are part of our constitution and the questions remain mandatory in this draft, the Form of Government, Directory for Worship, and Rules of Discipline have different roles, and where items are placed does impact how they are understood and interpreted. Constitutional questions for officers belong in G-14.

**4) Proposed W-4.4003 gives broader application of “constitutional questions” (“ordination vows”) as “Constitutional Questions to Officers and Commissioned Persons”.** Currently affirmative answers to the constitutional questions (“ordination vows”) are required only for officers: Deacons, Elders, and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. (They also are now required for Commissioned Lay Pastors, but by definition these persons must already be Elders.) The rewrite will mandate the “constitutional questions” for the ceremony recognizing and commissioning someone a Certified Christian Educator (whether or not that person is an elder). Certified Christian Educators don’t have to be elders, so this is the first case in which the “ordination vows” are required by the Book of Order for someone who is not an officer. This begins a blurring of the distinctions between “officer” vs. “non-officer” and between ordination to a lifelong office in the church vs. recognizing someone’s particular accomplishments in meeting requirements for receiving certification as an educator. It is appropriate to recognize those accomplishments, but the ceremony should not appear to be the same as ordination to a lifelong office.

**5) Content of ordination exams could be changed without consent of the presbyteries.** Currently the Form of Government (G-14.0310d) specifies the content of each ordination exam. The proposed change will leave only

the titles of the exams listed in the Form of Government (proposed G-14.0305), thus making it possible to change the content of the exams without the approval of presbyteries.

**6) This is not the time to adopt sweeping changes of unknown significance to the Ordination chapter of the Book of Order.** Any time wording is changed, the meaning changes (whether intended or not) and potential interpretation by church courts can change. The current chapter G-14 has been amended a number of times and is

cumbersome reading in some sections. Nonetheless, the chapter is functional and familiar. Improved clarity and conciseness of some paragraphs is not worth the cost of opening the door to new interpretations of ordination requirements and confusion about the ordination process during this time in which ordination standards are being repeatedly challenged in our church.

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## **Repent, Remember, Overcome: A Proposal to Renew the Church**

**By Susan Cyre**

Our church government at times is used to promote a faith that contradicts Scripture and our Constitution. Some decisions of the General Assembly and the General Assembly Council do not reflect Scripture and the Constitution, and do not reflect the faith of the majority of Presbyterians. We have seen occasions when the voice of lower governing bodies is silenced with a process that has been distorted and manipulated. There have been other occasions when the actions of lower governing bodies have been in direct opposition to the mandate of higher governing bodies and to the Constitution itself.

Our form of government makes us connectional. What one governing body does affects us all. According to the Book of Order, we all participate in any constitutional act of any of our governing bodies. When those acts subvert the intention of the constitution and the faith we hold in common, we have a natural desire to want to disassociate ourselves from what we regard as unfaithful acts. We consider emotional withdrawal, or taking actions to limit the power of government, or even departure to another denomination.

Before we take such actions or even before we seek to reform our government, we need to remind ourselves of the *purpose* of government and the *relationship* between theology and polity—between doctrine and practice. These considerations of *purpose* and *relationship* will give us a framework for reform. They will show us that reform is possible and they will help us focus our efforts for reform. The same connectionalism that affects us when there is defiance of the Constitution by a governing body, can strengthen our reform efforts. When one governing body rejects our Constitution it affects the whole Body. Likewise, when one governing body is faithful, it can begin to restore the whole Body.

### **Church Government is a Divine Mandate**

Church government is a divine mandate going back as far as Exodus 18 when God directs Moses to establish elder

leadership. The New Testament has a more fully developed description of church government with its headquarters in Jerusalem. When disputes arose in the early church, they were decided by the higher governing body speaking to the individual congregations.

The Westminster Larger Catechism explains God's active role in church government and therefore God's intent for church government.

Q 45. How doth Christ execute the office of a king?

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in calling out of the world a people to himself; and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them; ...and powerfully ordering all things for his own glory, and their good ..." (7.155).

Christ chooses to execute his office as King through imperfect church government and imperfect leaders. Because church government is God's plan, he has provided leaders. 1 Cor 12:28 includes "administrations" or governance as one of the gifts of the Spirit given to the church.

The Westminster Confession affirms that "the Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church officers...." It concludes with a reference to Matthew 16:19, "to these officers the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven are committed, by virtue whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that kingdom against the impenitent... and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel..." (6.170).

Jesus governs by speaking through his Word in the church to "bind" and "loose" —to denounce sin and to extend grace. As believers are united with Christ, they enter into his roles of prophet, priest and king—proclamation, intercession and governance. However, we don't enter into those roles individually or autonomously. Those roles

may only be properly exercised within the corporate body of the church, the Body of Christ.

**Doctrine Drives Polity**

Ministers (5.096-7) and church officers (6.169-70) have been given the keys to the kingdom, however, since the Fall, their ability to govern is tainted by sin. Therefore, church government was established by God both to restrain human sinfulness within the body of believers and to provide checks and balances on leaders who are also subject to sin.

James Madison’s description of the theological implications of human sinfulness on the newly formed federal government can also be applied to the church. He wrote, “But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.”

Church government was instituted by God because we are not angels but sinners. We need the restraint of government upon our sinful natures. And in turn we need to hold our governing officials accountable, lest their sinful natures affect their ability to govern in accordance with God’s word and will. Thus, theologian David Hall concludes, “Polity is a divine gift, betokening the grace, care, and love of the Savior for the church.”

The extensive and important nature of governance is explained in the Preamble to the Rules of Discipline in our Book of Order. Although the following appears as the Preamble to the Rules of Discipline which includes specific judicatory remedies, the Preamble describing “discipline” should be understood in the wider role of church governance and not just particular judicatory remedies.

Thus, the purpose of discipline is to honor God by making clear the significance of membership in the body of Christ; to preserve the purity of the church by nourishing the individual within the life of the believing community; to correct or restrain wrongdoing in order to bring members to repentance and restoration; to restore the unity of the church by removing the causes of discord and division; and to

secure the just, speedy and economical determination of proceedings.

Church government is not a program agency, but an inter-relatedness established by God for our benefit. It is through church government that the keys to the kingdom are administered. Church government is not a hindrance to the Gospel but is in fact a safeguard to the Gospel.

**Church Government Demonstrates our Unity**

Presbyterian government with its sessions, presbyteries and General Assembly demonstrate to the world our connectedness as the Body of Christ. We give witness to God’s word that “there is one body and one Spirit, ...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” (Ep 4:4-6) When an elder, clergy, session, or presbytery departs from that Lord, faith, and baptism, the church governs by exercising discipline so that unity might be restored and the world might see our unity.

**What Reforms are Needed**

If government is provided by God for our blessing, what do we do when governing bodies act in opposition to Scripture and the Constitution? How can we go about reforming church government so that its practice reflects its beliefs?

There are three areas that need to be addressed. We will address these areas more fully in future issues of *Theology Matters*:

- 1) There must be an assurance of fitness for leadership at every level of church government. Those who govern—clergy and elders—must know and accept God’s Word as revealed in Scripture. They must know and accept the doctrines of the church as expressed in the confessions.
- 2) Lower governing bodies must have free and open access to higher governing bodies to hold them accountable, to redress wrongs, and to facilitate changes to advance the mission of the Gospel.
- 3) Higher governing bodies must hold lower governing bodies accountable to the Gospel which is given expression in our Confessions. Teaching must be sound and practice must conform to teaching.

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