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The Upward Call of God: Submitting Our Sexuality to the Lordship of Christ

by P. Mark Achtemeier*

As we prepare in our presbyteries to wrestle with the emotional and difficult subject of homosexual ordination, an issue which has threatened, alas, to split our church and sunder our local communities, it is of supreme importance that we remember the one starting point which is always the sole and proper beginning for any discussion of the church's life--the gospel of God's grace and mercy given to us in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Under Christ's Lordship, we approach this issue from a position of fundamental equality and solidarity with our homosexual brothers and sisters, for all of us without exception are poor, lost sinners without hope save in the abiding mercy offered us by God in the cross of Jesus Christ. And in a church which lives by Christ's Lordship, there can be no ultimate division into righteous and unrighteous, no looking down our noses at our errant brothers and sisters who fall short of the truth, no comfortable resting in our own righteousness, as if our own supposed obedience had supplanted Christ's victory as the source of our hope! We are beggars at the Lord's table one and all, wholly overcome by the power of our own sinfulness, utterly dependent upon the free grace which God offers us undeserving in the cross of Christ.

So whatever else we say about a conversation like this one, we must say first and foremost that it is a conversation among sinners who are saved by grace one and all. And that is also to say that it is a conversation which takes place

between brothers and sisters under the one Lordship of Jesus Christ. Our inclusion together in the one body of Christ can and must take precedence over all the quarrels and strife which threaten to divide us. It is precisely our commitment to one another, grounded in our common desire to be faithful to Christ, that leads us to engagement, to discernment, to debate with one another, and finally to some very painful and difficult decisions.

Love and Liberation

The Christian Gospel is the joyous proclamation of God's triumphant love for all the world, and a glorious message of liberation from our bondage to the powers of sin, slavery and death. Christ has risen victorious over every power and dominion which binds or threatens or oppresses human life and human existence. From these scriptural assertions, that God loves *all* people and Christ has brought liberation from bondage, one frequently hears the inference drawn that God in Christ therefore lovingly accepts homosexual lifestyles, and that fidelity to the Gospel requires solidarity with the gay liberation movement.

It is important for us as Christians that in the heat of debate we not lose sight of the fact that these foundational characterizations of the Gospel are in fact true--the Gospel *is* a message of love and of liberation. But that recognition

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does not in itself decide the issue in favor of an uncritical approval of homosexual lifestyles.

Genuine love for other people, as Christ has taught us, cannot be separated from our love of God's truth as it relates to them. If I am poised on the brink of doing something stupid, of making a tragic mistake, of violating God's will for my life, I like to think a person who truly loved me would *not* be accepting, but would rather have the courage to say, "Mark, wait a minute--you're making a terrible mistake." A true friend would step in and question my thinking, no matter how good and right it seemed to me. Our exercise of Christian love for one another *cannot* be separated from our apprehension of what is God's will for us and for our neighbors. And real love means helping one another to discern God's will and to live truthfully in accordance with it.

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Striking in this connection is the Gospel story of Jesus' encounter with the rich man in Mark 10:17-31 [cf. Matt 19:16-30, Luk 18:18-30]. In response to the man's persistent questioning about the way to eternal life, the text says, "And Jesus looking upon him *loved* him, and said to him, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'" The love which Jesus here shows is no mere acceptance. It instead takes the form of a challenge--of a demanding call to a new way of life which desires above all else that the rich man should find peace in a life lived in accordance with God's will for him. Genuine love cannot be separated from our understanding of what God desires for us and for our neighbors!

In the same way, real liberation cannot be separated from our apprehension of God's truth and our clinging to it with all our might-- "You will know the truth," says Jesus, "and *the truth* will make you free!" [Jn 8:32] G.K. Chesterton once defined hell as the place where you get what you want. The New Testament is crystal clear that simply being free to indulge our desires without regard to God's truth is not freedom but slavery--slavery to sin, slavery to our impulses. "Their God is the belly" is the way Paul puts it [Phil 3:19]. In Romans 6:15-22 he puts the matter very starkly: You have a choice between slaveries, he says. We can either be slaves of sin, or we can find our true liberation in becoming slaves of God. In a similar vein, II Peter 2:19 warns of false teachers who promise a worldly liberation but are in fact slaves of corruption.

So the Gospel is emphatically a message of love and liberation. But we cannot know what true love is, nor can we know what genuine liberation looks like, apart from an apprehension of the truth which is given us by God. Which brings us to the question of how we interpret the Bible with regard to these matters.

Seeing the Forest Beyond the Trees

Huge amounts of ink have been spilled in this debate over the detailed interpretation of six passages which have been commonly understood throughout most of the church's history as prohibiting homosexual activity [The passages are: Gen 19:1-8; Lev 18:22; Lev 20:13; Rom 1:26-27; I Cor 6:9-10; and I Tim 1:10.] The debate has been fueled by the suggestions of a small group of biblical scholars that the relevant verses do not in fact mean what they seem to say or what the church has commonly understood them to say [see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1980); Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988)]. These are important discussions, the details of which have been amply set forth in these pages and elsewhere. Time does not permit yet another detailed review of the arguments involved, but let it suffice for the moment to say that I for one have not found attempts to explain away the plain meaning of the texts very credible, and that is a judgment shared by a great many contemporary scholars and church people.

Another claim one frequently hears regarding these texts is that they are hopelessly out of date, that their judgments are no longer applicable in a modern context. The Bible's understanding of homosexuality, so the argument goes, is so different from our modern, scientifically-informed concepts of sexual orientation that it is like comparing apples and oranges--the biblical prohibitions simply do not apply to our modern understandings.

These claims need to be considered seriously, but what they reflect more than anything is the weakness of an approach which seeks to construct a biblical ethic simply by paging through the text, as it were, in search of particular prohibitions relating to the issue at hand. The weakness of this approach is revealed in the fact that it would have little or nothing to say about child molestation, for instance, because the Bible nowhere contains specific commandments against the sexual abuse of children.

The meaning and purpose of the biblical texts becomes clearer if we take a step back from the trees--the particular prohibitions which the Bible sets out--and consider the nature of the forest in which the trees are rooted. We need to understand what the Bible has to say about God's *positive* intentions for our sexuality in order to make sense of the negative commands and prohibitions which protect against the corruption of God's intentions. Taking this approach it quickly becomes apparent that Scripture makes some strong and detailed claims about the way our sexuality fits into the broader picture of God's will and intention for human life.

Starting right at the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1, we find God creating human beings specifically as male and female, with the importance of that division of the sexes underscored by its close association with our creation in the image of God [Gen 1:27, 5:1-2]. This suggests that the communion between male and female is

intended by God from the very beginning and built into the fabric of creation. Further, this communion intended by God is intimately bound up with the gift of procreation, with God's command to be fruitful and multiply [Gen 1:28].

This picture is further developed and amplified in Genesis 2, where Man and Woman are specifically created for, and given to, one another. That text makes very clear that this communion between male and female is founded on a very important foundation of *complementarity* between the sexes. Eve is not the same as Adam. God creates her not as a copy but as a helpmate who *corresponds* to Adam, who complements him [v.18]. And the Genesis 2 text is explicit that this divinely-willed complementarity and communion find their fulfillment and proper expression in the institution of marriage, in which a man and woman cleave together and become one flesh--a reference both to their sexual union and to the procreative aspects of this communion which are so intimately bound up with it [v. 24]. This affirmation of the institution of marriage between male and female as divinely founded is picked up and explicitly re-affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4-6.

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We see here, then, the centrality of the complementary, procreative communion between male and female in God's plan for the world. The sanctity and integrity of this communion is fortified and upheld as it is hedged about by laws which guard against its corruption by adultery and other misuse of our human sexuality outside the bounds which God has set.

Indeed this communion between male and female is *so* central to God's plan for the ordering of human life that it takes on sacramental aspects, becoming widely seen in the later tradition as an image for the fulfillment of that glorious communion which God establishes with the chosen people. The Song of Songs is, on the literal level, a poetic celebration of God's gift of this communion between male and female in all its sensual goodness. But this Song is also interpreted spiritually by the church and becomes a vivid image of the love which binds together Christ and his church. The prophet Isaiah portrays God's redemption of Israel as a *marriage*, or a release from childlessness [Is 54:1, 62:4]. Israel's faithlessness toward God is described by Hosea as the betrayal of a marriage covenant between a husband and wife.

The New Testament continues to view the communion between male and female as an image of God's love for us. In all three synoptic Gospels Jesus compares his presence among his people to that of a *bridegroom* [Mk 2:20, Matt

9:15, Luk 5:34], and in John's gospel the same affirmation appears on the lips of John the Baptist [3:29]. Jesus himself, following the Old Testament, describes the consummation of God's kingdom in terms of a wedding banquet [Matt 22:1-14, 25:1-13]. John points very significantly to the fact that it is at a wedding feast in Cana that Jesus performs the first sign which reveals his glory. Paul paints a vivid portrait of the church as a bride betrothed to Christ the bridegroom [2 Cor 11:2], and John of Patmos describes the consummation of God's reign as the marriage of Christ the Lamb to his spotless bride, the church [Rev 19:7, 21:9]. The conclusion from all this is inescapable that the divinely-willed communion between male and female, fulfilled in the marital union, is a feature of central and pivotal significance in God's gracious plan for the ordering of human life.

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But the Bible does not stop there, of course. It also speaks about a falling away from God's loving will and intention for us, and this turning away from God inevitably brings with it a disordering of the communion between male and female which God intends. Already in Genesis 3, we find that one of the consequences of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God is the disordering of the communion between them: now the procreative aspects of that union become painful and dangerous for the woman, and in place of the loving complementarity which marks God's original will for them we find that the woman's husband will now rule over her [3:16].

It is in this context that we have to interpret the Bible's negative portrayals of homosexual practice. As the creation falls away from God, the communion between male and female which is willed by God, including its sexual manifestations, also falls away from God's intentions for it.

This explains the otherwise puzzling association which the Bible so often makes between sexual sins and idolatry: As the human race turns from the one true God to follow after idols, so also our sexuality falls away from God's intentions for it and becomes unraveled and broken in its manifestations. This is precisely the connection which Paul draws in the very important passage found in Romans 1:18-26. Paul there describes the sinful perversity of human beings whose lives have been given over to false gods:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped the creature rather than the Creator... For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women

exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another... [Rom 1:24-27]

Here the Bible describes homosexual practice as a manifestation of that brokenness which characterizes a world turned away from God.

We have raised the question earlier whether the Bible's concept of homosexuality is so different from contemporary understandings as to severely limit its applicability in our modern context. And it *does* seem to be true that Paul, for instance, as a typical ancient, views homosexuality simply in terms of lusts which have run amok, in a way that is a bit different from our modern ways of thinking about sexual orientation.

But when we view the issue against the background of God's positive will for our sexuality embodied in the loving, complementary communion of male and female, the differences between modern and ancient concepts of homosexuality do not amount to all that much, because we can recognize in both of them a falling away from God's will and intention for human life.

Indeed, the fallen human heart can give rise to all sorts and manners of corrupt behavior of which the biblical writers never dreamed. But the fact that we cannot find a specific and detailed prohibition corresponding to each and every one of them does not make them any less recognizable as a manifestation of brokenness, a falling away from God's positive intentions for human life, the shape of which the Bible makes quite clear.

Voluntary or Involuntary?

I have been very deliberately using the word 'brokenness' rather than 'sin' in this discussion, because in popular conceptions the word 'sin' tends to conjure up images of a choice which is deliberately and voluntarily perverse, and it is not at all clear that is what we are dealing with in matters of sexual orientation. For some people, at least, their homosexual orientation seems to present itself simply as a fact of experience which they have had to grapple with as long as they can remember. In important respects the inclination for them seems *not* to be a matter of choice.

But how much does it matter whether a homosexual orientation is chosen or not? Just because a same-sex orientation is experienced as involuntary in some cases does not make it any less a distortion of God's loving will for humankind. One of the greatest fallacies put forward in connection with this discussion is the notion that if science can show that homosexuality is something we are born with, that means it must be natural and therefore by definition good.

But we need to remember that human beings are born into this fallen world with all sorts of involuntary brokenness, from spina bifida to predispositions toward violent behavior, and the fact we are born that way does not make

these things either benign, or accurate reflections of the way God desires us to be. The New Testament quite to the contrary describes sin and brokenness as *slavery*--as something those of us who come after Adam and Eve did *not* choose. At its deepest level the dreadful inclination of the human heart (and the human body!) *away* from God and God's will for us is an affliction we are *all* born with. Our brokenness at its roots is *not* voluntary--we are all born into sin.

So while the question whether a same-sex orientation is the product of genetic inheritance or environmental factors or deliberate choice may be an interesting area for scientific study, it has very little bearing on our theological assessment of the situation. Brokenness is still brokenness, whether it is voluntary or not.

All Have Sinned

We have thus far been presenting a biblical understanding of homosexuality as a manifestation of the brokenness which characterizes a fallen creation. But up to this point we have left out a very important element of the Bible's witness. It is absolutely essential that we also recognize there is nothing in the Bible which would lead us to single out homosexual inclinations or practice as special or unusual in some sense, as if this disordering of our sexuality were among the most serious manifestations of creation's brokenness. In the very same passage from Romans 1 which we have cited earlier, Paul lists many *other* manifestations of creation's brokenness: wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, gossip, slander, hate for God, insolence, haughtiness, boastfulness, evil devices, disobedience to parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness... and the list could presumably be expanded almost indefinitely [vv. 28-31].

In fact, Paul takes considerable pains to emphasize that *every single one of us*--not just our homosexual neighbor!--is caught up in this brokenness which has overtaken creation; and *every single one of us*--including our homosexual neighbor!--is absolutely dependent on the grace of God given in Jesus Christ for the overcoming of that brokenness.

For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.... [Rom 3:22b-24]

There is no distinction! Here the Bible stands in judgment over *all* our attempts to deal with the speck in our homosexual neighbor's eye before we have attended to the log in our own eye. Here the Scripture casts its shadow over all our sinful attempts to separate out homosexuality as a form of brokenness which is liable to some sort of special judgment all its own, or which stands in a class by itself apart from all the myriad forms of brokenness which manifest themselves in the lives of each and every one of us.

The New Testament undercuts *every* attempt to cast this issue as us versus them, righteous versus sinners, believers versus infidels. The Bible's teaching is that we all together stand shoulder to shoulder with our homosexual brothers and sisters, because every single one of us, gay and straight alike, stands before God as a lost, broken sinner whose *only* hope is the grace of God offered us in Jesus Christ. Every time we welcome a new member into our churches....we welcome a sinner! Every time we ordain a person to the ministry of the Word....we ordain a sinner! There is no distinction.

Thus, if we take the New Testament seriously, the issue which confronts us here is not and cannot be "homosexuality and the church," as if this were an isolated and separable phenomenon standing off in a category by itself. The issue must rather be, "our brokenness and the church," and that is a matter which directly implicates each and every one of us.

The Role of the Church

How then ought we to deal with that brokenness which is a part of *all* our lives in the context of our common commitment to Christ? Augustine's image of the church remains extremely helpful in this connection, even after sixteen centuries: the church is a hospital for sinners. "Those who are well have no need of a physician," says Jesus, "but those who are sick" [Mk 2:17]. God calls us together in the community of Christ's body as a fellowship of grace and healing, where we may comfort one another with his forgiveness and encourage and build up one another in the new life which Christ has opened up to us.

The church is a hospital for sinners

One of the perennial temptations in this healing fellowship of the church, of course, is our tendency to focus totally on our neighbor's sickness to the exclusion of our own. A helpful check on our thinking in the current instance is to make sure we are willing to apply those statements we make regarding that brokenness which is homosexuality to other forms of brokenness as well. I find a useful test case here to be a person who suffers, let us say, from an explosive temper which gets out of control and leads to actions and statements which the person later regrets. This kind of brokenness it seems to me exhibits some of the same complicated interplay between voluntary and involuntary behaviors which in many instances characterizes the condition of homosexual persons.

So what do we say about the brokenness which all of us carry with us in our lives as Christians? First and foremost our proper response is one of repentance. The purpose of a hospital is healing! Jesus' own invitation with the coming of God's kingdom into our midst was: "*Repent* and believe the good news" [Mk 1:15]. The Christian life is a continual process of turning away from our brokenness, of

struggling against it, and of turning toward the new life of righteousness which God offers us in Jesus Christ [cf. Rom 8:18-27; I Cor 1:18; II Cor 3:18, 4:16; Phil 3:10-16; Col 3:10].

That does not mean we can expect to overcome completely within this lifetime all those manifestations of brokenness which we all carry with us. Every Christian engages in the warfare against "sin, the flesh and the devil," struggling and praying, wrestling and backsliding, repenting and beseeching God's continued support.

So just as the healing fellowship of the church presents Christ's call to someone with an out-of-control temper as an invitation to repentance, prayer and struggle in order to bring his or her anger under control, so also the church presents Christ's call to the person whose sexuality is disordered as an invitation to repentance, prayer and struggle in order to bring this particular manifestation of brokenness back into conformity with God's will.

Such a pilgrimage of repentance can assume a variety of different forms. Quite obviously what we would pray and hope for above all else is that God would grant healing for our disordered passions, removing our brokenness and bringing our inner life into full and joyous conformity with the divine will. So we continue to pray and hope that the person with the out-of-control temper will receive healing and be delivered from that burden by an act of God's grace. Similarly, we hope and continually pray that the homosexual person will be healed and delivered by God's hand.

And it *does* happen! It is important that the church not give up its hope in God's grace. Anyone who has spent significant time in the church has seen it happen--God's miraculous, healing intervention in people's lives, delivering them from all manner of affliction and brokenness and temptation. For this reason, we Christians ought to support and encourage the various healing ministries which have arisen in the church for persons struggling with homosexual orientations.

But complete healing is not *always* given. Paul himself reports his own ongoing struggle with an unidentified "thorn in the flesh" from which the Lord never saw fit to deliver him [2 Cor 12:7]. What do we make of the ongoing presence of weakness, of the impulses of the Old Adam, in the Christian life? Paul saw God's hand at work in his ongoing struggle with this "thorn," subduing his pride [v.7] and teaching him the power and sufficiency of God's grace [v.9].

The struggle with our brokenness will not always be completely and successfully resolved in this lifetime

The struggle with our brokenness will not always be completely and successfully resolved in this lifetime. Following Paul's example, we Christians continue to confess our brokenness, to seek God's help in prayer, to rely on God's grace and God's strength in the midst of our weakness, to "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." We do *not* give up, we do *not* simply accept our own brokenness as an inevitable status quo. We encourage and exhort one another, but at the same time we also deal compassionately with our neighbors, knowing they and we are participants together in this pilgrimage of faith toward the new life we have been given together in Christ.

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The church must be prepared to minister compassionately to all of the "sin-sick souls" who come to it seeking healing from the Great Physician. The community of faith rejoices with those persons who have been so transformed by grace as to completely overcome certain aspects of their former brokenness; but the community also prays and supports and continues to stand by those individuals who never find complete healing this side of the Kingdom, and whose resistance to their own brokenness constitutes a life-long struggle that continues with God's help and mercy.

Where the church must firmly call persons to account, however, is in those situations where repentance is lacking, and where persons are inclined simply to overlook or deny the brokenness of whatever sort that they carry with them in their lives as Christians. Just as the church cannot say to habitually angry persons that their temperamental outbursts are a matter of indifference, so the church cannot say to homosexual persons that their disordered inclinations and practices are matters of no consequence, nor ought the church accede to demands that these disorderings be re-interpreted as gifts of God to be celebrated and affirmed.

But in saying no to unrepentance and in challenging such indifference, we need to be very sensitive to the roots from which such problems spring. There are within our churches many sincere persons whose honest wrestling with Scriptures and genuine commitment to Christ have led them to conclusions about homosexuality which are different from our own. While the presence of such disagreement does not relieve the church of the obligation to make decisions about the ordering of its life, it is important in such cases that our response to each other embody that caring witness and mutual respect which characterizes the relations between brothers and sisters who share membership in the body of Christ.

That is a very different situation from one in which persons make claims or demands upon the church from a standpoint which has rejected the witness of Scripture and

cast off Christ's Lordship in favor of other voices and other masters, whether those of secular culture, or a misunderstood "science" or simply personal inclinations and experience. Such claims and challenges demand a firm confession and defense of the church's faith that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death" [*Theological Declaration of Barmen*, article 1].

In sum, if the church is a hospital for sinners it cannot and must not forget that its members are one and all sick, falling short each and every one in our own ways from the fullness of life to which Christ calls us. But at the same time the church cannot and must not forget that the purpose of a hospital is for *healing*, and that the essential form of the Christian life for every one of us is repentance and struggle and growth in grace.

Church Leadership

We come finally to the question of ordination. The Christian church has always understood the ministerial office to be a gift given to the church by God for the upbuilding of the Christian community. It is not and cannot be a "right" claimed equally by all persons. There are in fact all sorts of reasons, congenital and otherwise, for which the church denies people ordination to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. Examples in the Presbyterian Church would include a paralyzing fear of public speaking, or an inability to learn Greek and Hebrew, or a manner which makes interpersonal relations difficult.

Furthermore, the Scriptures are clear that leaders of the church are to be models and exemplars of life in Christ [see, e.g. I Tim 3.] This does *not* mean we can expect them to be without sin--if the church demanded sinless ministers we would not have a ministry! But it *does* mean that those who would lead Christ's church must themselves be actively and vigorously engaged in the struggle against the sin which still clings to them. The process of repenting and wrestling with our sinfulness--what Calvin referred to as the "mortification of the flesh"--must be firmly established and well advanced in such persons. The "Fidelity and Chastity" amendment to the *Book of Order*, which our presbyteries are presently considering, mirrors this understanding quite closely, specifying not personal sinfulness but "refusing to repent" as the disposition which ultimately disqualifies a person from ordained office.

And the practical implications of this understanding of church leadership are that the church can and should ordain qualified homosexual persons whose brokenness in this area has found successful accommodation in the context of a chaste lifestyle. Indeed, the witness of such discipline on the part of these people can serve as a very positive example to the church of godly discipline and self-control!

But the church would be committing a grave error if it were to ordain as Christian leaders those persons whose brokenness in this regard continues to find active, outward sexual expression. Again, this is not to single out

homosexuals as being in a class by themselves. Persons whose temper causes them to lose control of themselves ought not to be ordained either. The church needs to scrutinize carefully the life and witness of every candidate for the ministry, with an eye toward seeing that the leaders of our church can present a worthy example to the flock in every area where the brokenness of our fallen world manifests itself in their own lives. The struggle over the issue of homosexuality perhaps can provide impetus to the church to exercise greater vigilance in all areas of life for those candidates it considers for ordination. One senses at times a most unfortunate tendency in the church to single

out sexuality as the only area of life deserving scrutiny--as if greed and pride were of only minimal concern!--to the detriment of the ministerial office generally.

As our presbyteries grapple with these difficult issues in the months ahead, may God work in and through our struggles and our debates to lead Christ's church into a clearer apprehension of his truth for our lives, and a fuller manifestation of his love in our church and our world. May the glory be Christ's and not ours, and may the Holy Spirit work quickly to correct all of our errors and establish us in the truth!

Sex and the Single Life

by Philip Turner*

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What is it that Christians ought to say and do about the issue of sexual relations between single people? This question currently presses most painfully upon the life of the churches. The real issue is not whether the churches ought to adopt a new sexual ethic, but whether the new sexual ethic they are in fact in the process of adopting is one that is "worthy of (their) calling." Let me explain.

In 1982, *Newsweek* magazine published the results of a poll carried out by two scholars at Johns Hopkins University. It showed that one out of every five young women who reach the age of fifteen admitted to having had sexual intercourse. By the time these young women reach sixteen the figure rises to one in three, and by the time they are seventeen the number is one of every two. If we add to this the sexual activity of young men of the same age, of gay men and lesbian women at a later stage of life, and that of unmarried and divorced heterosexual couples, it becomes clear that the sexual practice of people in our society is quite different from that held to be normative by the traditional teaching of the churches.

The notable change in behavior that has taken place over the past thirty years would not be of such great significance if it were not accompanied as well by a change in the way people think about sexual relations. There have, after all, been many periods and places where sexual practice has been quite loose. There have as well been periods and places where it has been quite strictly controlled. Changes in behavior are not new, but the way in which we as a society are now beginning to think about that behavior is quite new.

James Nelson's** very popular book, *Embodiment*, provides an exemplary instance of revisionist Christian

thinking on this subject, and it does so for two reasons. The first and most obvious is that what he has to say captures so well the essence of the revisionist argument, and second it makes clear that the argument of the revisionists is the same whether they are speaking of heterosexual or homosexual relations. This second point is important because the two issues are usually treated separately—as if what one argued about relations between members of the same sex was quite different from what one might argue about relations between people of different sexes. Though these two cases may be distinct, the issues in both are not all that different. In large measure, they engage the same points, and thus it is a mistake in moral reasoning to address them as if they were utterly discrete issues.

The line of argument Nelson himself follows makes this very point and shows it to be a line that is quite explicit in the arguments being made by the new reformers. What he has to say about sexual relations between single people, be they heterosexual or homosexual, is of a piece with, and in the end but an extension of, what he says about marital relations themselves. The basic point to be made about *all* forms of sexual relation is that they are supposed to be a means for the "expression of love" and so also for the establishment and maintenance of "communion." They are, therefore, appropriate only when a certain degree of "loving commitment" is present. When this degree of love and commitment is present, they are acceptable. It is simply the case that sexual relations are "natural" to "embodied" life, and so may be (and indeed usually are) necessary for the wholeness and fulfillment of individuals no matter what their marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identification may be.

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The moral acceptability of these relations, then, is seen to depend not on an undertaking the terms of which are set by Divine providence but on the motivations and intentions of moral agents, and on the nature and consequences of their acts. The acceptable motive for a sexual relationship is love; the acceptable intention is that “each genital act should aim at human fulfillment and wholeness.” “Fulfillment” and “wholeness” in turn are said to involve emotional sustenance, healing, and, most of all, growth for the parties involved. As can easily be anticipated, in this scheme of things the sexual act itself is to be judged not on the basis of goods that are internally related to the act itself (unity and procreation), but on the basis of whether or not it is “loveless.” A loveless act is one that is “coercive, debasing to others’ sensitivities, utterly impersonal, [or] obsessed solely by physical gratification.”

Nelson’s point is easily grasped, but it is easy to miss its staggering implication, namely, that there is, properly speaking, no special ethic for sexual relations. Sexual acts are to be judged in the same way all other acts are to be judged: on the basis of whether they promote flourishing and avoid harm and coercion. Sexual acts, like all others, have no particular goods or ends that are proper to them, and for this reason, like all acts, are to be assessed *only* on the basis of intention on the one hand and results on the other. There is, as Nelson says, no act that is “inherently right or wrong.”

Nevertheless, precisely because moral acts are relative in this way, in all sexual relations certain promises are necessary if the parties involved are not to harm one another, affront one another’s dignity or illegitimately rob one another of their liberty. Thus Nelson insists, as do most of the new reformers, that in all sexual relations there ought to be present “commitment,” “openness” (or “vulnerability”), and “care.”

Now these universally mandated promises are to be not made in relation to the particular undertakings that might arise out of individual needs and desires. Neither are they mandated by the intrinsic nature of the acts themselves nor by the set nature of the undertakings of which those acts may rightly be a part. They are mandated simply to promote “respect for persons” and so to insure that their rights are not trampled upon. These promises do not derive from undertakings or from a moral character intrinsic to human acts. They derive instead from the need to protect the rights of individuals to choose their undertakings and so contract by means of promises for particular goods in the sexual market place.

In making this argument, Nelson speaks with the voice of our culture, and in so doing gives expression to the views of a significant number of Christians as well. It is clear that what he says applies to marital relations, adulterous relations, and to relations between single people both of the same and of opposite sex. There is no special line of reasoning needed for any of these forms of relationship because each is but another form of expressing love with a view to the establishment and maintenance of communion and for the promotion of growth.

The objections to this position are well known. It is, say many, quite contrary to the plain sense of Scripture. Critics further insist that terms like “commitment,” “vulnerability,” and “care” as used by the new reformers are, when compared to the vows demanded in the marriage rite, both extraordinarily limited in their content and vague in respect to the matter of duration. This limitation of both the extent and duration of the bond that ought to link people in a sexual relation has the effect of making such relations increasingly unstable and at the same time of trimming the virtues required of the agents involved in them.

Critics point out further that the new reformers must make a division *in principle* between the sexual and marital goods of unity and procreation and thereby make licit forms of “baby making” that have, *in principle*, no connection with “lovemaking.” The point is also made that if the arguments of the new reformers are applied, as usually they are, both to heterosexuals and homosexuals, they effectively erase the moral significance (for sexual relations) of the sexual and gender-related differences between men and women.

In response, proponents of Nelson’s position charge that the understanding of the Bible held by defenders of the “traditional ethic” gives undue authority to specific texts. These are after all relative to time and circumstance and are subject to judgment on the basis of whether or not they serve the purposes of love. Advocates claim further that the “traditional ethic” has plunged people into precipitous and disastrous marriages. They note that the traditional ethic takes no account of the vastly extended period that now exists between the onset of puberty and the age when marriage is possible and appropriate. They remind their readers also of the fact that there are now an extremely large number of permanently single people and that, if they are homosexual, marriage is out of the question for them altogether. They go on to assert that these people are nonetheless sexual beings with needs and desires that must not be ignored if they are to have healthy and full lives. They point out that sexual relationships are “natural” to human beings, are part of the world created by God, are good, and that no one ought to be denied such a relation simply on the basis of marital status or sexual orientation.

the parties to the disagreement have very different views both of moral agency and the nature of the moral life

The above arguments and counterarguments are well known. It is clear, however, that the parties to this debate in large measure simply talk past each other. Neither engages the point the other is trying to make. One reason for this failure to engage in genuine debate is that the parties to the disagreement have very different views both of moral agency and the nature of the moral life. This difference is an extremely important one to note for the simple reason that the ideas of the new reformers enjoy an

increasing appeal—their notions about moral agency and the nature of the moral life cohering so well with the views about these matters that now are characteristic of American culture.

This coherence can be seen in the place of honor now given two words that serve to sum up both moral agency and the moral life. The words are “person” and “self,” and the adequacy of the position of the new reformers hinges largely upon the adequacy of these two words (as now used) to account for the nature of the moral life and the nature of moral agency. Person and self are the words that carry our present-day moral universe and it is sad to note that the more traditional arguments about sexual relations have failed to take their meaning and power into account. As a result the traditional views still officially held by the churches seem to many people strangely out of place. The same cannot be said of the new reformers. They trade upon the current power and meaning of these words and thus their arguments present themselves with enormous force.

Force of presentation and strength of appeal do not, however, imply anything about adequacy. Here the focus will be not on “persons” and their “rights” but on “selves” and the various attendant notions that give this conception its resonance and power. It is really the notion of the self that provides the greatest support for the view of promises and undertakings we have been tracking. It lies at the heart of revisionist arguments about sex, and these cannot be assessed apart from an analysis of the significance and adequacy of “the self” as a moral notion.

self...lies at the heart of revisionist arguments about sex

What, in a moral sense, do we convey when we refer to people as “selves”? Charles Taylor has pointed out that there are three assumptions that serve to give the self its moral definition. The first is that the self does not define people by social status and role but by inwardness, by a subjectivity that gives each moral agent depths. These depths make each self an “individual.” The second is that the self’s proper sphere of activity is “everyday life” rather than, let us say, the mythical landscape of heroes or the heavenly one of saints. The third is that each self has abilities and that the point of everyday life is to discover those abilities and put them into operation. In this way the self grows, discovers its depths, and finds the satisfactions everyday life is supposed to yield.

Along with these notions of self come three moral ideas that direct and limit the self’s activities. The first is benevolence. Each self ought to act in a generous fashion toward all other selves so that each self can find the conditions necessary for its growth and development. The second is justice understood first of all as the guarantee of rights. Each self has dignity and as such should be accorded rights that protect that dignity and allow the self to pursue its good without undue impediment. The third

moral idea is that suffering can be and ought to be eliminated from daily life. Indeed, the elimination of suffering, in a way that would strike people of previous ages as wildly utopian, has become a major social imperative. In the moral world inhabited by “selves,” suffering is in no way seen as either an inevitable or as a useful part of life.

Even this brief summary of Taylor’s account of the self ought to make clear the “fit” between contemporary notions of moral agency and the views of the new Christian reformers. If we further assume that “sexuality” in some way defines the inner depths of the self, and if “sexuality” is thought to stamp the powers and abilities the self is to discover, develop, and exercise in the course of daily life, then, all other things being equal, it makes sense to say that sexual relations ought not to be tied to anything like set undertakings. To speak of sexual undertakings in the way implied by the traditional marriage rites of the churches is to deny people access to a basic human good from the start and for reasons that are difficult if not impossible for modern people to grasp.

Indeed, the traditional teachings of the churches seem neither benevolent nor just, and are most certainly believed to cause suffering. Given the present social climate, those not involved in a sexual relation are bound to feel a keen sense of insufficiency (and perhaps exclusion). Lacking such a relation, people are apt to feel that their lives are lacking a basic good, and it therefore makes no sense to most of them to say that, because they are not married, cannot marry, or ought not to marry, that they ought also to abstain from sexual relations.

Assumptions like these about “sexuality” are just those that Michel Foucault says accompany modern ideas about the “self.” In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault says that “sexuality” now serves the same purpose as did the word “soul” in the Middle Ages. At that time, “soul” provided its users with a way to unite the various aspects of human identity and, in so doing, gave it significance. It is now the function of the word “sexuality” to do the same thing. Thus “sexuality,” “self,” and “identity” are closely linked by present usage—sometimes to the point that the notions meld one with another. Denial of one’s “sexuality” is akin to denial of “oneself” and so also one’s basic “identity.” It is, therefore, easy to understand why more and more people believe that it is wrong to deny a sexual relation to oneself or to anyone else simply on the basis of marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identification. To do so is tantamount to denial of one’s sexuality and so oneself. A denial of the self’s basic needs is in turn both harmful and an infringement of each person’s right to pursue a full and whole life.

The close relation that exists between the notions of “sexuality,” “self,” “identity,” “fulfillment,” and “right” makes clear the links between the ideas that underlie the revisionist proposals of the new reformers and those upon which modern political society is founded. In both the bedroom and the public square, the purpose of social relations is the pursuit of private life plans and personal well-being. This is the modern agenda and it is limited

only by the principles of no harm and no coercion. It appears that the ideas about “self,” “promises,” and “undertakings” that have since the seventeenth century become increasingly dominant in the political realm have at the same time seeped into the more intimate spheres of life. In short, ideas that now dominate the public arena control also the debate about sexual ethics. The basic question for theological ethics is what the church ought to conclude about this spread of ideas from the public to the private realm.

Their spread in fact constitutes both a gain and a loss, and the arguments we are now having about sexual ethics will not progress until both the gain and the loss are taken into account. First, what needs to be said about the gain? The major difficulty with “the traditional teaching of the church” is that it has taken little account of individual circumstances. The particular desires and needs of men and women have too frequently been submerged into undertakings and sacrificed too easily to the demands of institutions. The appearance of the twin notions of person and self within Western consciousness serves to counter the tendency to swallow up individuals in collective purposes.

For this reason, the emergence of the sexual self is an important moral event. To have it recognized that we are sexual selves, related in freedom to our ends, with depths to plumb, powers to be used and developed, and that we (all) can do these things in the course of everyday life is in fact a giant moral leap forward. The strength of the new reformers’ position is that it recognizes the good of this step in a way that more traditional views have often, though not always, failed to do.

On the other hand, the chief problem with the view of the new reformers is that it fails to recognize that a sexual self, liberated from undertakings that have a moral claim upon it prior to any of its particular intentions and choices, has no satisfactory way to make moral judgments about what it intends, chooses, promises, and then undertakes. The loss connected with the modern view of the self is that, as usually conceived, the self has only the option of following the prompting of its own depths. It therefore appears in the unattractive guise of a dog chasing its tail.

**a sexual self,
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that have a moral claim upon it...
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Like “the person” that is so important to the political thought of modern liberal society, the sexual self that is so important to modern reflexive consciousness appoints its own ends. It need not search out the nature of the undertakings God has appointed for it and then struggle to confirm its desires, intentions, choices, promises, and

undertakings to those appointed ends. Neither the person nor the self is now thought to flourish within a providence that directs the undertakings of their lives. Rather, both are said to flourish or not as a result of the intentions and choices that flow from their inner depths. As James Milhaven has so clearly stated, it is now up to the autonomous self to “figure out what will be good for those concerned and how this good can be realized, just as it is up to [him], not God, to act and make the good a reality.”

If the inner depths of the self are given this sort of authority, it can only mean that the most insistent prompting of the self is always taken as definitive of the self’s true nature and good. The self’s depths are set up to be judge of the self’s depths. Even Locke recognized that it is unsatisfactory to make each “person” the judge in his own case, and surely the same thing is true of “selves.” To take this view is to adopt the very dubious proposition that if one has desires and inclinations and they are powerfully presented from the depths of the self, they are, by virtue of the strength of their presentation, both “natural” and “good.” To take this view is also to condemn the self to what Auden once called “promiscuous fornication with its own images.” Apart from the undertakings that present the self with its arena for action and so its true calling, the self inevitably collapses into itself as it chases about panting after its own productions.

From what has been said thus far, it is obvious that the liberty of individuals to pursue private good is the major moral concern of the new reformers and for this reason their ethical views can fairly be seen as a variety of the contractarian social ethic now increasingly characteristic of political society. Indeed, the fundamental point here is that the strong appeal of the proposals being made by the new reformers is due to the fact that they cohere so well with the way in which we now understand political life and with the way in which we represent ourselves as moral agents.

As one might expect, however, if the reformers’ arguments share the strengths that come from coherence with the modern view of the nature of moral and social agency, they also suffer from the weaknesses of these views.

Long ago, Aristotle pointed out that moral arguments are not like geometrical ones. In ethics, there are no deductions to certain conclusions. Moral argument is cumulative rather than deductive. It serves to establish a burden of proof rather than certainty. And when push comes to shove, the traditional teaching of the churches has greater strengths than does the position of the new reformers. (See my “Undertakings and Promises: An Anatomy of Sexual Ethics,” FT, April 1991.) That teaching makes more sense of marriage and divorce. It is better able to illumine the moral character of familial relations. It can even give a better response to the particular moral problems posed by contemporary accounts of the moral life and moral agency based as they are upon the twin notions of “person” and “self.” In respect to this last point, the traditional teaching can provide persons and selves with undertakings about which they can make promises and, in so doing, discover, rather than collapse into, themselves.

In short, a strong case can be made for saying that, as both the common good of society and the particular good of citizens is now threatened by political voluntarism, so also both the common and particular good of lovers (and families) is threatened by the voluntaristic and limited nature of the promises and undertakings that typically characterize the new reformers' account of sexual relations. Despite a strong climate of opinion to the contrary, it is more adequate to argue that, in both the public square and the bedroom, as William Werpehowski has put the traditional view, "persons flourish in and through patterns of relationship that are themselves taken to be normative," and that, in respect to its teaching about the undertakings and promises that ought to accompany a sexual (or political) relation, the church would do well to seek to preserve (again in the words of Werpehowski) "an account of the goods of human relationship against their collapse into the desires or interests of autonomous individuals." It is sensible to conclude in respect to the *moral problems* before the churches that they ought to defend rather than retreat from their traditional teachings and in so doing face squarely rather than turn away from "the pathos of Christian ethics today."

If the churches choose to face this pathos, however, they will at the same time face pastoral issues of fearful proportions. Because the primary intention of the new reformers is to say yes to forms of sexual relations heretofore condemned by the churches, they have a much easier pastoral task than do those who continue to hold to the traditional teaching. To defend this teaching is to appear to be a "no sayer" in the eyes of a culture for which the word "no" has less and less appeal. The pastoral question, therefore, is whether or not the churches, in passing on their traditions about sexual relations, have more to say than "Don't do it."

The truth is that they do—that the pastoral import of the traditional teachings of the churches is more fundamentally positive than negative. Their positive character is readily apparent in the surprising yet simple example that follows. Strange as it may seem, there is no need for someone who holds traditional beliefs to deny that there may be much good in the sexual relations single people enter into. Many of them produce a genuine, though limited, community of life, and in them people often learn far more than they knew before about the nature of love. A person would have to be blind to miss these and other goods that are often present in relationships which for other reasons are not right.

Indeed, if the teachings of the churches are properly understood, it becomes apparent that the good found in these relations in fact derives from what Christians have to say about the goods of the sexual division, the goods of sex, and the goods of marriage itself. The churches have thought that God created men and women for mutual society, and that, as men and women, they are neither to avoid nor despise their life together. The *social* relation between men and women is intended in creation for every man and every woman, and it is given to them so that they will not be alone. The first word beyond "no" to be spoken is that a sexual relation is not necessary to escape

loneliness, but social relations between men and women are.

It is God's intention that contra-sexual *social* relations be entered by all, but that *sexual* relations per se be contained within the more specific bond of marriage. Within that bond, protected as they are by promises of fidelity and permanence, sexual relations nourish the unity of the couple, lead to the procreation of children, and provide a most immediate way for a man and a woman to learn what it is to love another as one loves oneself. It is the belief of the churches that this providential ordering provides the framework within which our sexual lives can best serve not only our well-being, but also the more general purposes of God. These are the goods in one way or another sought in all sexual relations.

Observations like these make it obvious that Christians have far more to say to single people than "Don't do it," and that they have far more to say to married people than "Go right ahead." The teachings of the churches about God's providential will for sexual relations are rich and complex. Their truth helps define the fullness of our lives, and apart from a full, vigorous, and positive statement, both single and married people will find it difficult to glimpse the full extent of the promises God has etched in their sexual natures.

If Christians are asked to say "no" to sexual relations outside the bond of marriage, it is because they are called upon to honor God by saying "yes" to a providential ordering of life intended both for the glory of God and our individual and common good. What we know, however, is that we more often say no to God's providence than yes, and for this reason we know also that if God is not our reconciler and redeemer as well as our creator, we are lost. God in Christ, however, is our reconciler, redeemer, and creator, and when our sexual lives are viewed from this perspective they take on greater significance than first we imagine. They become a part of the way in which we learn to be disciples of Christ.

**The struggle necessary if we are to
direct our sexual energies to their
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The struggle necessary if we are to direct our sexual energies to their appointed and life-giving ends becomes, in Christ, a battle with an old self that refuses to honor God and insists upon its own way. In the power of the Spirit, this old nature must be put off and a new one put on. That old nature is driven by desires, some of them sexual, that are connected to self-serving ends. It is the teaching of the churches that both married and single people are called to say yes to this struggle and recognize it as part of the "upward call of God."

For most, a struggle with unfulfilled sexual longing is anything but part of an “upward call.” It seems instead a destructive, repressive, and self-deceptive form of denial. It is the belief of Christians, however, that entry into this battle leads men and women away from precisely these life-destroying habits and stratagems and toward a life that is open both to God and to their fellow men and women. To say “yes” to life in the Spirit is in fact the only way to end self-deceptive denial and harmful repression. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth and life rather than repression and denial. It calls for us to present ourselves at each moment to God as we are, with as much knowledge of ourselves as we can muster, with all our desires and intentions exposed, and in so doing ask for guidance, help, and the transfiguration of our lives. God will not answer yes to many of the desires presented, but in saying no he will say yes to deeper desires and deeper loves—both for God and for the men and women with whom God has surrounded us.

God will also speak a word of forgiveness over our inadequacies and failures and in so doing provide us strength to be even more truthful and more compassionate. Sexual desire is a very powerful one, and at the moment it is given full license by our society. Everything that confronts single people conspires to say “just do it.” It is increasingly rare for a single person, at one point or another, not to be involved in a sexual relation. In Christ, however, these relations need neither to be trumpeted nor denied. They can be brought before God, and as they are presented they will be judged with far more truth and love than we can muster. Another thing the churches ought to say to single people beyond “no” is come among us and present your life to God as it is. The upward call of God always begins from the place one starts and it takes place in a fellowship of friends who are also seeking to subject their loves to the truth and love of God in Christ.

This observation calls to mind another thing the churches have to say to single people about sex. Most people who enter even the most casual sexual relation are not promiscuous. They are, however, lonely. Beneath our disordered desires lies a loneliness brought about by a failure in the common life God intends for all men and women. The churches in America in many ways simply contribute to this loneliness. Their common life too frequently is not formed as a society of friends who share one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. It is rather formed around the needs and expectations of the bourgeois family. Single people at best are tolerated. Nevertheless, the view that sexual relations are intended for marital rather than general social relations is linked to the idea that close bonds between men and women, both single and married, ought to exist in all of life’s dimensions. Because of these bonds, sexual relations themselves are not necessary as a cure for loneliness. What is necessary is the fellowship of men and women in Christ. This is the word beyond “no” the church has to speak to single people. If it dares to speak, it will find not only that its common life is transformed beyond all recognition, but also that its teachings begin to appear to single and married people alike as a treasure to be shared rather than as a burden to be inflicted.

This discussion of the pastoral task that lies before the churches suggests that the ethics of sex ought to be placed within the full context of the Christian life and the churches’ pastoral ministry. Only in this way will what Christians say escape the twin evils of punishing legalism and boundless freedom. To place sexual relations in this full and more adequate context, Christians ought to understand them as part of an undertaking that encompasses all aspects of their lives. That undertaking is holiness of life and its end is not repression but joy unconfined. This is the heart of the Christian life and it is the chief business of the pastoral ministry.

Holiness of life summarizes better than any other notion what the Christian life and the pastoral ministry are about. The Christian life is rooted in the ancient command, “You shall be Holy for I the Lord your God am Holy.” The holiness of life known to Christians is based first in the alien righteousness that is imputed to them. It is based not upon their purity of heart and life but upon their faith in the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Holiness is also reflected in a way of life into which disciples enter more and more as, in the power of the Spirit, they engage in a struggle to conform their lives to the pattern of life they see in Christ Jesus. In this way they learn to imitate God and so share in God’s life. One aspect of the pattern of life they are called to imitate requires that they honor God by honoring as well the way in which God intends for men and women to join their lives in and through sexual relations.

If holiness of life is understood in relation both to justification and sanctification, then sexual relations can be included within its compass without the repression and deception that so often accompany their discussion. Indeed, if we include sexual relations (and their absence) as part of a wider account of the Christian life, we will learn, as our lives are drawn further and further into the life of God, more about the undertakings God sets for us by making us male and female. In the light of these undertakings, all the promises we make to one another about our sexual lives will be seen in truth for what they are. In this process we will learn more and more about our bondage to self-serving and imprisoning desire. We will also learn more about what freedom means for us as sexual beings. We will learn more and more about the joys life holds when our desires are ordered to the undertakings God appoints for us. In short, if the ethics of sexual order and sexual liberation, which now contend so fiercely one with another, are joined to an ethic of holiness of life, we will learn how necessary each is to the other.

** James Nelson contributed to the Report of the Special Committee on Human Sexuality presented to the 203 GA in 1991. His works including *Embodiment* are cited in the Report. The Report was rejected by the 203rd GA but continues to be published and distributed.

An especially helpful book on the issue of homosexuality is *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* by Jeffrey Satinover, Baker Books, 1996.

Theology Matters, Vol 2, No. 2, Mar/Apr 1996 with articles: “Keeping Faithful: Homosexuality and Ordination” by the Rev. Dr. Jack Haberer, “The Bible and the Practice of Homosexuality” by Dr. James R. Edwards, and “Why We Believe in Heresy” by Dr. Thomas Oden, is an important resource as you prepare to discuss and vote on the changes to the *Book of Order* regarding the ordination of people practicing homosexuality. For copies of *Theology Matters* to give to members of your church or presbytery, write or call, Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry, P.O. Box 10249, Blacksburg, VA 24062, (540) 552-5325.

What Can You Do??

The 208th General Assembly is sending to the presbyteries for their vote an amendment to the *Book of Order* of the PC(USA) which states: “Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman(W-4.9001) or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.” **For the changes to be included in the *Book of Order* a majority of the 172 presbyteries must vote to support them. An abstention is considered a “Disapprove” vote. What action can you take to help insure your presbytery APPROVES the amendments. . .**

1. Make sure the date/time/place of the vote is well publicized and that the vote is an “order-of-the day” at an optimum time when most commissioners are in attendance.
2. Encourage attendance by lay elder commissioners from all churches, especially the large, racial-ethnic, and very small. Encourage retired ministers to attend.
3. Make sure that the governing body is voting on the General Assembly’s proposed changes and not on the recommendation of some other committee. Meet with the stated clerk before the presbytery meeting and secure his or her agreement on the exact wording that will be the subject of the vote. This is crucial for avoiding confusion.
4. Identify other commissioners from your congregation and other congregations and make sure they have information that will help them arrive at a biblical position. Assemble a team to speak so that all aspects of the issue are addressed. Present biblical arguments in a gentle, humble and loving manner. Use a compassionate tone with gentle language. Speak in a way that witnesses to your care and concern for all God’s people.
5. Insist that all speakers be members of the presbytery and that there is a careful accounting of those who vote so that only authorized commissioners vote.

Bible Study of the Gospel of Mark

CHAPTER 10

(chapter 11 will follow in the next issue)

of THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Observe the text to understand the author’s meaning:

Read 10:1-12. Notice that Jesus now heads down from the north to the vicinity of Jerusalem. The Pharisees came to test Jesus on the Law. They knew the law: they were merely trying to trap Jesus. If Jesus said, “yes” it is lawful, they would denounced him based on the Genesis passage. If Jesus said, “no” it is not lawful, they would have said he disobeyed Moses and the Law. It was a no win situation

that they intentionally constructed. Jesus uses the opportunity to teach about marriage and its deep meaning.

See Gen 1:27, 2:23-24 and Deu 24:1-3. What is God’s original intention in Genesis? Why is divorce against God’s plan? What happens to the new “one flesh” or one body when divorce occurs. What happens if there is a divorce?

Read 10:13-17. Bringing children to Jesus for him to touch them was to receive a blessing. The disciples continue to misunderstand who Jesus is. Thinking he is a kingly Messiah after David, they don’t want to bother him with lowly children. They continue to create Jesus in their image.

What does Jesus mean when he says we have to receive the Kingdom of God like a child?

Remember the Exodus narrative. The people who left Egypt and saw the Red Sea parted, received manna, etc. refused to trust God and enter the Kingdom of the Promised Land. Instead it was their children, who trusted, obeyed and followed God, who entered the land.

Read 10:17-22. This continues the lesson on the Law and the Kingdom of God. When the man calls Jesus “Good teacher” what is he saying about Jesus? When Jesus answers and says “No one is good except God alone,” what is Jesus saying about himself; about what he says?

Which commandments did Jesus omit when he says the man knows the commandments?

The man has a religion of good works: if I do this perfectly, then God owes me eternal life. And in pride, he announces, “I have kept all these things from my youth up.” He didn’t just start doing these things, he has done them for a long time. What is Jesus’ reply? How does this relate to the commandment that Jesus omitted earlier?

In the end, what does the man choose, his possessions or Jesus? Which did Jesus call the man to leave? Which does he leave?

In vs 21, how did Jesus feel about this man? Does that change the call to faith? In other words, does Jesus offer “cheap grace” out of love? Would that be real love? What does Jesus do to his “pride” in his own abilities to save himself?

Was the man “saved?” Why not? While keeping the Law does not save us, it has the potential for driving us to Christ while sin, or disobeying the law, drives us away from Christ. Christ does not compromise with sin.

Read 10:23-25. In light of the previous passages, what is Jesus saying about wealth? Do you have to be poor financially to be in the Kingdom of God? Or is this an issue of pride as it was for the rich man?

Often when we have wealth, we believe we are self-sufficient and do not need Jesus. Wealth and pride are often closely linked. See Deu 8:11-20. How are we to view wealth?

Read 10:26-31. After Jesus talks about wealth, what is the disciples’ question? Aren’t they saying, “if the rich can’t be saved, then no one can?” Peter is still “hung up” on how to be saved with good works--how do we save ourselves?

If poverty and renouncing earthly relationships and possessions is the criteria for entering the Kingdom, what does Peter boast about? What is Jesus reply? Will good works save? What will save? Notice that amidst all the blessings, Jesus also includes “persecution.”

Who are the first who will be last and the last who will be first in light of the rich man story, the Pharisees, the children, the disciples?

Read 10:32-34. Notice where they are going. Do you see the intentionality of Jesus actions? The cross was not a surprise to him. He is going to Jerusalem and this is the fourth time since chapter 8 that he discusses the coming events(8:31, 9:9, 9:31-32, now 10:38). Each time he gives more detail. What is included here in the description that was not included before?

Notice also the amount of space given to the Jerusalem events. More than 1/3 of the book of Mark deals with holy week. Obviously this is a central part of Mark’s gospel.

Read 10:35-45. This is the ultimate in “good works” theology. These two have given up all they have to follow Jesus and now they want the blessings Jesus spoke of in vs 30--they want privileged positions in the Kingdom of God. They probably knew something about the kingdom. After all, they were with Jesus when he was transfigured. So when they say they want to sit in glory with Jesus, they probably think they are right next to Moses and Elijah. They do accept that the Kingdom of God is at hand, even while Jesus is talking about death. But, they don’t understand fully what that means. Can you speculate on what motivates the disciples?

What do you think the cup and baptism are that Jesus speaks of? (remember in Gethsemane when Jesus asks to have the cup removed from him)

Although James and John do not understand what Jesus is saying or what will happen to them, Jesus knows and alludes to it. See Acts 12:2. Although Jesus has the power to remove the persecution and suffering, he does not remove his own or the disciples’.

This is a time when Jesus is teaching the disciples about the events to come, the nature of the Kingdom, their persecution, his crucifixion. It is a time to equip and encourage.

Why in vs 41 are the disciples indignant with James and John?

Jesus gives the lesson again on servanthood. Jesus as King, Son of God, could have demanded people serve him(bring him food, prepare a place for him at gatherings, welcome him into their home, give him gifts, etc), the way the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over people and exercise authority over them. Instead, he came to serve others. How has he been serving other people? How will he serve them in Jerusalem?

What then is Jesus saying in vs 43-44 about our lives? Who is our absolute leader? Who do we serve?

When we serve our neighbor how is it related to our service to Jesus? We can’t serve our neighbor by denying Jesus. Remember, when Peter rebuked Jesus, Jesus did not

“serve” him by obeying his will. Jesus did not “serve” the Pharisees by obeying their laws. Serving God first defines how we serve others. Sounds like the 10 commandments! Explain.

Read 10:46-52. Notice Jericho is only a few miles from Jerusalem. Jericho is about 7 miles from the Jordan River and Jerusalem is a little further inland(maybe 20 miles).

Notice the approach of the various groups and people to Jesus--read 10:2, 13, 17, 46. Who has trouble getting to Jesus? Who doesn't?

What does Bartimaeus address to Jesus show of his understanding of who Jesus is? What does he initially say that he wants from Jesus(vs 47-48)?

In the rest of the chapter, what did the disciples want? What did James and John want? the Pharisees? The children? What does Bartimaeus want initially? How does Jesus “serve” Bartimaeus?

What is the result in Bartimaeus' life of Jesus' act? Physically? Spiritually?

Interpret the Text:

1. Thinking about the rich young man narrative--We sometimes say “God loves the sinner but hates the sin.” We often misinterpret that to mean “cheap grace” as if God overlooks our sin and saves us even though we do not repent. We separate the person from the sinful act. Rather Calvin says “God sometimes is said to love those whom He neither approves nor justifies.” By that Calvin means God loves the righteous seed within them but rejects the person and their deeds. Discuss the difference in meaning.

2. What is “sin” as opposed to “evil?” What is the difference with regard to the law between the rich man and the Pharisees? The rich man recognizes God's law and is struggling to keep it. He accepts God's “norm” for life. At this point however, even though he recognizes the truth of what Jesus calls him to--he is convicted of his sin--he does not repent.

The Pharisees on the other hand, reject the law as the norm. Their law, which takes precedence over God's commandments is the norm. They write the law. There is no question of them obeying God's law. They do not accept God's law. They are striving to obey their own law.

3. When Jesus speaks of his coming death and the persecution the disciples will face, is it clear that Jesus is “omniscient” all knowing as well as “omnipotent” all powerful? Who has power and authority even over the cross?

Mark 10:1-12. Notice that as sacred as the parent-child relationship is, the marriage covenant takes precedence over the parent-child covenant. It does not nullify the parent-child and in fact in the 10 commandments, God holds up the importance of that covenant for one's whole life. Nevertheless, marriage takes precedence.

Calvin explains Jesus' statement in vs 5 saying that divorce was a protection for the uninjured partner. For example, if a man was going to commit adultery, or marry another woman, the certificate exonerated the wife as being chaste. It was a way of saying, “she has not committed adultery, she is faithful, I am the one who wants to commit adultery with another woman.” With a certificate of divorce the woman then was able to remarry. (Without the divorce, faithful wives may have been abandoned and rejected and were unable to remarry.) Notice in vs 11-12, it is the person who does the divorcing who then commits adultery, the other person, the spouse who did not seek a divorce is free to remarry.

Another way of looking at Moses' commandment is not that he was condoning it, but observing that it goes on. Like saying, “when you run out into the street, you could get hit by a car.”

God creates new life through children, he also creates a new life through marriage. It is a new being that God joins together. Divorce is not consistent with God's will as he created us.

Mark 10:13-17. Calvin uses this passage to support infant baptism. Even though the children don't understand completely who Jesus is, their parents(who also may not completely understand) bring the children to Jesus to be blessed by him and welcomed into his presence and family.

Mark 10:17-22. Notice that Christ is not telling all of us to sell all we have and give it to the poor. If we did we would all be on the government dole. Christ is showing the man his covetousness. His refusal to sell all he has, shows his attachment to it.

Christ is also not saying that keeping the law can earn us eternal life. Christ is showing the ruler that while keeping the law perfectly would gain eternal life, no one in the “weakness of our flesh”(Calvin) is able to keep it. It is this realization that causes us to seek God's grace. This is the “school teacher” purpose of the law. See the Westminster confession.

Mark 10:46-52. Once again the one who comes to Jesus for physical healing receives spiritual healing. Those that come in pride and self-sufficiency remain blind.

Jesus heals the blind who call him “Jesus(meaning savior), Son of David(king).” Now he goes to Jerusalem where rebellion nails him to the cross and blindness drives his friends away in fear. In blindness and rebellion all forsake and betray him.

BIBLE STUDY NOTES

News from Around the World

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN SERVING ON A General Assembly level committee or entity, call or write, Sue Whitford, Office of the General Assembly, PC(USA), 100 Witherspoon St., KY 40202, (502) 569-5406 and ask for an endorsement form and brochure describing vacancies. The brochure will outline the work of the committees and the time commitment required. The GA Nominating Committee will nominate people to fill about 38 vacancies in addition to re-nominations. The number of nominations will increase by 150-200 as positions mandated by the recent GA are turned over to the GA Nominating Committee.

SPEAKERS FOR NEXT SUMMER'S PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN'S GATHERING continue to promote Re-Imagining themes. Speakers include Re-Imagining advocate and previous denomination moderator Thelma Adair and 1995 Re-Imagining Conference speaker Miriam Theresa Winter. Winter will lead attendees in "Bible study." In her "Psalm in Search of the Goddess" from *WomanWisdom* Winter invokes blessings from goddesses Artemis, Demeter, Sophia, Cybele, Hera, Isis, Inanna, Hathor, Nut, Hera, Athene, Anath, Astarte and Gaia. The litany professes, "I am Gods and Goddesses.

My stories and images differ. I Am many manifestations, but I Am One and the Same." Disciples respond, "We love you Gaia, Goddess of Earth."

150 LEADERS OF US DENOMINATIONS BELONGING TO THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES meeting in NC in May defended animal sacrifice and ancestor worship as ways the Gospel is shaped by culture. According to reports by the Institute on Religion and Democracy, WCC Deputy General Secretary Wesley Ariarajah said, "Christian theology has always been approached as if there is only one God. This is now a problem...There is so much good in other religious traditions." In the WCC film shown at the meeting called "Diverse Cultures, One Gospel" Filipino villagers sacrifice a pig so that the priestess can examine its entrails and determine the will of deceased ancestors. The video explains, "People who insist on a pure Gospel have hang-ups. But others are prepared for unity." The Presbyterian Church(USA) is the largest denominational supporter of the WCC contributing over 1.79 million dollars a year. The United Methodist Church with its 9 million members is more than three times the size of the PC(USA) yet contributes 1.15 million dollars per year.

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The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Susan Cyre is Executive Director and editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes eight clergy and two lay people, six women and four men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian world view. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it.

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