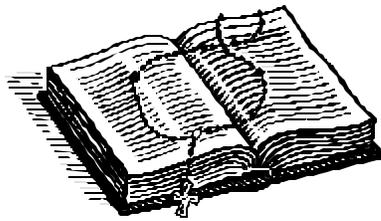


Reading Biblical Texts
commonly viewed as
dealing with Homosexuality



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INTRODUCTION

At some point in discussions of difficult issues in the Christian Church an appeal is often made to “the authority of Scripture.” When Christians refer to the “authority of Scripture,” they in fact mean “the authority of my interpretation.” All Scripture reading is interpretation.

Most English speaking Christians do not read the Hebrew Scriptures, or even the New Testament in their original languages. Translation from one language to another always includes interpretation. Biblical translation is particularly complex because translators do not have the original documents directly from the pen of the author upon which to work. All biblical translators must work on documents that are copies of copies of originals and thus hundreds of years removed from the authored texts. The process of laboriously hand copying texts inevitably introduces variations that are shaped by the copyist’s biases. So, when reading our best biblical manuscripts, we must acknowledge that we may not be reading the exact words intended by the original authors.

When translating the Gospel words of Jesus the picture is even more confusing because the accounts of Jesus’ teaching are written in Greek but were most likely originally spoken in Aramaic. When we read the words of Jesus in the Gospels, we are probably reading an English translation of a written Greek translation of a spoken Aramaic original. This is not to say that our contemporary texts are unreliable; it is only to say that we need to recognize that, any “authoritative” reading of the Scriptures must be held cautiously, humbly and always with an openness to the possibility that correction may become necessary with the arrival of new information or new material upon which to work.

Any reader of the Scriptures who has even the slightest awareness of the history of biblical interpretation will know that, through the ages, interpretations of certain texts have changed as the church’s understanding of the gospel and its implications have evolved. The church does view certain Scriptures differently today than it viewed those Scriptures in the past.

For the most part, we take a different view of divorce and remarriage within the church than we did even fifty years ago. The church has changed its views on slavery, the role of women, borrowing and lending money, and the observance of the Sabbath. In some cases these shifts may represent a collapse of moral authority. Perhaps the church has given in to societal pressure and, instead of having the “mind of Christ,” has simply caved in to the prevailing winds of public opinion. But, not every change of mind the church has embraced in the last century can be characterized as simply giving in to public pressure.

The change of mind in the church in the nineteenth century on the issue of slavery can only be viewed as a fuller working out of the implications of the gospel than was available to the authors of the New Testament.

By moving away from what was once viewed as the clear traditional understanding of certain Scriptures, the church has at times moved closer to the mind of Christ. Every generation bears the responsibility of doing the challenging work of applying the revelation of Scripture to its particular and unique context. In some situations a change of interpretation may move the church towards a more adequate application of Scriptural truth than was possible in the past or to biblical interpreters for the first eighteen hundred years.

The traditional position on homosexuality held by most of the Christian church is simple and clear. Homosexuality has traditionally been viewed as an aberrant sexual practice, clearly included by biblical writers in various lists of obviously sinful behaviour. Homosexuality has been seen as self-evidently contrary to “nature,” and therefore unacceptable for any followers of Christ. Guided by such convictions, the church has held that the only option for persons who experience a same-sex orientation in their sexuality is repentance for any action shaped by this orientation and a life-long commitment to celibacy if they cannot find healing. Healing is always held out as a possibility and, for the most part, compassion has been extended to those who are encouraged to remain in a desperate struggle against this sinful “lifestyle.”

This paper seeks to explore whether it might be possible to read the biblical texts that are normally viewed as dealing with homosexuality in a way other than is outlined by this traditional position. This exercise is undertaken out of deep respect for the texts of Scripture as the holy books of the Jewish and Christian faiths. It is done with reverence for these texts as revelations of God’s Word. This exploration of biblical texts is also

however undertaken with a desire to ensure that both sides of this discussion might be given a fair hearing and in the belief that neither side should be simplistically dismissed as having failed to take the Bible seriously.

In exploring the question of homosexuality, we must carefully examine the texts that are offered to support any position. Clearly it is possible for the same texts to be faithfully read in different ways by different people. Near my home there is a church no woman would ever attend without having her head devoutly covered. This practice is based upon the reverent reading of Scripture. I have no reason to believe that the people who attend this church are anything other than deeply committed faithful Christians. At the church I attend however it is rare that a woman ever worships with her head covered. The people of my worshiping community are faithful, devout, Christian believers. They govern their lives by the precepts of Scripture. But they have come to a conclusion different than the Christians who attend the head-covering church near my home. For the people of one church the Scriptures regarding head-covering are true and binding. For the people of another church, the same Scriptures are equally true but no longer binding. The truth of these Scriptures resides in a different dimension. The principles of the Scriptures are always to be applied but the specific details may not be useful in different contexts.

So, we must be willing to ask, whether the traditional reading of texts normally viewed as addressing the issue of homosexuality is in fact the only possible reading. Does a different interpretation of the same text necessarily indicate that one interpreter has abandoned the authority of Scripture? To ask such questions must not automatically be condemned as rejecting the doctrine of revelation in the Scriptures nor the authoritative role of Bible in the church. The refusal to examine the Scriptures from a challenging point of view allows fear to control the discussion. And fear will not lead anyone to the liberating truth of the gospel.

We do not need to fear this exercise of approaching the Scriptures with an open and inquiring mind. The Scriptures are strong; the truth contained in the Scriptures will withstand any honest, sincere investigation. The search for truth will only benefit from a willingness to examine the texts commonly put forward to support a particular view in an attempt to discover if these texts might be read in a way favourable to the other side of the argument.

6.

In this paper I will explore the texts usually utilized in discussion of the issue of homosexuality to see if it might be possible to support a non-traditional view of homosexuality without superficially dismissing these texts. I do this not necessarily because I am convinced by either side of the argument, nor in an attempt to convince either side that a particular reading is correct. I examine the Scriptures in this way, to ascertain whether it is possible to read the pertinent passages in a way that is favourable to a nontraditional view relating to the issue of same-sex sexual attraction. The Scriptures can stand in the face of serious critical examination; our faith will only be deepened by our willingness to examine the documents of our tradition.

If it is possible to demonstrate that, what I am calling a non-traditional reading of biblical texts commonly viewed as dealing with homosexuality, can in fact represent a credible reading of the texts, it might then be possible for those with opposing views on these texts to remain in communion with one another. At the very least, if I can see that a reading of these texts that is different than my own is held with sincerity, conviction, and reasonable grounds in biblical exegesis, I can then respect the faith and integrity of the person who reads them in a way that conflicts with my reading.

I. THE ARGUMENT TO DISPOSE OF THE TEXTS

Before looking at individual texts, we must consider one preliminary argument used in reference to all passages traditionally viewed as helpful in addressing the issue of homosexuality.

It is frequently suggested, by those who would overthrow a traditional reading of the biblical texts, that Scripture does not deal with our contemporary situation at all and therefore the surface, culturally shaped details of Scripture are not useful in any contemporary discussion of homosexuality. The argument suggests that, while homosexuality did exist in ancient times, adult, consensual, faithful, monogamous, same-sex intimacy was either completely non-existent or so rare, that it is not surprising that such a relationship would not be addressed in the Scriptures. Certainly “gay marriage,” legally sanctioned by society is not a situation the Old Testament writers or Paul would have ever been likely to imagine. When the biblical writers seem to be referring to homosexuality, they are invariably talking about pedophilia, homosexual prostitution, or the use of homosexuality in idol worship. Therefore, the details of the passages that

purport to be helpful in our debate are not relevant. They should be ignored, while seeking to continue applying the deeper underlying principles that are alluded to in these passages.

According to this line of thought, using the biblical texts in our current debate on homosexuality is a bit like using Paul's statements on slavery in a debate on current employee management theory in the workplace. The situations are so dissimilar that any application is a violation of our contemporary situation. When we use inappropriate texts to seek wisdom for contemporary living, we will always do violence to someone. In our current debate the use of these texts devalues and manipulates gay and lesbian people who are attempting to live faithful, godly lives in a church that is hostile to their intentions.

The word "homosexual" does not appear anywhere in the original languages of the Bible. The word was coined in the 19th century to describe a condition that was taken for granted at the time to be pathological. Wherever the word "homosexual" appears in an English translation of the Bible, it is somewhat anachronistic, in as much as the word "homosexual" did not actually exist at the time the biblical writers recorded their words. We can never be sure exactly what behaviors in its original ancient setting the word corresponds to in our contemporary situation. Certainly, we cannot assume that every Hebrew or Greek term used in biblical texts to speak about same-sex relations can automatically be taken to apply to everything we might mean in our day by the English word "homosexual."

There is no denying that the Bible condemns certain specific same-sex sexual practices, just as it condemns certain heterosexual sexual practices. But to conclude that the Bible therefore condemns all same-sex sexual practice does a disservice to the Scriptures. It is the same as arguing that, because the Bible condemns heterosexual adultery, it therefore condemns all heterosexual sexuality. To use the term homosexuality uncritically as if every mention of same-sex sexuality in the Bible refers to all same-sex sexual practices is to go beyond the appropriate use of biblical terminology.

Only a thorough and rigorous study of the social, historical and linguistic contexts of the time in which the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament were written can begin to answer this challenge. It is imperative that anyone using the texts of Scripture be able to demonstrate clearly why these particular texts are indeed valid to use in furthering the discussion and why a particular interpretation of these texts should in fact be viewed as authoritative for all readers at all times in every situation.

II. THE TEXTS

If we are unwilling to dismiss the texts of Scripture commonly viewed as dealing with homosexuality, we must come to grips with each text individually. In fairness to the homosexual debate, we must be willing to ask if the same hermeneutical principles can be applied to the homosexual debate that we have used to at least alter the impact of other texts in different areas of controversy. If we use certain interpretive strategies to mute the impact of some texts in debating any controversial issue, we must be willing to allow those same strategies to be applied in relation to other issues under debate. The burden of proof lies with those who are willing on the one hand to alter their reading of texts that seem perfectly clear on divorce while at the same time refusing to allow for any flexibility at all in their reading of texts that are commonly used in the debate around same-sex relationships.

GENESIS 1 & 2

It may seem curious to begin a discussion of homosexuality with the opening chapters of Genesis. There is no mention of or allusion to any concept of same-sex sexuality in these chapters. However, Genesis 1 and 2 are the usual starting point for traditional teaching about human sexuality. These texts are therefore a logical place to begin assessing the biblical teaching relating to homosexuality. The fact that most arguments against homosexuality start with a biblical passage which does not mention the topic indicates at the outset that any case against homosexuality from the Bible must in part rest upon an appeal to a wider biblical context than just those few verses which seem to deal directly with the topic. This raises the question from the beginning of what larger biblical context can legitimately be used in this discussion. The answer to that question is inevitably subjective and informed by the prejudices of whoever is arguing their case.

Genesis 1 and 2 are descriptive narratives. The central point of these chapters appears to be that God is the Author of all creation. This description of God's creativity includes a description of the human species as male and female. Throughout Genesis 1 and 2 there are only two human characters – one male, the other female. The writer therefore inevitably describes human sexuality in heterosexual terms. It does not necessarily follow that the writer is mandating heterosexuality as the **only** legitimate form of expressing human sexuality for all time. God told the first man to "*be fruitful and multiply.*" (Genesis 1:28) Nowhere in Scripture are

heterosexuals instructed to use contraception. It does not follow that any non-procreative sexual act is therefore condemned for all time.

Genesis 1:28 is often viewed as forging an unbreakable link between human sexuality and procreation. However, the second creation account in Genesis makes no such connection. Genesis 2 describes the creation of man and woman, and presumably the institution of human sexuality, with no reference to the procreative function of sex. In chapter 2, the author views sexuality more in terms of mutual support and enjoyment. Procreation is certainly one function of human sexuality; it is not the only one. In practice, today, statistical evidence would suggest that most Christians stop short of believing that procreation is an essential component of all legitimate human sexual expression. Far more human sexual activity is carried on today with no intention of procreating. Such sexuality is not normally viewed as lacking divine sanction.

The popular argument that the opening chapters of Genesis mandate what we now understand as the institution of marriage is also questionable. The Hebrew word in 2:24, 25 commonly translated as “wife” is “*ishahah*.” The same Hebrew word is used in v. 23. It means “adult woman.” Translators are dependent upon the context to decide whether or not the adult woman is “married.” There is nothing in this context that necessitates the translation “wife.” By what social or religious institution or observance could Adam and Eve be said to have become husband and wife in v. 25? There could have been no person present to perform a wedding ceremony; there were no human witnesses to a wedding ceremony; there was no legal agreement to bind man and woman together in a matrimonial relationship that would look anything like what we think of as marriage today. According to most of the standards by which we understand marriage today, what Adam and Eve had was not a legally, socially sanctioned marriage. In fact the institution of marriage as currently practiced in most of the Western world is a relatively recent development.

For Christians it is important to avoid an overly romanticized view of the institution of marriage. Paul says, “*I wish that all were as I myself am.*” (I Corinthians 7:7) Paul means that he wishes all were unmarried and celibate. He gives a grudging concession to the necessity of marriage for those who cannot manage the higher calling of celibacy – “*It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.*” (I Corinthians 7:9) Here marriage is not linked to procreation. The purpose of marriage is the avoidance of lust, a purpose the homosexual would argue can only be fulfilled for them by same-sex intimacy.

The other argument customarily connected to the opening chapters of Genesis is the argument from nature. It is suggested that God created male and female to complement one another physically and that this is an irrefutable pattern of nature. The argument from nature is more complicated, however, than might at first be assumed. What is natural? How do we decide what is natural? Who gets to make this important decision? We might say, "Natural is the way God created things." But this only avoids the question, as it is not equally clear for everyone, precisely how "God created things," when it comes to human sexuality.

From the earliest biblical stories and from much human experience, it could appear that it is natural for heterosexual men to have more than one sexual partner. The practice of polygamy is widespread throughout the Bible. It is never renounced in Scripture and was practiced by many of the heroes of the Jewish faith.

Paul does not comment on polygamy. He does, however, teach from "nature" that long hair is degrading to a man, while for a woman "it is her glory." (I Corinthians 11:14) It is hard to imagine anyone who would continue to hold firmly to the conviction that "nature itself" teaches men and women what their personal practices should be for grooming their hair. Clearly, we are going to want to use the argument from "nature" cautiously.

GENESIS 19:1-29

Genesis 19 tells the story of God's destruction of the city of Sodom in response to the inhabitants' wickedness. Nowhere in Genesis 19 is the exact nature of the sin of Sodom explicitly identified. The entire story is filled with violence and abuse. If there is one sin that stands out to a modern sensibility in the story, it is the vile sin of Lot who offered his innocent, virgin daughters to be abused by a vicious mob in exchange for protecting the strangers who had sought shelter under his roof. Lot himself seems to think that the sin in this story relates to the mob's violation of the sacred principles of hospitality. "*Do nothing to these men,*" he pleads, "*for they have come under the shelter of my roof.*" (Genesis 19:8)

A number of times in the Old Testament allusions are made to the sin of Sodom. None of these references mentions sexuality. In Ezekiel 16:49, 50 the prophet expressly identifies the sin of Sodom – "*This was the guilt of*

your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy.”

In the New Testament Jude verse 7 refers to the sin of Sodom. The Greek of this verse reads literally “*committing fornication and going away after other flesh.*” It is unclear exactly how the expression “going away after other flesh” should be understood. It is most likely that “other flesh” is a reference to the fact that Lot’s male guests in Sodom were angels. They are, therefore, “flesh” of a different order than that of mortals. Whatever else homosexuality may be, it is not sex between men and angels.

The term “sodomite” does not appear anywhere either in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament or the Greek text of the New Testament. “Sodomy” is a Latin term derived from the city of Sodom whose sin it was assumed was homosexual activity.

LEVITICUS 18: 22 & 20:13

The context for these verses is Leviticus 17-26. This passage is traditionally known as the “Holiness Code.” The Holiness Code describes the standards of ritual purity by which God’s chosen people were to guard themselves against the compromising practices of surrounding nations (18:3). The central concern of the “Holiness Code,” is not focused on practices the Israelites might do of their own accord, prompted by their ordinary human desires. The concern is about things they might do in imitation of surrounding cultures thus compromising their unique identity as “God’s chosen people.”

Failure to fulfill the regulations of the Holiness Code is described by the Hebrew word “*toevah*” (“abomination”). The term “abomination” is used to refer to infractions against religious practice. It carries connotations of detestable religious practices, of idolatry and of ritual orgies, behaviour that would normally be viewed as culturally dangerous and religiously abhorrent.

The particular condemnation of male to male sexuality in this context also related to the importance of increasing the population of the tribe through procreation, thus preserving the Hebrew race and strengthening its identity. The Hebrew writer would have subscribed to the pre-scientific belief that male semen alone was the source of life. Thus the sexual act took on a

sacred function because of its ability to bring about procreation. Same-sex male relations were condemned because they lacked this sacred capacity and would inevitably result in the destruction of the life that was believed to be contained in the semen. This belief accounts also for the condemnation of onanism (Genesis 38:9, 10), a biblical condemnation that is curiously less rigorously applied in our day than the assumed condemnation of all same-sex sexuality.

Underlying this Holiness Code was also the belief that at creation all species had been assigned certain specific fixed functions and characteristics. To step outside of one's assigned function was a violation of the created order. In the case of same sex male sexuality, one man was viewed as functioning in the female role. Taking the position of a woman was believed to be a violation of the male function and therefore was seen as an abomination. In a culture that no longer holds to such rigid categories of behaviour defined according to gender, this basis for the condemnation of same-sex relations is perhaps less applicable.

Almost none of the stipulations of the Holiness Code are viewed as a relevant guide for Christian life today. In fact, it appears that even Jesus and Paul had already released Christians from adherence to the requirements of the purity regulations (Mark 7:1-8 and Romans 14). The requirements of the laws of purity were culturally bound and Jesus supersedes all culture.

In fairness to any use of Levitical texts in contemporary situations, it must be acknowledged that there are parts of this "Holiness Code" which no Christian would even consider applying today: Leviticus 18:19 – "You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness." Leviticus 19:19 – "*You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.*"

Even within one verse of Leviticus most interpreters would hesitate to apply the whole verse equally. Leviticus 20:13 says, "*If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.*" The verse then goes on to instruct how the community should deal with such men. "They shall be put to death." There are not many, even among those who hold most firmly to the first half of this verse, who would mandate the second half in our day. It remains to be demonstrated why we would choose to apply the first half of a particular verse while completely ignoring the second half of the same verse.

If we believe that God views all homosexual activity as “an abomination,” we must at least be willing to explain why we believe God seems to have had a change of heart about the way of dealing with such “an abomination.” By what criteria do we continue to apply some portions of Scripture while apparently ignoring others?

OTHER REFERENCES IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Other texts commonly viewed as useful in the homosexual debate use the Hebrew word “*qadesh*.” This word comes from the root word for “be hallowed, sanctified, consecrated.” When it has a sexual reference “*qadesh*” refers to temple prostitution, either male or female. Thus, Deuteronomy 23:17 reads, “*None of the daughters of Israel shall be a qadesh (temple prostitute).*” “*None of the sons of Israel shall be a qadesh (temple prostitute).*”

It is intriguing that the King James Version translates the Hebrew word “*qadesh*” in Deuteronomy 23:17 as “*whore*” when referring to “*the daughters of Israel*,” but then unexplainably translates exactly the same Hebrew word as “*Sodomite*” when referring to “*the sons of Israel*.” This translation choice underlines the fact that the “science” of translation can be a subjective art, often shaped by the convictions and commitments of the translator.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE GOSPELS

None of the four canonical Gospels makes any explicit mention of homosexuality. Jesus mentions Sodom two or three times in the Gospels, never with any sexual reference. Jesus seems to use Sodom as a symbol for the rejection of the message of the coming kingdom. If homosexuality was a burning social issue in Jesus’ day, it does not seem to have been of much concern to him. Jesus was far more preoccupied with the religious sins of elitism, exclusivism and arrogant self-righteous religiosity that he encountered so frequently.

It is true Jesus appears to endorse heterosexual marriage relationships. But, it is unlikely he would have ever been confronted with even a hint of same-sex marriage relationships, or even same-sex marriage-like relationships

and, therefore, it is not surprising that he does not endorse such a possibility.

ROMANS 1:24-31

In this passage Paul describes Gentiles who have known God through God's revelation in creation. However, these Gentiles have not seen fit to "acknowledge God" (Romans 1:28) who has, therefore given them up "to a debased mind and to things that should not be done." (Romans 1:28) The exact nature of this situation is unclear. Paul seems to be particularly concerned about these Gentiles because they have abandoned the worship of God in favour of worshipping creation – "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creatures rather than the Creator." (Romans 1:25) As a result of their pantheism these people have fallen into a number of behaviors including "covetousness, malice...envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness." They have become, "gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." (Romans 1:29-31) Curiously, none of these consequences seems to relate specifically to sexual practice.

Paul does however condemn certain sexual practices in verses 26 and 27 where he speaks of women who have "*exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural,*" and men who have given "*up natural intercourse with women,*" and "*were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men.*" Paul does not spell out exactly what these "shameless acts" were. Given the context of Paul's day, he may well have been referring to pederasty and homosexual prostitution, the most commonly known homosexual practices of Paul's day.

Whatever behavior Paul was attacking in this verse, he was not describing our contemporary situation. Paul did not have in mind, adult, consenting, respectful, responsible, same-sex intimacy. Paul certainly was not referring in this passage to believing, baptized, committed Christian persons living in faithful, monogamous same-sex unions. Such a situation would have been completely foreign to Paul's imagination. He was referring to people who had abandoned God in favour of idolatry and, as a result of their idolatry, were sunk in sin. He describes those about whom he is speaking as people who, having understood God's "*eternal power and divine nature,*" (v. 20) have, none the less chosen to "by their wickedness suppress all truth," (v. 18). They have "*exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or*

reptiles” (v. 23). This can hardly be a description of most people living today in homosexual relationship.

Paul speaks here of behaviour that he appears to believe was consciously and freely chosen and was therefore “shameless” and unnatural. There are those who now argue that, for a certain portion of the population, it is apparently “natural” to be sexually oriented towards persons of the same gender. Many homosexuals state that they were aware of same-sex orientation from the earliest stirrings of their sexual awareness and, in many cases these people experienced a complete absence of attraction to the opposite sex. Most homosexuals would state strongly that their orientation towards same-gender physical attraction is not something they have chosen and in many cases is something they have struggled against for much of their lives.

The dominant understanding of human sexuality in Paul’s day viewed heterosexual sexuality as the only possible “natural” option. Thus, because of his worldview, Paul would have been convinced that anything other than heterosexual sexual activity was contrary to God’s created purposes. Paul’s worldview also led him to believe that “woman is the reflection of man” because “*man was not made from woman, but woman from man*” and that woman was created “*for the sake of man.*” (I Corinthians 11:8-9) This does not mean that Paul was wrong in his teaching; but it does mean that it is incumbent upon the contemporary reader to be aware that Paul did speak from a particular worldview that was informed and shaped by the dominant culture of his day. We also read Paul from a particular worldview and we need to be aware that our worldview might still change with the advent of new information and deeper understanding of the human condition.

Paul mirrors the taboos, prejudices and limited understandings of his day. Paul was not always able to entirely transcend his own culture. Clear cultural prejudices are reflected in Paul’s dealing with women; thus we no longer apply everything Paul said about women in exactly the manner he seemed to intend. We should not accept Paul’s argument from nature that men should cut their hair and women should keep it long (1 Corinthians 11:14, 15). We no longer accept that women should “*learn in silence with full submission,*” or have no “*authority over a man,*” despite the fact that Paul roots these admonitions in the very order of creation – “*for Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.*” (1 Timothy 2:11-14)

“Nature” seems to embrace a wider variety of options than Paul was able to imagine. Sex between men or women who by their own deepest sense of self-identity testify to being “naturally” oriented toward sexual expression with a partner of the same sex cannot be described as *“men giving up natural intercourse with women.”* For the “natural” homosexual, same-gender sexual expression is “natural,” heterosexual sexuality would be “unnatural.”

Regardless of how we read Paul’s lists of condemned behaviors, Paul is being descriptive, not proscriptive. His lists of censured behavior are not a new set of commandments. They are not intended to be used as a new “Holiness Code” for achieving purity in human behavior. Paul is describing types of human behavior in order to encourage his readers to “acknowledge God,” so they might recognize themselves in the list and stop being judgmental toward others. Faithful, believing homosexual persons do not find their sexuality described in this list. Thus, for them in regard to their sexual orientation, this list cannot achieve the purpose of the passage.

The real sin Paul is concerned about in these verses is the sin of self-righteousness in which the self-appointed judge separates him or herself from the category of sinner and points a finger at others. The point of the passage is spelled out in the opening verse of Romans chapter two – *“Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.”* To those who believe they are without sin Paul says, *“God shows no partiality. All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.”* (Romans 2:12,13) All are sinners. No one has the right to stand in judgment upon another person.

It is ironic that verses which were intended to break down distinctions between people are so often used to support separation and prejudice.

I CORINTHIANS 6:9

In this verse there are two words traditionally considered to allude to homosexuality.

Paul uses the word *“arsenokotai.”* 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 are the only occurrences of this word in the whole New Testament. There is considerable debate about how this Greek word ought to be translated. It

has been variously translated as “masturbation,” “promiscuity,” or “pederasty.” The greatest agreement seems to be that “*arsenokotai*” should be understood to mean “male prostitutes” as it is translated in the New International Version. Unfortunately, the word has no history prior to Paul and was seldom used after Paul. There are few external referents to verify any translation. Therefore it is inappropriate to appeal to this term as absolute proof of anything.

The other Greek word in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is “*malakoi*” which means literally “soft,” or “effeminate.” The same Greek word is used in Matthew 11:8 and Luke 7:25 to describe the kinds of robes that a rich person might wear. In reference to sexual practice, no exact translation into English is available. The New American Standard Bible settled on simply translating the word as “effeminate.” We are left to speculate about exactly what practices Paul is referring to in this verse. There is not enough certainty here upon which to base a doctrine of human sexuality.

In his popular paraphrase of the New Testament, “The Message,” Eugene Peterson acknowledges the difficulty in translating this verse. He avoids the translation problem by paraphrasing, “*Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex, use and abuse the earth and everything in it, don’t qualify as citizens in God’s kingdom.*” It is right to condemn those who “use and abuse sex” whether they do so in homosexual or in heterosexual relationships.

As in Romans chapter one (see above) it is important to follow Paul’s argument through to its conclusion and understand why Paul made a list of sins in I Corinthians 6. Paul is attempting to encourage his audience to adopt an attitude of humility and gratitude to God remembering that “this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” (I Corinthians 6:11) Paul makes a list of representative sins, not to encourage finger pointing, but self-examination, humility and gratitude to God for the grace of healing extended to the Corinthians in Christ.

1 TIMOTHY 1:10

The word translated here as “homosexual” is the same word used in 1 Corinthians 6:9, “*arsenokotai*.” Its meaning is not universally agreed upon by translators or scholars. Even the New International Version of the Bible is not comfortable translating “*arsenokotai*” as “homosexual” in this verse.

The NIV chooses instead to use the indefinite word, “perverts.” Oddly, in 1 Corinthians 6:9, the NIV translated the same word, “*arsenokotai*,” as “male prostitutes.” Any translation from one language to another is difficult. When that translation involves a span of thousands of years, vastly different cultures and less than perfect reproductions of original manuscripts the difficulties are even greater. The choices translators make are often informed by their prejudices and their preconceptions. In cases where translation difficulties are so prominent, it is better to avoid rigidity in our interpretation of the Scriptures.

III. THE ARGUMENT FROM SILENCE

The argument from silence is not really a cogent “biblical” argument. But this position at least deserves to be mentioned.

It is sometimes suggested that, because the Bible speaks positively about heterosexual sexuality but nowhere speaks positively about same-sex sexuality, all homosexual practice must be condemned. It would be possible however to fill a room with things the Bible does not speak positively about but that are assumed to be entirely appropriate today.

Nowhere does the Bible speak positively about contraception; yet this is a widespread practice today among Christians. Biblical writers seem to have favoured faithful stewardship of the earth and good physical health, yet there is no endorsement of recycling or of the use of antibiotics anywhere in the biblical texts. There are situations and practices in our current culture that would have been simply unimaginable for the biblical writers. This does not mean that such practices are necessarily wrong.

If it is true that the biblical writers, due to their culture and their place in history, would have been unable to imagine a healthy life-giving same-sex relationship, it is not surprising they would not have proposed such a relationship as a viable option. No biblical writer could have imagined a culture that embraced the legal marriage of same-sex couples. The absence of any mention of such a situation is therefore perfectly natural and does not represent any grounds for condemnation of current practices among responsible, monogamous same-sex couples.

We will want to be extremely cautious about applying an argument from silence to condemn a relationship that two people seem genuinely to experience as healthy, life-giving, loving, and in accordance with their understanding of their true nature and their relationship to God.

IV. THE HERMENEUTICAL QUESTION

The discussion of homosexuality cannot be entirely settled by pointing to certain passages in the Bible. Traditionalists who acknowledge the difficulty in many of the passages of Scripture dealing with homosexuality will argue that we must place these texts in the larger context of the entire biblical teaching on the matter of human sexuality. This sounds like wise guidance. Agreement upon exactly what is the overall teaching of Scripture on the matter of human sexuality may, however, prove more difficult to achieve than we at first imagine.

Any attempt to systematize or summarize the Bible's teaching on human sexuality involves some measure of interpretation. Taking that interpretation and then applying it to a specific homosexual person today will prove even more difficult and necessitate even greater interpretive leaps. Such leaps must be made with great humility and caution. The interpretive leap must also have some parameters. We need to find a way by which we can ascertain whether our understanding of a debatable text is headed in the right direction.

Even dealing with individual texts is not as easy as we might hope. Surely we must recognize that, with the best most, godly will in the world, the "plain meaning of Scripture" is just not so plain to some people. It is neither appropriate nor loving to simply write off individuals who may disagree with our reading of a text as if they have abandoned Scripture simply on the grounds that their reading is different than ours.

We can sword fight with exegesis until one of us falls down from sheer exhaustion. Nothing will be settled by such a procedure. We must be honest. Reading the Bible means interpreting the words we read. Interpretation always involves analogy, inference and some speculation. We simply do not know the exact context in which the Scriptures were originally written. We do not know the precise meaning intended by the original authors of every word written in the Bible. Records are incomplete and our understanding of the original languages is imprecise. We must be honest about our preconceptions, our prejudices and the cultural biases that inform our reading of the Scriptures. We must be willing to entertain the possibility that a reading that differs from ours may have something to teach us and that the reader who differs in his or her understanding may do so with genuine Christian conviction and good reason.

V. FINDING AN INTERPRETIVE PARADIGM

I am intrigued by the suggestion that, in order to understand the particulars of Scripture, we must derive an interpretive framework from the whole that can serve as a template for our interpretation of the parts. We must first see the whole picture in order to ensure that our reading of the parts is congruent with that whole. This “whole” has been variously labeled as “the controlling center,” “the heart of the Gospel,” “the imaginative construal of the whole.” The question remains: What is the whole? Can we agree on the overriding message of Scripture with which its parts must be congruent? What is the whole story in which the parts must find a place?

A. THE TRADITIONAL MODEL

Those who take a conservative position on the issue of homosexuality will tend to view the Bible as having primarily to do with the character and nature of God. God is defined as holiness and justice. Jesus died in order to preserve God’s integrity in the face of the devastating consequences of the fall. Human sinfulness must be judged, condemned and punished. This sentence was carried out by God against his only Son who gave himself as the sacrifice to satisfy God’s character by dying on the cross.

The aim of human life is to reflect God’s character by becoming like God’s Son. As God’s character is fixed for all time and across all cultures, so those behaviors which can be said to reflect God’s character are equally fixed for all people at all times. The Christian is a person who has decided to live according to the qualities God has revealed to be in keeping with God’s character. Any behavior which does not reflect God’s character must be aggressively shunned, to the point that, ultimately, people who refuse to turn their wills to God’s will must themselves be shunned. In this model great emphasis is placed upon behavior and human conduct. Having been rescued from God’s determined opposition to evil, the goal of life is to live a good life in accordance with God’s will, in order to insure the final fulfillment of one’s salvation in union with God after physical death.

It is easy to see, in this model of reading the Scripture, why homosexual activity should be condemned. The argument suggests that God created men and women to function sexually within faithful, monogamous heterosexual marriage alone. The function and the purpose of human sexuality were fixed by God for all time at creation. Anything other than this ideal falls below God’s perfect will and can only be viewed as sin.

B. THE NONTRADITIONAL MODEL

The nontraditional model finds that the Traditional Model lacks integrity. Nowhere does the Bible condemn the common practice of polygamy. How then can the Traditional Model derive quite such a rigidly fixed view of God's understanding of human sexual relations? If God is against polygamy now, has God's mind changed or has the human understanding of sexual relations developed? If God's mind can change about one aspect of human sexuality, can God's mind not change in regard to another area of human sexual practice? If the human understanding of sexuality can develop to a point where it views as inappropriate a practice that was once viewed as a legitimate form of human sexuality, might not human understanding also develop to a point where it is able to embrace a form of human sexual expression as legitimate that appears to have been at one time condemned? It is unclear how such distinctions are to be maintained.

It is similarly unclear from Scripture how we should view the common practice in our day of heterosexual intimacy intentionally conducted outside of any possibility of procreation.

Certainly, the prohibitions against doing harm to another person, or viewing another person as an object to fulfill one's own physical desires apply equally in any human relationship. Persons of a homosexual orientation would argue however that their relationships are no more inherently harmful to another human being than any heterosexual relationship. Evidence seems to suggest that it is possible for homosexual partners to live together in respectful, loving, life-giving monogamous relationships for their entire lives. It is difficult to see what harm is done by such relationships. And it is hard to identify another human "sin" that apparently harms no one, even the "perpetrator" him or herself.

It may be that God's views on human sexuality are not quite as fixed as we would want them to be. Or, if God's views on human sexuality are eternally fixed for all times and in all cultures, this fixed view has not yet been made equally evident to all people of all times in all cultures. In fact, the Bible would appear to hold out a model of relationship that emphasizes the unique quality of every relationship between any human being and that person's Creator. There is a flexibility and openness to God's way of dealing with people that seems to defy categorization or legislation. Every time we think we have God nailed to the spot, God moves off in a different direction, behaving in a way that seems most ungodlike according to our prescribed recipe – *"the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the*

sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” (John 3:8) Both the human ability to perceive and the Spirit appear to be moving in this picture of the wind that “blows where it chooses.” Wind cannot be kept in a box, nor confined by human reason or understanding.

A nontraditional Christian overview of the Scriptures views God in Christ as having restored humanity and all of creation to God’s original purpose. In Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension and in the sending of the Holy Spirit, God has renewed creation. Humanity is risen from the death of sin to new life in Christ. The goal of the Christian life is to live that new life guided by God’s Holy Spirit living and active within the individual Christian and throughout the community of the church today.

The Spirit of God speaks to the individual and the church today in and through the words of Scripture. The Spirit of God also speaks in and through contemporary thought, science and all cultures. Our application of the specific details of Scripture does need to change over time as the human community develops new understandings and as new, previously unimagined circumstances arise. This does not mean that we have abandoned the deeper inner principles and meanings of the biblical text. Rather, it means that, holding firmly to the revealed underlying truths of Scripture, the people of every generation are charged with the responsibility of applying those truths, under the guidance of God’s Spirit, in the circumstances in which they find themselves.

At no time is it certain that any one person can be said to have the whole mind of Christ absolutely and without error, for all time and in every situation. It is possible that, in our contemporary situation, with new scientific insights and removed from some of the blinders of an ancient worldview, we are now able to approach more accurately an understanding of God’s gracious will towards persons who are homosexual. This movement in our understanding parallels the unfolding awareness within the church of the horrors of racism and the absolute equality of women before God. To deny this fresh awareness of God’s will is to lock up God’s Word in the pages of history.

VI. TWO OTHER OPTIONS

Between what I have called the “Traditional Model” and the “Nontraditional Model” there are people who will find themselves in one of two possible moderate positions.

A. MODERATE TRADITIONAL

This position emphasizes the mystery of human sexuality. Homosexuals should be lovingly welcomed into the life of the church. They should be cared for and offered compassionate Christian healing ministry. They should not be singled out or condemned as somehow more sinful than any other members of the church. However, homosexual sexual practice cannot be viewed as normative, in the sense of common, for the majority of sexual practice. In keeping with the historic position of Christian tradition, leadership in the church should be confined to the monogamous heterosexual or to the person who is committed to celibacy.

B. MODERATE NONTRADITIONAL

In a fallen world we cannot know all that there is to know about human sexuality. Homosexuality may be a manifestation of the brokenness of the human condition, but no more so than a person who suffers from a speech impediment or some other physical disability. The prevailing cultural norms of our day have shifted and homosexuality is now widely viewed as a legitimate option for a portion of the population. In the interests of justice and compassion, the church should accept the more open approach of society towards homosexuals and allow them full membership in the church with all of its privileges and responsibilities. The church should require of homosexuals seeking a role of leadership, the same standards of conduct required of all heterosexual persons.

VII. THE PLACE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The traditional reading of the Scriptural texts commonly viewed as dealing with homosexuality would pose no problem if these texts did not conflict with the apparent reality of certain peoples' life experience. There are godly, Christian people who have, often reluctantly and with considerable pain, come to the conclusion that they have been created with a sexual orientation towards members of the same sex. Many people in this situation have struggled to overcome what they originally saw as this "sickness," or "evil" in their lives. Finally, after much struggle, they have concluded that God is calling them accept themselves as they have come to believe they were created through no choice or fault of their own. Some of these people appear to have gone on to discover happiness and contentment in a strong healthy life-long monogamous same-sex partnership.

Many homosexual people have come to the place where they honestly have to say, "I have sincerely struggled to find the place of personal choice in this fact of my life. I cannot find where I have made a decision to be

oriented toward same-sex sexuality, or where I can reverse this reality of who I am without doing deep violence to myself. I must conclude that this is the way God meant me to be and that liberation means accepting myself as I am and living as godly, faithful and whole a life as I can within the given parameters of the person I am.”

We may want to argue that this person is deluded about their personal experience. But, we must surely conduct our argument cautiously and humbly, respecting that this is the person’s experience. If it is not our experience, we must accept that, due to our different experience of life, there may be certain facets of others’ lives that we find it difficult to understand and to which we find it hard to relate. We cannot dismiss the sincerely held beliefs and life experiences of others simply because they are not our beliefs and experiences.

In considering the question of homosexuality it is also important that we be willing to consider the experience of heterosexual Christian people who have changed their mind on the subject of homosexuality. Most commonly, this change seems to have taken place when a heterosexual person has developed a meaningful friendship with a person who is homosexual, or has discovered a family member who has acknowledged his or her homosexuality. Over time, attitudes seem to change. As the heterosexual comes to experience the homosexual as an apparently healthy, whole human being, striving to live a Christian life with integrity and honesty, attitudes soften and dogmatic positions become more difficult to maintain. Deeply committed, biblically faithful Christian “straight” people have come to the conclusion that their homosexual friends are not fundamentally different and are no less Christian than they.

It is neither possible nor responsible for an incarnational faith to interpret a biblical text outside the context of the life experience of those who will be most affected by the outcome of that interpretation. There are committed, but often hidden, homosexual persons within every Christian church. These people cannot be ignored in our attempt to understand God’s Word in Scripture. This is not just an “issue.” Homosexuality wears a face. Whatever else a homosexual person may or may not be, he or she is a person fully loved by God. All people are equally worthy of God’s grace and compassion. All persons are fully deserving of complete and warm welcome within the community of faith.

We cannot dismiss the nontraditional position on homosexuality without great caution, careful consideration and a willingness to acknowledge the diversity of opinion and experience connected to the mysterious and

complex area of human sexuality. Our personal life experience plays a large role in our interpretation of Scripture. Whatever we end up believing Scripture says about homosexuality, there is little room for arrogance in anyone's position. It is never appropriate to be overly secure in our reading of any text where there is substantial difference of opinion throughout the Body of Christ. Caution, humility and charity must surely be the guiding principles of any discussion around the Bible and the homosexual. We must be willing to listen deeply, compassionately and openly to those whose understanding differs from ours. We must always entertain the possibility that we may be wrong and may need to change our view. The way forward in any difficult discussion is always challenging. As we embrace this challenge we will all grow and deepen in our awareness of God's gracious work in our own lives. Thus we will all be enriched in our faith and God's purposes will be advanced in the world.

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APPENDIX

There are number of troubling texts in the Scriptures, dealing with a variety of matters. If we can dismiss these texts, it remains to be demonstrated why we must continue to apply the literal meaning of texts that have traditionally been viewed as dealing with homosexuality.

DIVORCE and REMARRIAGE

Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.

Luke 16:18 – Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. (**Matthew 5:31,32; 19:9; Mark 10:11,12**)

I Corinthians 7:10,11 – To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY and CHURCH

Deuteronomy 22:20,21 If, however, this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Judges 15:1,2 Samson went to visit his wife, bringing along a kid. He said, 'I want to go into my wife's room.' But her father would not allow him to go in. Her father said, 'I was sure that you had rejected her; so I gave her to your companion. Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?'

Judges 19:23,24 the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, 'No, my brothers do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing.'

I Corinthians 11:3-15 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ. Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head – it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil. For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man. Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for

the sake of man. For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

I Corinthians 14:33b-36 As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

Ephesians 5:22-24 Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

I Timothy 2:11-15 Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

Titus 2:3-5 tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be self-controlled, chaste good managers of the household, kind, being submissive to their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

I Peter 3:1 Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct.

POLYGAMY

Exodus 21:10 If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife.

Judges 8:30 Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. (**Hebrews 11:32** And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises)

I Samuel 25:42,43 Abigail got up hurriedly and rode away on a donkey; her five maids attended her. She went after the messengers of David and became his wife. David also married Ahinoam of Jezreel; both of them became his wives.

II Samuel 5:13 In Jerusalem, after he came from Hebron, David took more concubines and wives.

II Samuel 12:7,8a Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom.’ (**Acts 13:22** When God had removed Saul, he made David their king. In his testimony about him God said, ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.’)

SLAVERY

Deuteronomy 20:10,11 When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor.

Judges 1:28 When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor.

I Corinthians 7:21, 24 Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it... In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.

Ephesians 6:5 Slaves, obey your earthy masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ.

Colossians 3:22 Slaves, obey your earthly master in everything.

Titus 2:9 Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect.