

Table of Contents

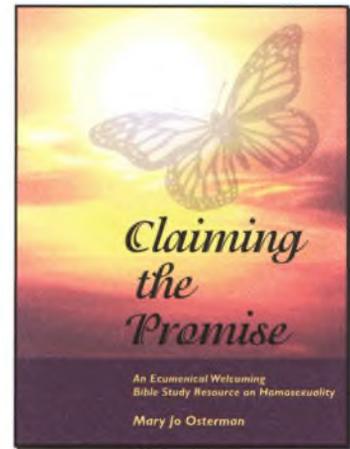
Welcome!	2
A Road Map	3

CHAPTERS

1	Troubling Dilemma	4
	<i>2 Timothy 3:16-17</i>	
2	Heirs Apparent	10
	<i>Galatians 3:23-29; 5:13-23; 6:15</i>	
3	Gift-ed Sexuality	16
	<i>Romans 1:26-27; Psalm 139:1-18</i>	
4	Ethical Decision Making	22
	<i>1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 16:14</i>	
5	Gracious Hospitality	28
	<i>Genesis 19:1-29</i>	
6	Inclusive Holiness	34
	<i>Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Luke 10:25-37</i>	
7	Reconciling Discipleship	40
	<i>2 Corinthians 5:17-20; Matthew 5:43-48</i>	

APPENDICES

A	“Doing Least Harm” Chart	46
B	“Where Do You Stand?” Scale	47
C	Glossary	48



A Leader's Guide for *Claiming the Promise* is available. It includes three session-plan options with activities, study questions, and Bible background materials.

Welcome!

“The Lord has promised good to me!”

—Amazing Grace
John Newton, 1779

Our God has promised good to us. God’s word our hope secures. This old familiar hymn claims the promise that the Bible offers. We are daughters and sons of God, heirs apparent of the Divine One! God calls us to claim that promise! To live it out! To be new creations in Christ. As we do so, we experience “many dangers, toils, and snares.”

Today we are called to face with courage a troubling dilemma in the church. This dilemma is a danger and snare that divides and hurts us all. Simply put, this dilemma is: Will the church unconditionally welcome, or refuse to welcome, lesbian women and gay men into the full life and ministry of the church?¹ Will we affirm that people of all sexual orientations can claim kinship as daughters and sons of God, heirs apparent with Christ?

As we try to solve this dilemma in the life of the church, we naturally turn to the Bible to discern God’s Word.² Yet some of the words in the Bible contribute to our dilemma about welcoming lesbian women and gay men into the church. We are called to sort through those specific—and perhaps troubling—biblical references prayerfully, as we seek to discern God’s living, healing, saving Word.

We invite you to study the issues that are embedded in this current church dilemma. We study them, not as an academic exercise, but as a process of Christian dialogue and spiritual discernment that literally can save lives. We invite you to know, hear, and understand individuals who are gay or lesbian—and their families. As we study, may we continually be reminded that people who live and work and worship among us are personally affected by this current church dilemma and by our responses to God’s promise. If you are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, we invite you to share with your class participants as you feel comfortable and safe enough to do so.

Come and explore how we—as individuals and as communities of Christians—might discern God’s promise and claim it. Welcome to the journey!

This Study Will Help Us...

...Identify assumptions about biblical authority and how we engage in biblical interpretation



...Examine alternate understandings of biblical references that people sometimes apply negatively to lesbian women and gay men



...Explore the place of those biblical references within a comprehensive understanding of the Bible’s liberating message of justice-love and freedom in Christ



...Claim the promise of being God’s heirs apparent by identifying how we might live as welcoming, reconciling disciples of Christ.



Notes

¹Publisher/co-publishers’ note: We recognize that bisexual persons are clearly and often painfully affected by biblical interpretations on same-sex conduct. We also recognize that, while bisexuality does raise some different issues of biblical interpretation, overlap also exists. We hope this resource will facilitate initial discussion of broader issues of orientation and gender. We have, however, focused this curriculum directly and specifically on the Bible and homosexuality, as noted in the subtitle of this study booklet. A Bible study related to bisexuality would be a welcome companion resource.

² See the glossary, p. 48, for definitions of key words or phrases.



A Road Map

Claiming the Promise follows a particular pattern to focus our thinking on the church's dilemma about welcoming or not welcoming those who are lesbian and gay. Four small icons guide our way.



Golden Calf—A visible stationary image of a false God that the Hebrews worshipped at Mt. Sinai

Each chapter begins with a biblical reference that is often used as a “biblical condemnation” of same-sex conduct. Potential “golden calf” dangers of such interpretations are briefly discussed. Like the Hebrews who worshipped a calf, we sometimes idolize static interpretations about same-sex conduct rather than hearing the Bible’s story of God’s promise to include all people in full kinship with God (Exodus 32). This potential danger exists for moderate or liberal people in the church as well as for conservative people.



Pillar of Fire—That which God used to lead the Israelites through the wilderness by night during the Exodus

The next section in each chapter is a reflection on broader intents, contexts, and messages related to the “golden calf” biblical interpretations. These reflections are offered as “pillars of fire” (Exodus 13:17-22). In the Exodus story, God was manifested in a pillar of fire at night to lead the people toward the Promised Land. Though we may see them dimly, the biblical reflections in this section offer evidence of God’s leading us toward the promise of new life.



Prophetic Voices—Those contemporary leaders arising from many places to offer God’s Word to us in fresh—and sometimes disconcerting—ways

The third section is an exploration of the analyses and reflections of contemporary “prophetic voices.” These reflections, especially as they come from lesbian women and gay men, are powerful symbols that new life is rising from an oppressed group. They offer possibilities of new life in the Spirit for all of us.



Promise—God’s covenant with humanity that we are all heirs

The fourth section focuses on the biblical promise that we are God’s heirs through God’s promise to Abraham. God reaffirmed that promise through the Christ-event. God’s claim on Christians requires a response: be “new creations” (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). The butterfly, a symbol for new life, reminds us to explore what it means to *claim the promise* and be new creations.

It is possible to read these four sections of a chapter as a continuum. However, they were first imagined as expanding concentric circles. The calf discussion with its potential dangers is the core of the dilemma that engages all of us. The pillar, prophetic voices, and promise sections of each chapter offer expanding ways for us to reflect on our joint dilemma and move toward new life in Christian community.

Finally, this study presents several points of view. It acknowledges clearly that Christians are not all of one mind about homosexuality and the church. However, not all views are equal in this study. *Claiming the Promise* has a “point of view”—one that we think offers us glimpses of God’s Word in the midst of our troubling dilemma. We hope only that you will prayerfully read and consider its point of view.

The Question Boxes

Each chapter contains four boxes of questions. They are offered as possible work for you to do before class. Together these four sets of questions lead us through several steps of a Bible study process. This process includes:

Box 1: What does the English text say?

Box 2: What are some problems of translation or interpretation of the original Hebrew or Greek texts?

Box 3: What does a biblical writer, Jesus, or church tradition say about the text?

Box 4: Having done some critical biblical study—and having engaged in a prayerful discernment process—what do we think?

Are You Studying this Material Alone?

You may wish to buy the leader’s guide to *Claiming the Promise*. It has additional background material on various biblical passages. Also, some of the activities in the leader’s session plans might be helpful in your study.

Chapter 1

How do I interpret
the Bible?



2 Timothy 3: 16-17

What Kind of Authority?

According to a Gallup poll, 31 percent of U.S. citizens and 14 percent of Canadians believe the Bible is the “actual” literal word of God. Some 57 percent of U.S. citizens and 53 percent of Canadians believe the Bible is the “inspired,” but not literal, word of God. Only 11 percent of U.S. citizens and 28 percent of Canadians believe the Bible is a book of fables, legends, history, and moral principles.³

Notes

¹This prayer was written for this study by Corlette Pierson.

²We recognize that our Roman Catholic readers come to the Bible through their tradition in a different way than Protestants do. While Catholics do use the various approaches to the Bible examined in this study, the ultimate teaching authority in the Roman Catholic church is the magisterium. Catholics may disagree with that teaching on many issues, but those who base their religion on the infallibility of the magisterium will read a passage solely in the light of that ecclesiastical authority.

³From *Newscope*, which quoted statistics from the Princeton Research Center, 19 January 1996.

Living Word,

We have gathered here with a desire to know your living Word more fully. Some of us are afraid that divine inspiration may be dismissed, others that the Bible will be held up as an object of worship. We long for your comforting touch as we delve into subjects that may prove to be painful for many of us. Amen.¹

Joint Dilemma

Christians today face a dilemma that is crucial to our personal and congregational lives. Some of us (perhaps you or members of your church) might state the dilemma like this:

Homosexual behavior is a sin. The Bible plainly says so, in several places, and the Bible is God’s Word. Maybe homosexuality is no worse a sin than others, but how can we say that homosexual relationships are good when the Bible says same-sex conduct is an abomination? I don’t want to be seen as rejecting others, but how can we joyfully receive homosexuals into our church when they don’t repent of their sin? Often I feel as if other Christians are trying to destroy my belief in the Bible as the Word of God....

Other Christians have a different kind of dilemma related to the Bible and homosexuality. Perhaps you state it like this:

The Bible doesn’t clearly condemn gay and lesbian persons even though it contains negative verses about same-sex conduct. People back then didn’t have a word for homosexuality or a modern understanding of sexual orientation. Jesus never said anything about homosexuality. I believe the Bible is inspired by God—if I bring to it insights from twentieth-century scholars and my own experience. I believe lesbian women and gay men are God’s children too and I welcome them in the church. My dilemma is how to connect with Christians who interpret the Bible literally. Often I feel as if my faith is dismissed and my approach is not understood....

Wherever we stand on this issue can be painful because the Bible does have significant authority for our lives.² Neither of the statements above may accurately reflect our beliefs—and that can be painful as well. Some of us would be much more positive and affirming of gay and lesbian people. Others may want to refine the first view. How would *you* state your “side” of the church’s dilemma?

Differing Assumptions

Those of us who voice the first side of the dilemma may turn to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 to support our beliefs. The Bible, we point out, plainly says that God inspired *all* scripture. Every verse that talks about same-sex conduct is therefore God's Word. Since every verse says such conduct is bad, faithful disciples of Christ cannot condone homosexuality today.

Behind these beliefs lie several assumptions about the nature and authority of the Bible:

- ◆ Scripture is directly and literally inspired by God.
- ◆ The Bible is infallible (incapable of error).
- ◆ It is completely trustworthy as a witness to God's Word and saving actions.
- ◆ It is sufficient to bring us to faith and salvation in Jesus Christ.⁴

These assumptions form the base of a *literal approach* to the Bible.

Those of us who voice the second side of the dilemma read 2 Timothy 3:16-17 differently because we begin with different assumptions:

- ◆ The Bible is the Word of God, but it is not the words of God.
- ◆ Although it witnesses to God's Word and saving actions, it was written by fallible human beings whose evolving understandings—and errors—exist in the words.
- ◆ Our task is to approach the words with historical-critical methods of interpretation to hear the Word that transcends the historical and human context.
- ◆ In this way, we can experience the usefulness and divine inspiration claimed by the writer of 2 Timothy in the second century.⁵

These assumptions form the core of a *critical approach* to the Bible.

The first approach says that the scriptural references to same-sex conduct have obvious "plain meanings." It also says these references are God's Word for all times and places. The second approach applies critical methods of study to the scriptural references and comes up with different conclusions. As we face the dilemma in our churches today, we will be helped if we recognize the existence of these two general approaches to interpreting biblical material.

Dangers: A literal interpretation of 2 Timothy may lead us to equate the authority of the Bible with the authority of God. We potentially worship the Bible rather than worshipping the living God who speaks through and beyond it. We also might assume divine authority for particular English translations of Greek and Hebrew biblical texts without carefully weighing the accuracy of the translations.

On the other hand, we who approach the Bible in a historical-critical way may greatly diminish the Bible's authority for our lives. If we do, we may overreact and dismiss the living Word of God that comes to us through the words of the Bible. Any interpretive community might make the Bible a golden calf by claiming that *our side* has "rightly" interpreted it. We miss the point that *each side* has a piece of the divine intention. Because we have only a piece, each interpretation may be distorted in some way. We need each other. We need to bring our pieces together and listen to each other's critiques to reach a fuller understanding of God and relationship with God and each other.



What Does It Say?

Look up the verses to be sure you know exactly what they say.

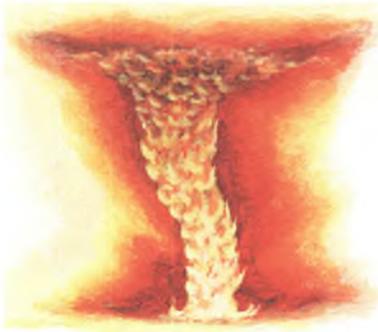
1. List the key words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

2. According to the writer of 2 Timothy, why is scripture useful and for whom?

Notes

⁴For more on old and new evangelical understandings of authority, see Phyllis A. Bird, "The Authority of the Bible," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), pp. 36, 59-60. *New Interpreter's Bible* hereafter noted as *NIB*. For a conservative view, see Marion L. Soards, *Scripture & Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), ch. 1. Hereafter referred to as Soards, *Scripture*.

⁵See Martin Dibelius, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary*, rev. by H. Conzelmann, trans. by P. Buttolph and A. Yarbro. Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), pp. 1-10, 120.



Inspired and Useful

Using a critical interpretive approach, let us examine more closely 2 Timothy 3:16-17. In the original Greek, 2 Timothy 3:16 lacks the verb “is.” Translators must supply it and decide where to put it. Should it be “All scripture [is] inspired and useful” or “All scripture inspired [is] useful”? Translators traditionally choose the first version.⁶ However, in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)⁷ biblical scholars note that verse 16 may be translated: “Every scripture inspired by God is also useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” The emphasis shifts from “*all scripture is inspired and useful...*” to “*every scripture that is inspired is also useful...*”

What Does It Mean?

The questions in this box focus on translation and interpretation issues each time.

1. Look up 2 Timothy 3:16-17 in a study Bible and read the annotations (see glossary). What does the interpreter who wrote the annotations say about these verses?

2. Find the alternate translation of verse 16 in the footnote of a New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) study Bible. Write both versions below. How do they differ?

In Verse:

In Footnote:

The Greek words which NRSV scholars translated as “inspired” and “useful” are rather vague terms. The first implies only that biblical writers were somehow guided by God as they wrote. The second means only that a scriptural reference is somehow helpful or advantageous to a reader. Neither Greek word *requires* us to assume that all scripture is entirely consistent, that it is totally unaffected by the cultural settings of the writers, or that it is binding for all times and places.

Placing the verb “is” in a different location than it is traditionally placed does not mean we reject divine inspiration of scripture. It does mean, however, that we adjust our understanding of how God worked to inspire biblical writers. Instead of thinking of every word as the Word of God, we acknowledge that God spoke to and through human beings whom God created with human freedom and human limitations.

The second translation acknowledges that the writer of 2 Timothy probably did not mean that *every* verse of scripture was relevant for all time to come. After all, this letter was a very practical one, addressing very specific concerns of the church around 90-110 C.E.⁸ The writer was not addressing us in the twentieth century and had no understanding of many of our twentieth century realities. Biblical writers wrote to their own people in their own day for their own reasons. The early church saw within these writings the ring of truth and reality and declared them to be scripture. However, biblical writers from both Testaments continually reinterpreted and modified scripture for their new times and situations. So did later theologians. We call their writings the tradition (Protestant) or part of the magisterium (Roman Catholic). At the same time, both biblical writers and church leaders continued to affirm the inspiration of the Bible.⁹

So can we. Some of us take one tiny step out of our joint dilemma by accepting the second translation of 2 Timothy 3:16. We believe that God’s Word is not synonymous with all the words of scripture. We acknowledge different ways of interpreting scripture. What do you think?



Notes

⁶For a traditional view, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 313.

⁷See list of abbreviations, p. 48.

⁸C.E. means common era. We used to say A.D. See abbreviations, p. 48.

⁹Discussion of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is based on Victor Paul Furnish’s analysis in *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), pp. 14-18. Hereafter noted as Furnish, *Moral Teaching*. Helpful comments were also provided by consultants H. Darrell Lance, Daniel A. Helminiak, and George C. Edwards. For basic background on the anonymity of the writers of the pastoral letters, which were attributed to Paul, see H. Conzelmann and A. Lindemann, *Interpreting the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1988), pp. 91, 209-13. For a conservative view, see Brevard Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 378-95.

Three Approaches

Throughout church history, people have approached the Bible in many ways.¹⁰ In this study, we have already identified two—the literal and the critical. After briefly summarizing them below, we will describe a third—the sociocultural approach.

The Literal Approach: In a *literal* approach to interpreting the Bible, we look at the words of a particular English translation of the Bible. Then we say what it “plainly means” by drawing from a large reservoir of interpretative material—tradition—handed down to us from earlier centuries. We may or may not acknowledge that much of our tradition first emerged as biblical interpreters in other centuries reinterpreted scripture for their own times and their own situations. The literal approach to the Bible emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, largely as a reaction to the rise of modern scientific thinking and historical biblical criticism. However, some literal interpreters today do use research from the critical approach.¹¹

The Critical Approach: This approach interprets a biblical text through historical study. We study the language of the text itself, its original audience, the identity of the original writer in relationship to that audience, and the way that audience would likely have understood the language of the text. Only then do we ask what it means for us today. If we interpret the historical sacred text “correctly” (and that is an on-going process), then scripture can—and does—have on-going authority and influence in our lives. This approach is labeled *critical* because it uses a variety of methods of historical, textual, and literary criticism, much like the analytical methods of art or music criticism. Those who use the critical approach sometimes combine it with social and cultural methods arising from the third approach.¹²

The Sociocultural Approach: Emerging from marginalized and oppressed groups, largely in the twentieth century, the third approach acknowledges that much of the Bible and most biblical interpreters reflect the dominant social, cultural, and political view of their day. As a result, they have usually misrepresented or ignored marginalized and oppressed peoples. This third approach invites us to stand boldly within our own “social locations”—as women, Native Americans, first-generation immigrants, gay men and lesbian women, those with disabilities, and so forth—to interpret the Bible.¹³ It invites us to ask: “How does this passage speak to *my/our* experience? Who’s invisible here? What’s *not* being said? Who is powerless? Who benefits? What are the economic implications of a law or custom? *Why* is something so important in early Hebrew or Christian communities?” This approach is particularly appropriate in discussions of same-sex biblical references.¹⁴



How Did David and Jesus Reinterpret Scripture?

The questions in this box focus on how others interpret scripture.

1. What scripture did David technically violate? How did he reinterpret it?
See 1 Samuel 21—22 and Leviticus 24:5-9.

2. What prompted Jesus to refer to David’s reinterpretation?
See Mark 2:23-27.

3. What Hebrew scripture did Jesus himself reinterpret and how?
See Mark 2:23-24, 27. Then look up Leviticus 23:3.

Notes

¹⁰Paul demonstrated a marvelous flexibility in interpreting his “tradition.” Luther, even with his strong emphasis on “the plain meaning of scripture,” was a critical scholar.

¹¹*Caution:* Literal interpretation is selective about what is read by “plain meaning,” what is read through the lens of tradition, what is read metaphorically, and what is ignored entirely.

¹²*Caution:* The methods and insights of critical interpretation are influenced by the sociocultural status of the interpreter which sometimes produces limited insights related to women, racial minorities, and others. This is crucial to remember when reading commentaries and biblical dictionaries.

¹³See James Earl Massey, “Reading the Bible from Particular Social Locations: An Introduction” in *NIB*, vol. 1, pp. 150-87.

¹⁴*Caution:* While the sociocultural approach is helpful in understanding same-sex biblical references and other issues important to marginalized groups, it is not sufficient by itself. “My cause” or “my group” must not be trivialized or denied; however, God sides with the whole world and seeks liberation for all.





Remaking Covenant?

Using particular sociocultural approaches, pioneering interpreters from racial and ethnic minority communities have helped us see the underlying structures of slavery and the assumptions about ethnic purity in many biblical passages. Likewise, pioneering women interpreters have helped us see the underlying patriarchal (male-dominated) structures of power and property ownership in the Bible. Gay and lesbian interpreters are just beginning to help us see the underlying structures of heterosexual bias and privilege in biblical passages.¹⁵

We can stand firmly within our own identity (whoever we are) and our community (whatever our experience is) while reading scripture. If we do, and if we struggle in community to understand each other and to live out God's expectations for us, we soon discover that God speaks to us through the words of the Bible, through our tradition or ecclesiastical teachings, *and* within Christian community.¹⁶ Divine authority exists in all of those places.

What Do You Think?

This box in each chapter asks you questions directly related to the church's dilemma.

1. If the alternate translation of 2 Timothy 3:16 was proven without a doubt to be more accurate, what difference would that make in your life? In others' lives?

2. Do you think the church can move beyond struggles to make one interpretive approach supreme over others? If so, how? If not, why not?

If we believe that, then any of our approaches to interpreting the Bible (literal, critical, and sociocultural) can allow us to embrace a God whose Word meets us where *we* are. God's Word meets *us* just as that Word met the Hebrews and early Christians where *they* were—and as God's Word still meets the Jews today where *they* are.

Each of us deeply values our assumptions about the Bible and our approach to biblical interpretation. They are part of the very core of our faith. It can be scary to look at other people's positions or to have them look at and question ours. Yet, in the midst of the dilemma we face in the church, we desperately need to learn to trust each other enough to do just that. One way to begin is to acknowledge to ourselves what it is that we fear. What would happen if we altered our own assumptions about the authority of the Bible? What would be "true" if we adjusted our approach to interpreting the Bible?

It seems clear that people on all sides of the church's dilemma about welcoming gay men and lesbian women feel *diminished* in some way by "religious enemies." At the very least, claiming God's promise and living as new creations in Christ will involve discussing those feelings of being diminished by each other. It will involve acknowledging our different approaches to interpreting the Bible. Can we call a truce? Can we begin to share and listen honestly? In our biblical story, God repeatedly forgives us and remakes covenant with us. Can we forgive and remake covenant with each other?

Notes

¹⁵Many people may experience discomfort or dismay that their view (often the dominant patriarchal view of the Bible) is being questioned. One point in this study is that their view is just that—a particular view from a particular "social location." Another point is that we are to consider all views as we seek to discern God's living Word.

¹⁶L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 4. Hereafter noted as Countryman, *Dirt*.



Expressing Our Faith



A Psalm of Serendipity

O God most high,
How do you speak to us?

And how can we understand your language?

You spoke to Noah with your rainbow smile,
And to Sarah in her fertile womb.

You made a fearful demand of Abraham,

But spoke your final word in a ram.

You addressed Moses through a burning bush,
And to Pharaoh with fearful plagues.

You spoke in thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai,

And to Balaam by the mouth of a donkey.

You led the children of Israel by fire and cloud
And the prophets by dreams and visions.

You addressed Elijah not by fire, wind or quake,

But in a still, small voice.

You spoke to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego
By your presence in their hell.

You spoke to the psalmist with seas, mounts and valleys,

Both of geography and emotion.

You addressed Deborah through the Law
And Mary in your Grace.

You called to Lazarus "Come out!"

And comforted Mary Magdalene at your tomb.

You communed with the Emmaus travelers in the breaking of bread,
And through your wounds touched the doubtful Thomas.

You spoke through the Resurrection to the disciples

And by the languages of strangers at Pentecost.

Unexpectedly and in unusual ways

You spoke to those who came before us.

Can we study your language?

Can we begin to know your ways?

We pray your voice will find a way to us, O God,
And we will not miss its unusual expressions.

God, bless us with serendipity

Even at the expense of our serenity.

—Chris Glaser

More Light Psalter, January 1995, pp. 15-16
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On Your Own

Start a personal journal. Reflect on the questions: Can I (do I) forgive my "enemies" in the midst of this troubling church dilemma? Can I remake covenant with them? What steps might I need to take personally?



Closing Prayer

God, you are always in our future,
beckoning us toward a horizon
we are not sure we want to reach.
We think of the things that are past
and wish you would give us, again,
that with which we were comfortable.
But you lead us from the future.
Thank you for the assurance
that we will not be without you then,
as we are not without you now,
and give us the courage
to follow your lead.

—James Richards

More Light Prayers, January 1993, p. 4
Used with permission of
More Light Update

Focused Reading

Bird, Phyllis A. "The Authority of the Bible," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1, pp. 33-64.



Countryman, L. William. *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny?* 2nd ed.

Helminiak, Daniel A. "Interpreting the Bible." In *What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality*, pp. 21-34.

Massey, James Earl. "Reading the Bible from Particular Social Locations: An Introduction." In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1, pp. 150-87.

Chapter 2

What is my inheritance?



Galatians 3:23-29; 5:13-23; 6:15

Heirs Apparent

God's people reach back to God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have heirs and descendants as many as the stars. God promised they would be the ancestors of many nations. Ancient Hebrews and modern Jews claim and celebrate that early divine promise by faithfully obeying a later covenant with God—the law given to Moses. We Christians also claim a second covenant—God's liberating action in Jesus Christ. In Galatians, Paul pointed back to God's early promise to Abraham as an inclusive promise. We, as descendants of the early Gentiles, are joint heirs of that promise to Sarah and Abraham.²

Notes

¹Written for this study by Corlette Pierson.

²See Genesis 15:1-6; 17:15-16 and Galatians 3:6-19. Also see Victor Paul Furnish, *Journey Through the Bible: Romans—Philippians*, vol. 14, ch. 11. Hereafter noted as Furnish, *Journey*. Also see Sidney G. Hall, III, *Christian Anti-Semitism and Paul's Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 67-69. Hereafter noted as Hall, *Christian Anti-Semitism*. Also Furnish and Hall notes to Osterman, August 1996.

Liberating Spirit,

Am I really your heir? Do I have the kind of freedom with responsibility that is afforded to those who are joint heirs to an inheritance? At times the responsibility seems overwhelming and I feel more secure living by rules rather than by grace. Guide me, challenge me, and support me as I seek the ways of the Spirit. Amen.¹

Similar Dilemma

Will the church unconditionally affirm and include lesbian and gay persons in the circle of Christ or will it require them to change or be celibate? Our answer involves our understanding of who God's children are and what it means to be God's *heirs apparent*.

The current troubling dilemma in our churches about welcoming or not welcoming gay men and lesbian women is similar to a dilemma the Galatian Christians faced about twenty-five years after Jesus died. Like us, the Galatians were struggling over what scriptural laws they needed to follow in order to be included in God's covenant with humankind. So, before getting into specific biblical references on same-sex conduct, let us look at a portion of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Perhaps it will offer us some insights into our dilemma.

The relationship between God's promise (Galatians 3:1-18; 23-29) and God's law (Galatians 3:19-22; 4:1-7) is very complex. Paul worked with Jewish and gentile Christians on that issue throughout his ministry. Scholars have studied it for centuries. We will only touch the surface of this issue, hoping to inspire all of us to continue reaching toward a deeper understanding of God's promise and how we are to respond to it (Galatians 5:13-26; 6:15).



Not a Gospel at All?

*I am astonished
that you are so quickly deserting the one [God]
who called you in the grace of Christ
and are returning to a different gospel—
not that there is another gospel,
but there are some who are confusing you
and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

—Galatians 1:6-7 NRSV



Jewish Christian troublemakers within the Galatian churches were unsettling gentile converts by trying to impose selected Jewish laws upon them. They were trying to convince Galatian men (non-Jews) to undergo circumcision in order to be included in God's covenant. Circumcision was a sign of covenant that God had commanded of Abraham and all his male descendants (Genesis 17:9-14).

Paul refuted the troublemakers by referring the gentile converts to Christianity to God's early promise in Genesis. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have heirs and be the ancestors of a multitude of nations (Genesis 15:4-5; 17:4, 15-16). Those descendants were Gentiles as well as Jews. Paul referred to that early promise in order to prove from scripture that it is not God's *law* but God's *promise* that defines God's relationship (covenant) with humankind. The law didn't come until long *after* Abraham and Sarah had received the promise and believed (Galatians 3:17-18). Though Gentiles were never under the Jewish law, they clearly were part of God's covenant. They did not need to be circumcised or to follow other Jewish practices.

"Those of us who are lesbian and gay Christians," some of us observe, "are the Gentiles of modern Christianity who are being asked wrongly to renounce their/our sexual identity and live under the law of heterosexuality in order to be included in God's covenant. That demand is a gospel that is not really a gospel at all."

"There is no comparison between the gentile Galatians and gay men or lesbian women today," say others of us. "The Bible clearly condemns same-sex conduct, especially the law in Leviticus. Lesbian women and gay men must turn away from their 'sinful' behavior in order to be included in the covenant."³

For Paul, while the law had its role (Galatians 3:19ff), it did not have the power to give life. That power is God's and is disclosed in the promise (through Christ). While the law excludes Gentiles (unless they become like Jews, obedient to the law), the promise includes Gentiles along with Jews (and without Gentiles having to become like Jews). That is the gospel; what the troublemakers proposed was not.⁴

Dangers: We may be tempted, like the troublemakers in Galatia, to demand obedience to laws or creeds or rituals without understanding that they do not give life. When the laws are limited by human biases, they especially do not give life to the marginalized and the oppressed.

What Does It Say?

Read Galatians 3:6-9 and Genesis 17:4-8, 15-16.

1. Who are the descendants of Abraham?

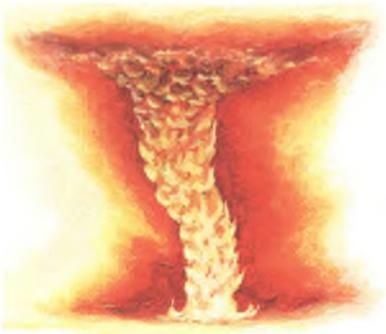
2. What was God's promise to Abraham?

3. What was God's promise to Sarah?

Notes

³Paragraphs 3 and 4 and the premise of this whole chapter are extensions of Jeffrey S. Siker's writings. See Siker, "Gentile Wheat and Homosexual Christians: New Testament Directions for the Heterosexual Church," in *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Brawley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), p. 146. Brawley hereafter noted as Brawley, *Biblical Ethics*; Siker hereafter noted as Siker in Brawley. Also see Siker, "Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion: Confessions of a Repenting Heterosexist," in *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. Siker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), esp. pp. 187-91. Hereafter noted as Siker, *Homosexuality*.

⁴The discussion in paragraphs 1, 2, and 5 is based on Furnish, *Journey*, ch. 11, and various notes to Osterman, 1996.



The Law and the Promise

You foolish Galatians!
Those who **believe** are the descendants of Abraham—
not those who rely on the works of the law.

—Galatians 3:1, 7, 10-11 NRSV
emphasis added

Paul continued his argument against the troublemakers in Galatians with a metaphor about the law. The law, said Paul, is like a *paidagogos*, a Greek word that literally means “boy-child-leader” (Galatians 3:24). The *paidagogos* was an older household slave in whose care a young Greek boy was placed from age seven through late adolescence. During those years the *paidagogos* served as a constant companion. He set boundaries to guide and protect the boy from getting into mischief or being harmed by others. The law, said Paul, was given to guard and protect us like a *disciplinarian* who limits and guides us while we are minor children (Galatians 3:23-25).⁵

The issue the Galatians were struggling with was: Are Gentiles included in God’s promise without having to become Jews? Paul’s answer is yes, and without having to commit to the law. Look at Abraham. Abraham received and believed in a divine promise that did not come wrapped in the law. God’s promise was and is a promise that graces all of humanity, not just Jews and not just Gentiles. Paul says, “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?... Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?” (Galatians 3:1-2). Those who believe are the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. We are beneficiaries of God’s promise if we but believe. We are Abraham and Sarah’s children—living, like them, from the promise, without the law (Galatians 3:6-9).

That is Paul’s message: Those who *believe*, not those who rely on the works of the law, are the descendants of Abraham. They are the recipients of God’s promise and covenant. They are God’s heirs. Biblical scholar Victor Paul Furnish notes that Paul was not taking anything away from the Jews; rather, he was summoning the Gentiles to *claim their inheritance* as represented by Abraham’s faith.⁶

The real point of Paul’s message in Galatians is that God made us *all* heirs. Paul says there are now no distinctions: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Gentiles are beloved without becoming Jewish; females, without becoming males; and—dare we say it?—lesbian women and gay men are beloved without trying to become heterosexual or to live “straight” lifestyles. If we believe (belong to Christ), we are all “heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29).

What Does It Mean?

Examine Galatians 3:23-29.

1. What role did the law play “before faith came”?

2. What is God’s promise?

Notes

⁵Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 9. (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), pp. 139-40.

⁶Furnish notes to Osterman, 1996, and Furnish, *Journey*, pp. 88-89. Also see Matera, *Galatians*, pp. 136-37. Matera offers a similar interpretation. He further notes that this is a christological interpretation, not a Jewish one. Also see Hall, *Christian Anti-Semitism*, pp. 52-60. Hall notes that Christian interpretations of the law can be demeaning to Jews by implying that Jews are like minor children in need of guardians, with no direct legal rights to the family inheritance. He draws on the scholarship of Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity*; Ellis Rivkin, *A Hidden Revolution: The Pharisees’ Search for the Kingdom Within*; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*; and Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Hall seeks to identify and correct anti-Semitic elements in Paul’s writings and in our long tradition of interpreting Paul.



Called to Freedom

*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;
only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence...*

Live by the Spirit...

—Galatians 5:13, 16 NRSV



Paul concluded his argument against the Galatian troublemakers with an appeal to the Galatians not to be circumcised (Galatians 5:2-12). Then he drove home his point: You are called to freedom. Only do not use that freedom for self-indulgence. Live so that the gifts of the Spirit are visible in and through you.

To live in freedom as God's heirs does not mean "anything goes." It means acting responsibly. Paul said: "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another" (Galatians 5:13). We sometimes turn Paul's admonition against self-indulgence into a new list of prohibited actions. Paul himself lists the "works of the flesh" as evidence of self-indulgence or "living by the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21). However, Paul's ethical vision for Christians is not a new set of laws, rules, or prohibitions. He points to a radically different ethic: we are called to freedom to *be new creations*. To live in freedom, a Christian must put her or his whole *self* fully and "without remainder" at God's disposal.

Many translations of Galatians 5:13 say "servant" instead of "slave." Both words are hard for many women and others who have been put into positions of submission involuntarily or by gender roles. Yet Paul simply assumed slavery as a part of life. In his analogy, Paul seems to be saying that instead of focusing on ourselves or indulging ourselves, we are called to love. To love means to become servants to one another voluntarily. Interpreter Carolyn Osiek says, "Paul may be doing something quite radical here. He is holding up traditionally feminine values as ideals for everyone, male and female, and perhaps especially for the Christian men who are his principal addressees" in the Galatians letter. Perhaps *Paul* wasn't doing that; but Osiek's interpretation may point to a radical Word for us today.

The question to ask ourselves is not, "What laws must we follow?" but: "Will such and such an action increase our love of God, neighbor, and self?" (Galatians 5:13, 14). The signs that we are doing so will be signs and gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

Being called to freedom is about belonging to God as descendants of the Abrahamic promise (Galatians 3:29). We are heirs of God's new creation or coming reign. Being called to freedom is about living creatively in the Spirit. It is about *being* "new creations" in Christ (Galatians 6:15). It is about being both graced and claimed (wholly and unconditionally) by God's creating and redeeming YES.⁸

What Does "Called to Freedom" Mean?

Read Galatians 5:13-25.

1. If we are called to live in freedom, what are we called not to do, according to Paul?

See Galatians 5:13-16?

2. What specific signs of "living in the Spirit" does Paul name?

See Galatians 5:22-25.

3. What does Paul's message about being "called to freedom" have to say about welcoming or not welcoming gay and lesbian people into the church?

Notes

⁷See Carolyn Osiek, "Galatians," *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), p. 337. *Commentary* hereafter noted as *WBC*.

⁸This discussion is heavily based on conversations and correspondence with consultant, Victor Paul Furnish. For uses of the Law in the Lutheran tradition, see Martin J. Heineken, "Law and Gospel," *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), pp. 193-95. For uses of Law in Calvin, see John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and Ford L. Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 1. (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 354-58. For discussion of anti-Semitic elements in historical and modern interpretations of law and gospel, see Hall, *Christian Anti-Semitism*.



Claiming the Promise

If we believe God, we truly are God's heirs—called to freedom and called to be new creations in Christ. Yet, we seem afraid. Some of us fear that other people will claim totally unrestricted sexual freedom. We cling to rules about sexuality—especially the prohibition of same-sex expressions—as a way to control sexual activity. Others of us find it very difficult to question any type of behavior or relationship in the gay and lesbian community lest we be accused of restricting others' freedom.

We may be tempted to write off such fears and hesitations. However, perhaps we should take another look. When we finally saw the racial, sexual, and control issues imbedded in biblical commands about slaves and women, we slowly began moving toward a more humane ethic of equality.⁹ We gained respect for the gifts of racial and gender role diversity.

On the other hand, when we identified the double sexual standard for men and women in the 1960s and attempted to correct it, our society seemed often to sink to baser sexual behaviors. Many factors, of course, played into that so-called "sexual liberation" of heterosexual women, including whole new ways to think about sexuality. Nevertheless, the failures and excesses of that revolution feed the fears of many persons today when same-sex expressions of sexuality are claimed as equal to heterosexual expressions. What, some people wonder, is to keep society from sinking to baser behaviors of the gay community (or any sexually active community) rather than rising to higher, more responsible ethics found in that same community?

The terms "baser," "higher," and "more responsible," are obviously relative terms. What *I* mean, *you* may not mean. The point is this: The above-named perceptions and fears exist. They affect what people think and feel about gay and lesbian sexuality. Therefore, we need to name the fears and talk about the realities.

Can we acknowledge this piece of our joint dilemma? Can we begin to share our concerns and our understandings with those who have fears—and with those who hesitate to call others to accountability? Can we find ways to call each other to accountability that allow each of us to be morally responsible adults, rather than dependent children needing a disciplinarian?

God honored us long ago by making us heirs without regard for our differences. We honor God when our gift of sexuality and love is expressed in a male-female relationship—if we are heterosexual or bisexual. *And* we honor God when that gift is expressed with a partner of the same sex—if we are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. We do not all have to be or act "straight" to fulfill God's promise. We each can claim the promise and be new creations in Christ by remaining true to our basic identities and living in freedom with responsibility.

We may never agree on the above statements. *But what if we could acknowledge each other as God's heirs apparent? What if we could affirm that we all are attempting to respond to God's promise? What if we could affirm that we all are attempting to live out our freedom responsibly and faithfully as new creations in Christ?* Could we agree on that, even knowing that different people will interpret "freedom," "responsibility," and "new creations" differently? Being God's adult children of the promise requires that we struggle with these questions and that we listen to and respect each others' answers. Reconciliation requires it.

What Do You Think?

The most crucial questions of this chapter (and perhaps of this whole study) are these:

1. Can self-affirming lesbian and gay Christians answer God's YES with our/ their own unreserved, total obedience to God? Why or why not?

2. Do we/they "belong to God through Christ" and are we/they "heirs of the Abrahamic promise"? Why or why not?

3. What signs of the Spirit (Galatians 3:22) have we seen in lesbian and gay Christians' lives that would lead us to say "Yes, we/they are 'new creations'—heirs of God!"?

Note

⁹The two biblical commands are: "Slaves, obey your masters" (Ephesians 6:5) and "Permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man" (1 Timothy 2:12).

Expressing Our Faith



Spirit:

We never expected—
We were unprepared—
We did not even imagine—
Had we known,
 we would have been frightened.
Had we tried to prepare,
 we would have failed.
Our imagination was too limited.

But you led us
Stumbling, eyes blinking, into—
This indeed is a new path,
One never entered
 in all the history of the universe.
The stars and the animals and the
 trees smile down on us,
And we smile back.

Thank you, Spirit,
For the new creation
Which resides deep within our bones,
Tingles in our flesh,
And makes our world
New again.

—John D. Wrathall
“Day 37,” based on Revelation 21:1
More Light Prayers, January 1993, p. 16
Used with permission of *More Light Update*



On Your Own

Imagine you are a prominent missionary writing to the Christian churches in your state today about our dilemma over the Bible and same-sex conduct. Write a letter setting forth your understanding of living under the law and living by the Spirit. Include your understanding of what it means to live in freedom in the Spirit.



Focused Reading

Furnish, Victor Paul. *Romans—Philippians*. Journey Through the Bible Curriculum Series, vol. 14. Cokesbury. See ch. 11 on being God's heirs.



Hall, Sidney G. III. “Galatians: Before Moses Was Abraham.” In *Christian Anti-Semitism and Paul's Theology*, ch. 4.

McNeill, John J. “Liberation from Fear” and “Trusting in God.” In *Taking A Chance on God*, chs. 6 and 8.

Siker, Jeffrey S. “Homosexual Christians, the Bible, and Gentile Inclusion: Confessions of a Repenting Heterosexualist.” In *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. by Siker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), ch. 13.

Chapter 3

*How is my sexuality
a good gift?*



Romans 1:26-27 ♦ Psalm 139:1-18

Natural Sexuality

People in the ancient world took same-sex activity for granted. Where they forbade it, they forbade it for reasons other than “nature” or “God’s plan.” They forbade it for cleanliness or purity reasons, or for procreation and population reasons, or because they frowned on sexual pleasure itself. The idea that heterosexuality is the whole of God’s plan and that same-sex conduct therefore is sinful is a much later idea. Today those ideas are being refuted. Scientific evidence increasingly confirms that sexual orientation is a continuum of sexual orientations: from heterosexuality through bisexuality to homosexuality.²

Notes

¹This prayer was written by Corlette Pierson.

²See glossary, p. 48, for definitions of terms.

³Richard B. Hays, “Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies: The Witness of Scripture Concerning Homosexuality,” in Siker, *Homosexuality*, pp. 10, 13. Hays hereafter noted as Hayes in Siker. Besides Genesis 1, Hayes points to Mark 10:2-9, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, Ephesians 5:21-33, and Hebrews 13:4 for his view that heterosexual marriage is normative.

Creative One,

You formed each of us in our mother’s womb. Yet some of us are thought to be flawed because of our sexual orientation or other characteristics. Assist us in sorting through our own assumptions about ourselves and others. Amen.¹

God’s Plan?

*God made Adam and Eve,
not Adam and Steve!*

When we discuss Paul’s comments on same-sex conduct in Romans 1:26-27, some of us attempt to be humorous and then point seriously to the two stories in Genesis about the creation of Adam and Eve. God made men and women as complements of each other, we say. God planned for human sexuality only to include heterosexuality. God wants us to limit our sexual expression to heterosexual behavior within marriage.

Others of us reflect that Genesis does not lay out God’s entire plan for sexuality. It was not written to tell people how to act sexually. Rather, it is a story of how the earth was first populated. That story required a procreative male and female “first” couple. Genesis was written to trace the Jews’ lineage all the way back to that first human couple.

This chapter will explore four related issues. First, what does Genesis really say and mean in the creation accounts of Adam and Eve? Second, can we rightly interpret Paul’s comments in Romans 1:26-27 as references to the Genesis creation accounts? Or, did he draw on other materials that were important to him? Third, what did Paul really mean when he used the words “natural” and “unnatural”? Fourth, what does it mean to say that sexuality is God’s good gift?



Paul and Creation

Some of us who use a literal approach to scripture often point to Romans 1:26-27 as proof that even the New Testament condemns all gay or lesbian sexual activities and relationships. Paul, we say, based his statements on the two creation accounts in Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-25. Let's look first at how those stories are interpreted.

Richard Hays expresses the "plain meaning" approach when he says:

From Genesis 1 onwards, scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage.... This picture of marriage provides the positive backdrop against which the Bible's few emphatic negations of homosexuality must be read.... The New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures: Marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfillment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose.³

Others of us observe that this is an inaccurate interpretation of Genesis. Genesis is sacred genealogy. The writer describes the creation of the first couple and then traces the generations from Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah and, finally, to Joseph and his brothers in Egypt during the Exodus. Later books of Hebrew scripture continue that genealogy, ultimately tracing the generations to David. (Chapter 1 of the Gospel of Matthew rehearses that genealogy and carries it forward from David to Jesus.) Genesis describes God's covenanting actions with the Hebrews' ancestors. It records how God continually led them onward. However, to conclude that it tells us everything about God's plans for human sexuality diverts our attention away from the meaning that the original writer intended. What do you think?

Was Paul thinking about those creation accounts when he wrote Romans 1:26-27? Biblical scholar George C. Edwards says "no." The connection of Romans 1:26 with creation is "an invention arising in the present church dispute." Edwards and other critical interpreters conclude that Paul was drawing on the Wisdom of Solomon, not on Genesis. The Wisdom of Solomon, written in the late first century B.C.E. (before the common era), was part of Paul's Hellenistic Jewish background. The early Christian church also considered it to be scripture.⁴

Other interpreters imply that if Paul *was* drawing on Genesis, he misinterpreted it. Theologian Theodore Jennings suggests that Genesis describes the *cohumanity*—not the *complementarity*—of the sexes. Evangelical feminist Virginia Ramey Mollenkott affirms this: "Clearly, the point of the creation accounts is not the establishment of normative heterosexuality, or even the *complementarity* of the sexes (as though each gender is incomplete and requires a union with the other in order to be whole)." God made us male and female, blessed us, and named us "humankind," says Mollenkott. That is a statement of cohumanity, nothing else.⁵

Dangers: A literal interpretive approach may lead us to generalize unfairly about God's full intentions for human sexuality and about Paul's specific condemnation of same-sex conduct. On the other hand, critical scholars may hypothesize and engage in research to determine what sources Paul had in mind, but ultimately we can't know.



What Does It Say?

Read Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-25. Also read Romans 1:26-27 and 11:24.

1. Why does God create humankind?
See Genesis 1:28 and 2:18.

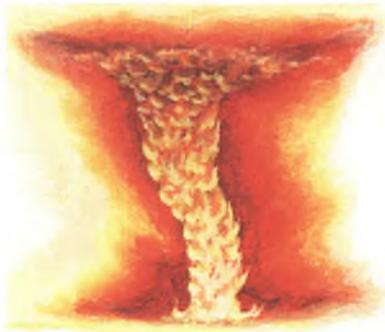
2. Does Paul directly refer to Genesis in Romans 1:26-27?

3. What does Paul say is "unnatural"?
See Romans 1:26-27 and 11:24. Also see 1 Corinthians 11:14.

Notes (see previous page for #3)

⁴See Wisdom 13:1-9, 14:12-14, 24-27 in the apocryphal/deuterocanonical section of a study Bible (usually found between the Old and New Testaments). Discussion is based on Edwards notes to Osterman, July 1996, and Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality: Recent Findings* (San Francisco: Alamo Square, 1994), pp. 66-68. Hereafter noted as Helminiak, *What Bible Really*. Also see Victor Paul Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context," in Siker, *Homosexuality*, pp. 21-23, 25. Hereafter noted as Furnish in Siker.

⁵Theodore W. Jennings, "Homosexuality and the Christian Faith," *Christian Century* 94 (16 February 1977), p. 138. Also, see Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harpers, 1994), pp. 81-83, 149-52, for discussion of varying points of view on the creation accounts. Hereafter noted as Mollenkott, *Neighbor*.



What Is Unnatural?

Paul obviously meant something negative when he talked about unnatural sexual conduct in Romans 1:26-27. But what did he mean? Critical interpretive scholars have explained Paul's Greek phrase *para physin* ("contrary to nature" or "unnatural") in several ways.

New Testament professor Robin Scroggs says that Paul was objecting to practices of *pederasty* in the Greek and Roman world of his day. Pederasty means the love of, and sexual use of, boys or youth by adult men. In one form of pederasty, a master kept a slave artificially young and effeminate to serve the master's drunken and lustful wishes. In a second form, a young "call-boy" sold his sexual favors to older male patrons.⁶ Scroggs concluded that Paul was referring only to pederasty, that he had no concept of sexual orientation as we know it today, and that, therefore, he was not speaking about gay and lesbian relationships today. Other interpreters have added that Paul especially had no understanding of same-sex relationships that are non-exploitative, committed, and monogamous.

Historian John Boswell explores Paul's use of *para physin* in Romans 11:24 (where God does something "unnatural"). He concludes that for Paul "nature" or "natural" meant "that which is characteristic or expected." Jews are Jews "by nature" (Galatians 2:15). "Unnatural" then meant "out of character" or "atypical" or "socially unacceptable." Long hair on a man is degrading and unnatural (1 Corinthians 11:14). Thus, in Romans 1:26-27, gentile men and women were doing the atypical, the socially unacceptable.⁷

Roman Catholic theologian Daniel Helminiak agrees—as far as the men were concerned—but notes that Paul's reference to women in 1:26 might simply have meant that the women were engaging in heterosexual acts that were socially unacceptable for women in Paul's day. Helminiak thinks Paul was referring to Jewish law. He points to an obvious parallel between Paul's use of "natural" and "unnatural" in Romans 1:26-27 and the similar language in Leviticus 18:22.⁸

L. William Countryman also proposes that Paul used the Jewish language of impurity rather than the Stoic language of sin, which we usually employ in modern discussions of this passage. Countryman concluded:

While Paul wrote of such acts as being unclean, dishonorable, improper, and 'over against nature,' he did not apply the language of sin to them at all. Instead, he treated homosexual behavior as an integral if unpleasantly dirty aspect of gentile culture. It was not in itself sinful, but had been visited upon the Gentiles as recompense for sins, chiefly the sin of idolatry but also those of social disruption.⁹

Pauline scholar Victor Paul Furnish assumes that Paul did believe same-sex activity was a violation of the "natural created order"—as he understood it. Paul likely assumed four widespread ideas of his day: 1) Everyone is "naturally" attracted only to the opposite sex; 2) All same-sex intercourse is intrinsically lustful; 3) Same-sex intercourse compromises what patriarchal societies regard as the properly dominant role of males over females; and 4) Same-sex intercourse could lead eventually to the extinction of the human species.¹⁰

This scholarly debate will likely continue for some time. However, these critical scholars all come to the same ethical conclusions about accepting and including gay and lesbian people in the church today. All of their explanations oppose the interpretation expressed by Richard Hayes (p. 17).

What Does It Mean?

These questions help us look at the context of Romans 1:26-27.

1. What is Paul's major theme in Romans?
See Romans 1:16-17.

2. How does Paul understand "sin" and "salvation" for Gentiles?
See Romans 1:18-24. Also see Romans 3:19-26 (part of Paul's conclusion to chapters 1-3).

3. How does Romans 1:26-27 fit into the larger context of chapters 1-3 of Romans?

Notes

⁶Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. vii, 29-43. Hereafter noted as Scroggs, *NT and Homosexuality*. In Greco-Roman world of Paul's day and earlier, pederasty was a socially acceptable, and even "ideal," relationship between an older man or older youth and a boy or younger youth which involved the younger one's education and entrance into a male-oriented public life.

⁷John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 110-12. Hereafter noted as Boswell, *Christianity*.

⁸Helminiak, *What Bible Really*, pp. 61-74.

⁹Countryman, *Dirt*, pp. 109-17; Helminiak, *What Bible Really*, pp. 73-83.

¹⁰Furnish in Siker, p. 31. The four ideas are drawn from both Stoic thought and Hellenistic Judaism. Also see Victor Paul Furnish, "What Does Scripture Say? How Shall We Listen?" in *Open Hands* 9 (Summer 1993), p. 5. Hereafter noted as Furnish, "What Does."

Vision and Reality

*I will praise you [God],
for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*
—Psalm 139:14 NRSV



As we try to solve our dilemma about unconditionally welcoming gay men and lesbian women into the Body of Christ, perhaps we need not to focus so much on these minute issues of interpretation. Perhaps we should be focusing more on the broad messages of the Bible. One of those messages is that human sexuality is a good gift from God.

New Testament scholar Robert Brawley shares a story about the positive biblical message he received about sexuality. Brawley says:

“My parents responded to my earliest questions about the mysteries of human sexuality with scientific and anatomically correct candor, but they also repeatedly linked their answers to Psalm 139:14: ‘I will praise you [God], for I am fearfully and wonderfully made’.... My childhood peers called it nasty, and modern cinematic portrayals often diminish sex to an animalistic titillation. But my parents had interpreted sexuality in mystery and wonder as a part of my relationship with God—nothing less than a relationship of praise to the God who searches me and knows me.”¹¹

Brawley’s parents gave him a constant message of positive affirmation of his sexuality: “You, as a sexual human being, were created by God.” No qualifications. No, “only if you are heterosexually inclined.” He was reminded repeatedly to acknowledge the Creator’s magnificent gift of sexuality.

How different the psalmist’s message is from Paul’s message in Romans 1:26-27. The psalmist speaks of God’s design for human beings. In that vision we see the magnificent individuality of each person. Paul’s message in Romans is a *reality check on that design and vision*. In a powerful way, Paul described how both Gentiles and Jews had turned away from what they knew, or should have known, from the time of creation (Romans 1:18-3:20). We had forgotten: We are all made by God; we all belong to God; we all owe God our greatest praise and obedience.

Paul laid out the reality: All people have turned away from properly worshipping God the Creator. Neither Gentiles nor Jews have kept their lives, worship practices, or sexuality in “right” relationship to God. Both have turned away to worship the creation and thus be consumed by lust, money, power, or other material things.¹²

According to Paul, the root sin is humanity’s refusal to acknowledge, honor, or glorify God as Creator. Salvation lies in turning toward God in obedience as God’s heirs apparent through Christ. It lies in our claiming the promise.¹³ Turning toward God involves praising God for God’s gift of life (as the psalmist did) and God’s gift of Christ. In turning, we receive and live in the Spirit (Romans 3:21). We live as “new creations.”

What does this mean as far as Paul’s words in Romans 1:26-27 are concerned? Some of us believe Paul meant only to describe and condemn sexual practices that are exploitative or that keep us from saying a total and unconditional “yes” to God our Creator. Some sexual practices—heterosexual and homosexual—fit that description and condemnation. Other sexual relationships allow heterosexual *and* homosexual people to be in “right” relationship—praising God for God’s good gift of sexuality.

What is the Psalmist’s Point?

Read Psalm 139:1-18.

1. What is the psalmist saying about God’s creation of human beings?

2. What do you think the psalmist’s words are implying about human sexuality?

Notes

¹¹Brawley, *Biblical Ethics*, p. vii.

¹²Some scholars, such as Furnish, believe that Paul assumed that all same-sex activity was rooted in insatiable lust, one of the symptoms of engaging in idolatry. Others, such as Countryman, propose that Paul was identifying same-sex conduct as impurity (drawing from Leviticus 18:22 which we shall examine further in chapter 6). In either case, the underlying point is that people have turned away from proper relationship with God, their Creator.

¹³Salvation for the Jew, says Christian interpreter Sid Hall, lies in adherence to the law and in understanding that Christ came to fulfill the Abrahamic promise of including the Gentiles among God’s People. (From notes to Osterman.) This interpretation may be very unfamiliar to you. See Hall, *Christian Anti-Semitism*.



God Gift-ed Sexuality

*Are gay men and lesbian women
fearfully and wonderfully made by God?*

Yes! If we move beyond the almost exclusively male world-view of the Bible and seek instead God's full intention for women and men, we might read Genesis 1:26-28 and claim:

God values equality since God deliberately created male and female persons as equals. Such equality was not typical in the ancient world; yet the message has survived.

And God saw that it was very good!

Yes! If we move beyond the almost exclusively heterosexual world-view of the Bible and seek instead God's full intentions for human relationship, we might read Genesis 2:18 and claim:

God values companionship since the only time God found something "not good" was after the lone earth creature had been created. God created us for companionship and affection and intimacy.

And God saw that it was very good!

Yes! If we move beyond our temptation to look at isolated verses and strive instead to hear all of what Paul was saying in chapters 1-3 of Romans, we might read Romans 1:26-27 and affirm together:

We all have a tendency to get into wrong relationship with God. We are called to examine that relationship, regardless of our sexual orientation.

And God saw that it was very good!

Yes! If we move beyond a literalist assumption that views all same-sex conduct as sin and claim instead with Paul that sin is turning away from God, we might read Psalm 139:14 and affirm together:

I will praise you God, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. You have made me as I am; and I am your child.

And God saw that it was very good!

What Do You Think?

1. What makes sexuality a "good gift from God" for you?

2. What abusive, exploitative expressions of sexuality do you see today in the heterosexual culture? In gay and lesbian communities?

3. How do you explain the meaning of Romans 1:26-27 and its relevance for Christians today?



Expressing Our Faith



Litany of Reconciliation

God, we are a pilgrim people, traveling through the wilderness.

They demand that we sing, but how can we sing our God's song in a land with injustice and oppression?

We are called to be like Moses and Miriam leading our people in a dance of freedom.

We follow the cloud and fire before us.

God, spark us and enable us to share our fire with others.

We proclaim today that creation is good, that we are good.

We affirm that you have searched us and known us.

And have knit us in our mother's womb.

We affirm that we all are created in God's image.

As images of God we rise and name oppression and injustice wherever we find it: in society, ourselves, our church.

Today we commit to reconcile our vision of the new heaven and the new earth with the reality around us.

We do this as co-workers with you, God, our creator and liberator, our completer and perfecter, our comforter and sustainer.

—Anonymous
Manna for the Journey, adapted
vol. 1, no. 1, p. 14

O God, who made us

Tune: Traditional Irish melody: "Be Thou My Vision"

*O God, who made us and loves us as well,
Give us new visions to live and to tell;
Visions of people—all different, yet one;
One people together, and excluding none.*

*Cleanse all your people from lies and from hate;
Women and men, young and old, gay and straight.
Break down the barriers that keep us apart;
Reclaim us by grace and renew each one's heart.*

*So shall we serve you, O God of us all.
You love each one and each one do you call;
Call us to witness to those who will hear
That all are your children; you hold each one dear.*

—Vin A. Harwell
More Light Illuminations
June-July 1992, p. 11, verses 1, 3, 5
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On Your Own

Create a personal poster, banner, wall hanging, or even a small card for your bathroom mirror that conveys the biblical affirmation of the psalmist: "I am fearfully and wonderfully made!" Meditate on it daily, emphasizing a different word in the verse each day.



Focused Reading

Countryman, L. William. *Dirt, Greed & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today*, pp. 109-23.



Furnish, Victor Paul. "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context." In *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate*, ed. by Jeffrey S. Siker, pp. 18-35.

Scanzoni, Letha Dawson and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor*, rev. ed., pp. 149-52.

Chapter 4

How do I decide what is “right” and “wrong” in relationships?



1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 16:14

Discernment-Based Ethics

In the discernment process, adults are considered moral agents who make choices based on our values and guidelines. The result is our ethical (or unethical) choice. When carried out, that choice shapes behavior. We each bring to the discernment process our own particular social location in life. “Our particularity includes our... gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age, and physical ability.” It also may include our experiences of privilege and/or discrimination, oppression, and victimization. To be *moral agents* requires that we possess power to act, options, and ability to act without threat of punishment. We must also be willing to accept whatever consequences occur from what we consider to be a right choice. Persons are able to exercise moral agency against the greatest odds.³

Notes

¹Marie M. Fortune, *Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 30. Hereafter noted as Fortune, *Love Does*.

²Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 1.

³Based on Fortune, *Love Does*, ch. 1. Also see “moral agency” in glossary, p. 48.

O God our Creator,

We praise you, for it is you who have made us. We thank you that we are so wonderfully made. We marvel at our human diversity. Help us to know how to express the sexuality you have given us. Help us to stay in right relationship with you and with others. Amen.

Rules and Realities

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.

You shall not lie with a man like a woman.

Most people live in relationships of varying degrees of intimacy and most would prefer to do this with integrity. —Marie Fortune¹

You shall not engage in premarital sex.

You shall uphold fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.

Relational patterns are shifting all around us and theology hardly seems to notice. —Mary Hunt²

These ethical rules and descriptions of relational realities—and the tension between them—highlight another piece of the dilemma the church faces today. As we live in relationships, we continually make decisions about how we conduct ourselves sexually. We sometimes experience tension between our own relational realities and the rules made by church and society. Trying to resolve (or live within) this tension leads us into the essential, though often complex, consideration of sexual ethics.

To resolve our tension, we usually turn to one of two approaches: rules-based ethics or situation-based ethics. We will explore both of these approaches in this chapter. We will also explore a third one, which we might call discernment-based ethics.

We will look at these three approaches to sexual ethics as we examine Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, where Paul identifies wrongdoers who will not become God’s heirs. These verses are often identified as “rules” or ethical norms which categorically condemn gay and lesbian people.

Who Are these Wrongdoers?

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom [kindom] of God?

—1 Corinthians 6:9 NRSV



Paul said that wrongdoers would not inherit the kingdom of God.⁴ He followed that statement with a list of wrongdoers (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). He then noted that some of his Corinthian audience “used to be” such wrongdoers, but now they have been washed (baptized), sanctified (made holy), and justified (brought into right relation) through Christ.

Lists of wrongdoers like the one Paul used were common in Paul’s day. Biblical scholars often call them “vice lists.” They represent a common Jewish stereotype of “gentile sinners.” Paul used several variations in his writings. We looked at one such vice list in the last chapter (Romans 1:26-32).

Paul’s vice list in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 has presented biblical scholars with both easy and hard words to translate. No matter which translation you look at, the English word for *moichos* is always “adulterers.”⁵ However, the next two categories in Paul’s list (*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*) have been translated differently in almost every English version of our Bible. Such variation in translation has led us to a variety of interpretations and conclusions that deepen our current dilemma.

Some interpreters say, “The word *arsenokoitai* is based on Leviticus 18:22. Since Paul drew on that Jewish law in the midst of speaking about Christian wrongdoing, Paul meant that all same-sex conduct is wrong. Those who engage in it will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Others respond, “No, Paul was speaking of two particular forms of same-sex activities that were prominent in the Greek and Roman world of his day. What he said has no relation to the Jewish law or to gay and lesbian relationships today.”

“Besides,” say still others, “Paul was mentioning this list only to make a larger point. He was speaking about the necessity for Christians to conduct themselves in ways that are a credit to the gospel. That includes sexual behavior, not dragging each other into court, and so on.”

Paul obviously meant “wrong relationships” when he used the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. But what kinds of “wrong” relationships did he mean? Who were these wrongdoers?

Dangers: One danger in biblical translation is that we are tempted to use modern terms like “homosexual” or “practicing homosexual” for ancient realities. We then assume we have made an accurate translation of ancient Greek words. Another danger is that a literal approach to Paul’s words ignores the broader point Paul was making. It takes what he used as illustration and tries to turn it into universal moral law.

What Does It Say?

Look up 1 Corinthians 6:9 in as many different translations of the Bible as you can. What one or two words follow the word “adulterers” and precede the word “thieves.”

Jerusalem: _____

King James: _____

New American: _____

New English: _____

New International: _____

Phillips Modern English: _____

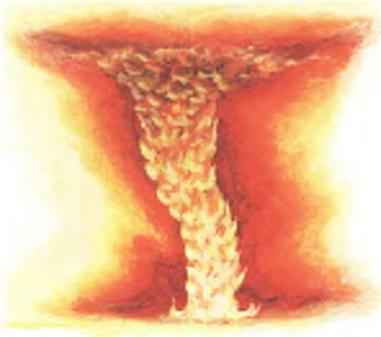
Revised Standard: _____

Other: _____

Notes

⁴See glossary, p. 48, for “kindom” definition.

⁵See former ELCA bishop Stanley E. Olson, “In Thanks to Adulterers: A Reflection on 1 Cor. 6:9,” *The Network* (October 1995), pp. 3-4.



Shifting Translations

Translators of the two Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 leave us in a quandary. Historically, Luther's Bible (1522-45) said "effeminate" and "violators of boys." The King James Version (1611) said "effeminate" and "abusers of themselves with mankind." In fact, until the early twentieth century *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* were generally treated much as the KJV translated them. Sometimes, translators referred to unapproved morals without specific reference to gender or sexuality. For example, the French Jerusalem Bible says "depraved" and "persons of sordid morals."

Recent English translators employ a variety of English words to translate the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. The RSV (1946, 1952) translated them together as "homosexuals." The RSV (revised 1971) says "sexual perverts." The NIV (1978) says "male prostitutes and homosexual offenders." The NAV (1986) says "boy prostitutes and practicing homosexuals." The NRSV (1989) says "male prostitutes" and "sodomites."⁶

What are we to make of these various translations? New Testament scholar Dale Martin boldly concludes that "curious shifts" of translation have taken place. These shifts were not based on definitive new biblical critical work. Rather, these shifts occurred because our society's understandings of gender and sexuality have shifted. Martin claims that the King James Version's word "effeminate" was an accurate translation of *malakoi*.⁷ However, being an "effeminate" male today wouldn't exclude a man from the kingdom of God. Furthermore, agreeing that Paul condemned effeminacy means continuing to participate in the diminishment of women that is implied in the ancient use of the term *malakoi*. Therefore, modern translators had to come up with different words to fit our current understanding of gender, sexuality, and wrongdoing. Most of the current translations have shifted to words that somehow imply same-sex conduct. The RSV (1946, 1952) went so far as to translate the two Greek words as "homosexual." Those translators corrected themselves in 1971 to "sexual perverts," but the generalization "homosexual" has stuck in many people's minds.⁸

William Countryman says the word *arsenokoitai* meant males (free or slave) who used their sexual attractiveness to ingratiate themselves with rich and elderly lovers (male or female). The *arsenokoitai*'s motivation was a hope of replacing more legitimate heirs (at least, from the patriarchy's point of view) and thus receiving a substantial economic legacy.⁹ Other scholars offer other views.¹⁰

Perhaps the real question for us today is not what Paul meant specifically by either Greek word, but what he was saying about faithful and moral relationships. Let us turn our attention to three ethical approaches that address sexual relationships. Marie Fortune's analysis of ethical decision making may give us a clue about how to read Paul.



What Does It Mean?

Read 1 Corinthians 16:14. This might be considered one of Paul's "ethical standards" ala Marie Fortune's approach. You may want to read the next page before answering these questions.

1. What is Paul's "ethical standard" for the Corinthians?

2. What does Paul mean by: "Let all you do be done in love"?

See 1 Corinthians 13 for a possible explanation.

3. Is it a good "ethical standard" for Christians today? Why or why not?

4. Is it an adequate "relational guideline" for making decisions? Why or why not?

Notes

⁶See abbreviations, p. 48.

⁷Dale B. Martin, "Arsenokoites and Malakos: Meanings and Consequences" in Brawley, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 117-36.

⁸Helminiak, *What Bible Really*, p. 89. Daniel Helminiak concludes that *malakoi* for Paul means "moral looseness and lewd, lustful and lascivious behavior."

⁹Countryman, *Dirt*, pp. 127-30, 202.

¹⁰For other scholarly views, see Boswell, *Christianity*, pp. 106-107; Furnish in Siker, p. 24; and Scroggs, *NT and Homosexuality*, pp. 40-41, 62-63, 83, 85-86, 108.

Decision Making

As we consider the activities implied by Paul's two Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, we make decisions about their rightness or wrongness. We bring some ethical standard to bear on them

Ethicist Marie Fortune notes that people typically make ethical decisions based on external rules or on the details of each situation. Those of us who use a **"rules-based" ethic** rely on external rules handed down by others. The Bible says "You shall not commit adultery." The church says "No premarital sex." The family says "Don't cross economic, racial, or religious lines to marry." If we apply the external rules and obey them, we are right; if we break the rules, we are wrong.¹¹ Others of us use a **"situation-based" ethic**. We make our ethical decisions primarily by studying a specific situation before us. We decide what the specific situation calls for, rather than applying external rules.¹²

In rules-based ethics, the rules were often unexamined, gender-biased, and inadequate to real-life relational situations. In situation ethics, everything became relativized. Liberals, says Fortune, turned Fletcher's model into an easy "anything goes" freedom devoid of responsibility. The tension between these two approaches has created major stress between conservatives and liberals. As a result, we have been left in a "moral vacuum."

Fortune proposes a **"discernment-based" ethic** based on *"doing least harm."* This, she proposes, is a realistic standard adequate to the realities, complexities, and ambiguities of human relationships. "Doing least harm" is a positive, concrete way to make choices and decisions about relationships and sexuality. The first question to ask, Fortune says, is: "How do I avoid doing harm to myself and to another?" or "How do I do least harm in this situation?"¹³

Fortune further proposes that we expand our basic ethical standard with a statement of relational guidelines. She offers five guidelines as a framework for "doing least harm." They involve seeking peer relationships, authentic consent, stewardship of sexuality, sharing of pleasure, and faithfulness. (See chart, p. 46.) Guidelines reflect the values we want to bring to sexual, ethical decision making. Guidelines are not "rules." Rules are "externally imposed requirements" that may or may not be reasonable and may or may not reflect current prejudices of a society or institution.¹⁴ Guidelines, on the other hand, are more general value statements we can refer to in our discernment process any time we have a decision to make about sexual or other intimate relationships. Since ethical guidelines are usually developed and revised over time, Fortune suggests developing them in community where we can test them against others' experiences and concerns.

How does Fortune's "doing least harm" ethic work? Let's try to apply her ethic and guidelines to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:9, using Countryman's translation of *arsenokoitai*—males who used sexual attractiveness to ingratiate themselves with rich and elderly lovers of either sex. If we apply Fortune's relational guidelines, what can we learn? Try to answer the questions in the box at right.

It is hard to answer some of these questions about the ancient *arsenokoitai* relationship. We have very limited information about the persons involved. What does this tell us about applying our ethics to other times or their ethics to our times?



How Ethical Were the Arsenokoitai?

Countryman defines *arsenokoitai* as males who used sexual attractiveness to ingratiate themselves with rich and elderly lovers of either sex. Apply Fortune's relational guidelines to his understanding of *arsenokoitai*:

1. Would this be a relationship between peers? Yes No Maybe
2. Would "authentic consent" be involved? Yes No Maybe
3. Would "stewardship of sexuality" be at work? Yes No Maybe
4. Would there be a sharing of pleasure? Yes No Maybe
5. Would fidelity be a characteristic? Yes No Maybe
6. Does this relationship "do least harm"? Yes No Maybe

Notes

¹¹Fortune, *Love Does*, pp. 20-22.

¹²Fortune, pp. 22-25. Situation ethics was developed by Joseph Fletcher in the 1960s.

¹³Fortune, pp. 37-39. Fortune's ethic, "doing least harm," implies that all relationships cause some harm. Perhaps her book title offers us a more ideal ethic: *Love Does No Harm*.

¹⁴Often worded as prohibitions, rules are necessary legal codes to protect the vulnerable and preserve the common good, but they are not adequate to guide us as moral agents. See glossary, p. 48, for definition of "moral agency."



Clarifying Our Ethics

The church has long presumed heterosexual marriage to be the *ideal* and *only divinely intended* form of intimate relationship. Against that ideal, it has named “wrong” relationships and prohibitions:

- Fornication* (sex outside the man-woman marriage relationship)
- Adultery* (sex by a married person with someone other than the marriage partner)
- Incest* (sex with other family members, especially minor children)
- Pederasty* (sex by adult males with minor male children)
- Molestation* (sex by adults with children who are not family members)
- Homosexuality* (sex by persons of the same sex).

The rule that encompasses all the rest has been “no fornication—no sex outside marriage.” This “rules-based” sexual ethic *seemed* to work. In reality, however, it made marriage so sacrosanct that few if any rules stated what was “right” or “wrong” *within* a marriage. Now the assumed superiority of marriage is under question for many legitimate reasons.¹⁵ This is not to say that marriage is no longer viable or sacred. It is only to say that the church is long overdue to rethink its sexual ethic and its process for ethical decision making. For example, suppose we redefined fornication as “sex without a covenant of caring, sex without mutual respect and concern for the welfare of the partner, or sex without justice and love in right relationship.” We would put the emphasis on the *quality of relationship* rather than on positions, techniques, or the gender of the people involved.¹⁶

What about monogamy? This will be a “stickler” for us as we discuss sexual ethics. Some will say monogamy is absolutely necessary, and we need legal marriage for gay and lesbian relationships. Others will say monogamy is crucial, but faithfulness can happen without marriage. Some will say that, in some situations—following some set of guidelines that care for the quality of relationships—monogamy might not be the best, or even desired, decision. Others will say that marriage, as an institution of the patriarchy, needs to be dismantled. It can be scary to listen to the *naming* of those different positions, let alone to think about them seriously. However, those positions are part of the relational realities of our culture today—among people of all sexual orientations. Think about them we must—unless we are content to sit back and let the rest of the world hammer out a new sexual ethic.

Let us return to Paul. Paul named certain kinds of same-sex conduct as illustrations of wrongdoing. For Paul, however, we are baptized, sanctified, and justified by God’s action in Christ. By God’s grace we have become heirs of the kingdom.¹⁷ For Paul, the basic Christian ethic was not a set of rules. It was a way of being and living. We are to claim the promise. We are to be a new creation in Christ. Fortune would call this starting from the “vision” side of ethics—which Paul did superbly!

Living by Paul’s vision on the one hand, and with Fortune’s ethic of discernment on the other, we might someday be able to affirm together:

Regardless of sexual orientation, the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) will be visible in any right relationship and lacking in any wrong or corrupted relationship (See Galatians 5:19-23 NRSV).

What Do You Think?

1. Which ethical approach did you grow up with—rules, situation, or discernment? How has your approach helped or hindered you as you have made decisions about relationships?

2. Do you agree with the basic ethical standard and five guidelines offered by Marie Fortune? Why or why not?

3. How does your current relationship (or pattern of relationships) fare when assessed by the guidelines?

4. How might “doing least harm” help us claim the promise and be new creations in Christ?

Notes

¹⁵Many in society are challenging longstanding assumptions that allowed and sometimes even encouraged unequal power, economic inequities, domestic violence, and marital rape within the marriage relationship.

¹⁶Mollenkott, *Sensuous Spirituality*, p. 113.

¹⁷Mollenkott, *Neighbor*, rev. ed., p. 79.

Expressing Our Faith

Gracious and ever present Spirit,

Draw me near to you this day.

Calm my disquieted heart.

Soothe my anxious mind.

Free my bound up soul.

Guide me into paths of healing and wholeness.

Merciful God,

whenever there is fear in my life,

draw me into your circle of grace.

Whenever there is sadness in my life,

draw me into your circle of grace.

Whenever there is depression in my life,

draw me into your circle of grace.

Joyful God,

Whenever there is hope in my life,

may it be sustained through the nurturing of your grace.

Whenever there is community in my life,

may it be sustained through the nurturing of your grace.

Whenever there is love in my life,

may it be sustained through the nurturing of your grace.

Daring God,

help me to discern more fully

that I deserve your love and attention

as does every creature in your realm.

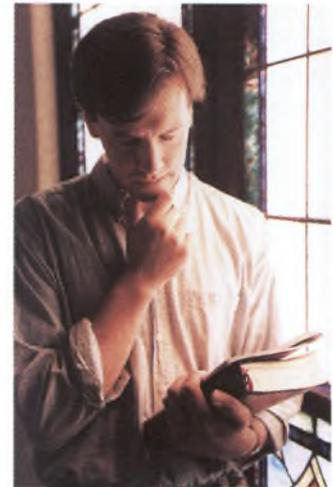
Draw near to me this day and grant me my petitions.

Amen.

—Allen V. Harris

More Light Prayers, January 1993, p. 9

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On Your Own

Write out your own understanding of a sexual ethical process of discernment. What is the basic principle? The values you draw from that principle? The qualities of “right relationship” which, when visible, will guide you in your discernment process whenever you have to make decisions about sexual activity or other aspects of intimate relationships?



Focused Reading

Ellison, Marvin M. “Common Decency: A New Christian Sexual Ethics.” In *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. by James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow.



Fortune, Marie M. *Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us*.

Hunt, Mary E. *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship*.

Scanzoni and Mollenkott. “Proposing a Homosexual Christian Ethic,” in *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*

Stuart, Elisabeth. *Just Good Friends*.

Chapter 5

When do we commit the “sin of Sodom”?

Genesis 19:1-29



Biblical Hospitality

Extending hospitality to a stranger in biblical times meant transforming that stranger into one’s honored guest. A member of the community served as host, essentially acting as patron or protector while the stranger remained within the circle of the host’s community. The host offered water (for foot washing), food, and drink—and he offered the best he had available. The guest accepted. The guest then refrained from hostilities with the host or with other guests since the host was honor bound to defend and protect all guests. Hosts treated guests like representatives of God.

Notes

¹See Deuteronomy 29:22-23; Isaiah 1:9-17; Isaiah 13:19; Jeremiah 50:39-40; Ezekiel 16:46-50; Amos 4:11; Zephaniah 2:8-11; Wisdom of Solomon 19:13-14 (in apocryphal/deutero-canonical section in a study Bible); Matthew 10:5-15; Luke 10:8-12; 2 Peter 2:4-10; and Jude 7.

²See Boswell, *Christianity*, pp. 92-99; Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955); Furnish, *Moral Teaching*, p. 57; and Mollenkott, *Neighbor*, pp. 56-62. For a brief description of the critical and sociocultural approaches, see page 7 in this study booklet.

Gracious God,

We come before you confessing that we are not always as hospitable to all your people as we are to our own kind. Forgive us and guide us in your ways. Amen.

Where Does It Say...?

The story of God’s destruction of Sodom for its sin is probably the most familiar of the few biblical references cited on same-sex conduct. But what is Sodom’s sin?

Writers of scripture mention the Sodom story a number of times, but they never name homosexuality as Sodom’s sin.¹ Jews through the ages have held that Sodom’s sin was inhospitality. The prophets identify Sodom’s sin in many ways, but never as same-sex conduct. Jesus says that cities who have heard his message but are still unrepentant will be worse off than Sodom on judgment day (Matthew 11:24). He never mentions homosexuality as their sin. He also says those who do not welcome the seventy disciples he sent out will be worse off than Sodom (Luke 10:12). Again, he does not mention homosexuality; he mentions inhospitality.

Earliest interpretations from the Christian community also do not mention same-sex conduct as Sodom’s sin. Only later, in the second century, did Christian writings begin to identify the word “sodomy” with same-sex conduct. However, the word still referred to various heterosexual acts for many centuries. In the Middle Ages, sodomy became clearly attached to same-sex acts. In the twentieth century, biblical scholars began to recover the fact that sodomy was not the main point of the story. Through the critical interpretive approach, they recovered earlier understandings of Sodom’s sin as inhospitality. Now, through a sociocultural approach, interpreters are further refining the inhospitality interpretation to reflect the sexism and the attempted, violent sexual abuse inherent in the story.²

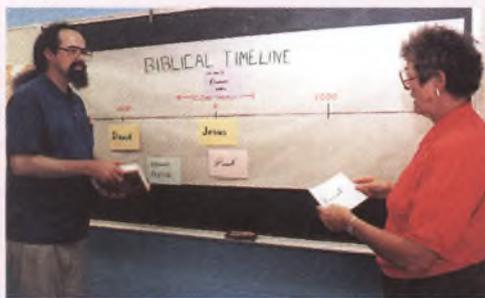
It is interesting, and perhaps important, to determine “Sodom’s sin.” Ultimately, however, our question in this study is: What does the story of Sodom teach us today about hospitality, faithfulness, and God’s justice-love?

Starting in the Middle

When some of us tell the story of Sodom, we often start in the middle. We tell how two male strangers came to the city of Sodom and how Lot took them into his home for the night as the ancient hospitality code demanded. We tell how all the men of the city came to Lot's door and demanded that he send the two strangers out that they might "know them." We tell how Lot refused and offered his two betrothed daughters to the men instead (Genesis 19:1-8).

At this point, we draw our first conclusion: Since Lot offered his daughters, the Hebrew word *yada* ("to know") must have meant the men wanted sexual intercourse with the strangers. Then we usually jump ahead and tell how Lot and his family left Sodom before God destroyed the city (Genesis 19:24-26). Since the writer of Genesis said that the men of Sodom wanted "to know" the strangers sexually, we conclude that he must have meant that homosexuality was the sin that caused God to destroy the city.

More and more of us disagree with this interpretation of the story because it leaves out or misinterprets crucial points. Lot's offer of his daughters to the men of Sodom reflects the basic sexism of his day and the fact that women were seen as a man's property to do with as he wished. Furthermore, what the men wanted was to gang rape the strangers—an act of sexual violence, not "homosexuality." (We do not define heterosexuality by examples of heterosexual gang rape.) The above explanation of the Sodom story also leaves out crucial understandings about Abraham and Lot, the strangers, God's actions, and hospitality. Finally, it reads back into the ancient biblical text the religious condemnation of homosexuality that emerged strongly only in the Middle Ages.³



What Does It Say?

Read Genesis 19:1-26.

1. How did Lot initially fulfill his obligation of hospitality to the strangers?

2. When the men of Sodom arrived at the door, what did they say and how did Lot respond?

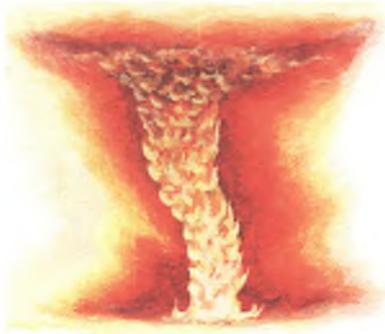
3. What did the men of Sodom attempt to do next and what happens to Lot and to them?

4. What do the strangers advise Lot to do and what does Lot bargain for instead?

Dangers: One interpretive danger for this story is that we end up tacitly approving an ancient religious code that even most contemporary Jews would acknowledge is outdated. It is irrelevant to what it means to be a good Jew today. Also, by becoming so focused on the attempted same-sex rape in the story, we miss the bigger point of human faithfulness and God's double action of justice and mercy. On the other hand, we who focus primarily on the human inhospitality in the story miss the same point.

Note

³Boswell, *Christianity*, pp. 91-99.



The Beginning

To tell the whole story of Sodom, we must turn back to Genesis 13. Abraham and his nephew Lot agreed to go their separate ways. Strife had emerged between their herdsmen due to their large overlapping holdings. Abraham gave Lot the choice of land. Lot chose the well-watered plain of Jordan where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were located. Lot moved to Sodom where, as the narrator of Genesis tells us, the people “were wicked, great sinners against the Lord” (Genesis 13:13).

The story of Sodom picks up again in Genesis 18. God visited Abraham and Sarah in disguise with two angel attendants. Abraham graciously and generously offered them hospitality as his culture expected him to do. When the visitors set out for Sodom, Abraham accompanied them, again as hospitality dictated. One of the visitors, now indirectly identified as God—or “of God”—(18:16-19) informed Abraham that they were going to check on Sodom’s wickedness.⁴ The implication was that if reports of Sodom’s sin were true, then God would destroy the city. By informing him, God involved Abraham, God’s chosen one, in the proceedings. Abraham immediately questioned God’s decision to destroy everyone. He asked how many righteous persons it would take for God not to destroy the cities. God took Abraham’s concern seriously and agreed to ten.

Meanwhile, the other two visitors traveled on to Sodom where Lot extended hospitality to them as required, thus showing himself to be a righteous man in Sodom. The narrator of the story then gives us an illustration of Sodom’s wickedness by noting that *all* the men of Sodom wanted to rape Lot’s visitors. The narrator was providing an exaggerated example of Sodom’s sin of inhospitality and abuse of strangers. (Other biblical writers refer to Sodom’s sins as pride, refusal to care for the poor, lying, etc.) Lot displayed his own culture’s low value of and, disregard for, women by offering his daughters for the men’s heterosexual violence. However, the two strangers intervened to prevent rape or violence of any kind from occurring at Lot’s home. They finally persuaded Lot to leave Sodom. God destroyed the city of great wickedness, but saved Lot and his family. We do not know if God saved others.

The narrator of this story in Genesis first contrasted the very gracious hospitality of Abraham with a somewhat less gracious, but still righteous, Lot. (We would question Lot’s righteousness because of his treatment of his daughters, but the narrator didn’t.) The narrator then further contrasted Abraham and Lot with the extremely unrighteous, inhospitable men of Sodom. Finally, the narrator contrasted God’s judgment (justice) toward wickedness with God’s mercy (love) toward at least one righteous individual and his family. Traditionally, we have looked at the judgment side of God’s actions. By looking at the mercy side, and particularly at the hospitality *theme* rather than at the inhospitality *example*, and focusing on God’s *saving* action rather than God’s *destroying* action, we may come to understand this story as biblical writers probably intended it.⁵

What Does It Mean?

Read Genesis 18:1-33. Check commentaries.

1. Why were the visitors going to Sodom?

2. What is the point of Abraham’s bargaining with God about saving righteous men?

3. Why does God destroy the city of Sodom? Why did God save Lot and his family?

4. What implications does this story have for understanding sexual conduct and violence today?

Notes

⁴Fretheim, “Genesis,” *NIB*, p. 463. Hereafter noted as Fretheim in *NIB*. Other interpreters say God appeared in all three visitors and that God never is identified as one of them. See Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Old Testament Library. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 204.

⁵John S. Kselman, “Genesis,” *Harper’s Bible Commentary*. Commentary hereafter noted as *HBC*. See also Fretheim in *NIB*, pp. 473-79.

Looking Back

The hospitality theme and the saving action of God are the end of the biblical story of Sodom. These two themes do not, however, tell the whole story of Sodom. We can gain further insight by looking at the story from our modern sociocultural experience and insights. H. Darrell Lance has observed:

“If I invite you to my home and serve you poisoned elderberry wine, I am certainly being inhospitable, but the real crime is much more serious. The reality is that the men of Sodom intended to commit male-on-male gang rape of strangers who unbeknownst to them were angels in human form. One-on-one rape or gang rape, whether male-female or male-male, is sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is sin.”⁶

Abuse and violence are what the men of Sodom wanted to heap on Lot’s visitors. The narrator of the story was making a case for the extreme inhospitality and sinfulness of the men of Sodom. Rape, a crime of violence, involves extreme disregard for other peoples’ well-being. The story of Sodom is not an example of normal or typical same-sex conduct, and it certainly is not a description of homosexuality in general.

Think about how gay men feel when they hear the story of Sodom interpreted as God’s judgment on male homosexuality.

In his misguided efforts to obey the hospitality customs, sexual abuse is also what Lot casually tries to heap on his daughters by offering them to the men of Sodom. Lot’s inhospitable and abusive treatment of his daughters is concluded in Genesis 19:30-38. Lot and his daughters moved from Sodom (Lot’s choice of paradise) to an isolated cave in the mountains because Lot was afraid to stay in Zoar. There his daughters made of him the passive sexual object he had tried to make of them when he offered them to the men of Sodom. Most interpreters see this concluding story as evidence of how far from faith Lot had fallen. Some interpreters, however, note positively that the daughters’ sexual initiative, though disapproved, continued Lot’s ancestral line. Their “desperate” or “trickster” action is similar to Tamar’s action (Genesis 38) and that of the midwives (Exodus 1).⁷

Think about how women feel when they read this story and find no condemnation of Lot’s treatment of his daughters.

It is ironic and sad that a biblical story about hospitality and God’s justice came to be used as biblical support for the church’s inhospitality toward, and injustice against, gay men and lesbian women. It is tragic that those who today physically assault gay men and lesbian women (and those who commit crimes of rape and domestic violence against women) are the ones who truly commit Sodom’s sins. Sodom’s sins are not only general inhospitality. Sodom’s sins include violent abuse and extreme disregard for others’ well-being.

What do your own history and social location say to you about this story of Sodom?



Who Is Hospitable?

Try to finish the following story with your own story of hospitality toward gay men and lesbian women who were strangers in some situation.

One day in Massachusetts, says a modern narrator, two young men were walking across a bridge in a strange neighborhood, holding hands, when some neighborhood youth approached them.... No, wait, no one was hospitable to them. The neighborhood youth threw the two young gay men over the bridge and they drowned.

One day, says another narrator, two young women moved to a town in Oregon.... No, that is not a neighborly or hospitable story either. That lesbian couple was kidnapped and killed.

One day, says you the reader, ...

Notes

⁶H. Darrell Lance, Letter to Osterman, January 1996.

⁷See Fretheim in *NIB*, pp. 475-76; Susan Niditch, “Genesis,” *WBC*, pp. 21-23; and Drorah O’Donnell Setal, “Exodus,” *WBC*, p. 30.



Responding Faithfully

Whether we employ a literal or a critical approach to interpreting the Bible, many of us have been abandoning the interpretation that Sodom's sin is homosexuality. Such an interpretation is inadequate and false.⁸ We have quietly embraced a more complex interpretation involving attempted sexual abuse or violence. We have interpreted this as extreme inhospitality.

Having done so, one would think we would move on. Yet many of us seem to stay focused on Sodom as if it could give us an answer to our dilemma about the church and homosexuality.

Sodom does have an answer—if we change the specific questions we are asking of it. The story of Sodom does not answer the question: “Are homosexual people morally acceptable?” Rather, the story of Sodom addresses the question: “How do we as Christians respond faithfully to the strangers in our midst?” Because of the history of interpreting this story as a condemnation of gay men and lesbian women, we ask that question in a specific way: “How do we as Christians respond faithfully to the lesbian and gay strangers in our midst?” However, the story of Sodom would also speak to the question of how we are to respond to immigrants and illegal aliens in the U.S. today. To each of those questions, the story of Sodom responds: Practice hospitality to those beyond your own circle. Practice mercy.

The story of Sodom addresses at least two additional questions. First, what place does judgment have in the midst of justice, especially with abusers? The patriarchal culture of Lot did not provide for judgment of Lot's treatment of his daughters or mercy for the daughters.⁹ Yet, God's action in the story of Sodom is still a general model of divine judgment and mercy. Second, what is our human role in situations calling for judgment/justice and love/mercy? In the story of Sodom, it is God who judges and administers justice and mercy. Abraham's justice role was to be concerned for those beyond his own circle, even to the point of questioning God's actions. His justice role was to speak up on behalf of the few. Is our role to be like Abraham's? This perhaps is the lesson the story of Sodom still has to teach us. It is a lesson of learning to practice radical hospitality—a combination of judgment and mercy, justice and love.

Practicing radical hospitality is perhaps one of the best ways that we heirs of God can give ourselves unreservedly in obedience to God. Practicing radical hospitality toward each other honors God. It is almost as if we were practicing hospitality toward God.¹⁰

What Do You Think?

1. From your reading of the story of Sodom, what is the real message?

2. Is it possible to practice hospitality with people we think of as “sinful”? Should we avoid sinful folks? Tolerate them? Love them? What is the difference between tolerance and love?

3. What might it look like for you and your church to practice radical hospitality (justice-love) toward gay men and lesbian women and their families?

Notes

⁸See, for example, Soards, *Scripture*, pp. 15-16, for a conservative view that abandons the old interpretation.

⁹The Sodom story is one of the places in the Bible where women interpreters have helped to illuminate the sexism of a biblical passage.

¹⁰Fretheim in *NIB*, p. 464.



Expressing Our Faith



Prayer for Caring Stewardship

Genesis 1:26

God of all creation,
what incredible love and trust you showed for us —
making us in your own image
and giving us the awesome responsibility
of taking care of all you created!

Forgive us, Lord, for not doing a good job
of looking out for each other,
or taking care of your natural world.

Forgive me, particularly, for not being there
for a brother or sister who feels alienated
by the church family because of sexual orientation.

Enable us, with the God-spirit in each of us,
to reach out in love to these
and to any other member experiencing alienation
for *any* reason.

Empower us to be reconcilers, peacemakers, and good stewards
of all the gifts with which you have blessed us.

In the name of our Lord,
who loves each one of us unconditionally, I pray. Amen.

—Ruth Slade
Rainbow Prayers, January 1994, p. 4
Used with permission of *More Light Update*

On Your Own

Look up the word “Sodom” in a recent Bible dictionary. Is the interpretive approach of the writer of this item literal, critical, or sociocultural—or some combination of approaches? What words/phrases tell you the writer’s approach? With which points do you agree and why? With which do you disagree and why?



Focused Reading

Boswell, John. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, pp. 91-99.

Helminiak, Daniel A. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, ch. 3.

Scanzoni and Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*, rev. ed. pp. 56-62.



Chapter 6

What kind of God
do I worship—and
why?



Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 ♦ Luke 10:25-37

Ancient Purity

The Holiness Code section of Leviticus reflects ancient Israel's concern for *purity* (the state of being clean and unblemished) and *impurity* (the state of being unclean and polluted). Only unblemished specimens of one's own kind, unpolluted by any other kind, are pure. Polluted specimens are defiled. Being defiled does not mean being *morally* defiled, but rather, being physically unclean. Purity was the desirable state. Israelites were to be holy, as God was holy. Impure or unpurified people could not approach God at the Temple. Impure specimens could not be offered as sacrifices to God.¹

Note

¹Sources for this statement were *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, p. 843; *HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 167 notes; and Furnish, in Siker, p. 20.

Holy One,

We find it hard sometimes to discern your living Word among the many words of the Bible. Gay or straight, we all struggle daily to be faithful. Help us all to sort out our understandings and our doubts. Amen.

Why Bother?

Some Christians say "Why bother with Leviticus? It is about ancient religious sacrificial customs and purification rules. Such rules and customs were relevant to ancient Israel, and to some parts of Judaism today. However, Levitical rules don't really help us know how to live ethical moral lives as Christians."

Others respond, "Leviticus is important because it is part of God's Word. It is part of God's law. However, if something doesn't point us to Jesus and the gospel, maybe Christians can set aside those passages. We should always ask ourselves: What does Christ say is the heart of law."

"That's helpful," answer some. "The issue here is not *whether* we exempt some laws, but *which ones* we exempt and *why*. We all ignore *some* of the rules of Hebrew scripture. For example, we mix different fibers in our clothing; we sow different kinds of seeds in the same field (Leviticus 19:19)."

"A related issue is what kind of God we worship," says another. "In Leviticus, God is portrayed as 'holy' in a distant and unapproachable way. Leviticus focused on the people performing certain sacrifices and rituals of purification to approach God at the Temple or to be holy as God is holy. Yet, elsewhere in Hebrew and Christian scripture, God is approachable. The psalms especially indicate that the Israelites directly approached God. The prophets and Jesus portray God as one who is found among the poor and the oppressed."

The people in this conversation are wrestling with two weighty matters: what is God like and what is the heart of the gospel message for us as Christians. Do we embrace a purity system of exclusive holiness? Or, do we say with Jesus that the heart of the law is "Love God and your neighbor as yourself." These matters influence how we understand the two verses in Leviticus that condemn same-sex conduct.

What Kind of God?

Leviticus 18:22 is the only place in the Bible where a *law* specifically prohibits same-sex conduct: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman...” The punishment for breaking this law is death (Leviticus 20:13). Both verses are part of the “Holiness Code” (Leviticus 17–26). Leviticus as a whole is often labeled a “priest’s manual.”

The Holiness Code provided a complex set of purification rites, regulations, and taboos for Israelites after the Exile. The code was meant to help them be pure and holy. If they were, they might “qualify” to approach God. “You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). “Holy” in this passage means transcendent (totally pure, separate from flawed or impure humanity). To be in “right relationship” with this holy God, individual Israelites were called to practice an elaborate purity or holiness discipline, which separated pure from impure, clean from unclean, perfect from blemished.

In addition, Israel as a nation and as a land was to be holy—separate from the pagan nations who were considered impure. In some cases, that meant sending foreign wives away or removing foreigners from the land they had come to inhabit while the Israelites were in exile.²

Today, some who are literal interpreters of the Bible still embrace the same-sex prohibition in Leviticus (and in some places even the punishment) as a relevant moral command for Christians. At the same time, we ignore many other prohibitions in Leviticus. It is not always clear what criteria we are using to distinguish between cleanliness customs and moral laws for all time and all people. In the case of the same-sex verses, some of us point to the fact that Paul supposedly referred to Leviticus in 1 Corinthians 6:9.³ Others who are literal interpreters say that the Leviticus passages are not relevant to Christians because “Christ is the end of the law.” We quote Romans 10:4, Galatians 3:10-11, and 5:3-4 to point out that “grace, not law, governs Christian life.”⁴

Conservative biblical commentator Walter Kaiser believes that the prohibition of same-sex activity is normative, just as the laws on incest, adultery, blood relations, and unjust weights and measures are still normative. Kaiser also embraces the image of exclusive holiness and purity found in Leviticus: “When an individual comes into the presence of a holy God, a line of demarcation must be drawn....” God draws that line between holy and profane and so should those who worship him: some things are holy, others defiled; some can be repurified, others are punishable by death.⁵

Dangers: A danger in the literal approach is that we end up approving an ancient religious code from a conservative branch of Israel as viable for ourselves. We approve it without understanding the code’s concept of holiness, its sexism, or its image of a separate and almost unapproachable God. On the other hand, some of us, using specific and limited critical interpretive material, may be tempted to reject the whole of Leviticus as we discard Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. We forget that “love your neighbor as yourself” is found in Leviticus. We also create a false dichotomy between Jewish law and the Christian gospel.



What Does It Say?

Browse through chapters 18 and 20 of Leviticus.

1. What do Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 say?

2. What kinds of regulations come before and after 18:22?

3. What seems to be the purpose of the regulations in chapter 18?
See verses 1-5, 24-30.

Notes

²See Ezra 9:1-3, 10:1-5 and Nehemiah 13:1-3, 23-30. These books were written after the Exile about the same time as Leviticus.

³See our earlier discussion on p. 18 on whether or not Paul really was referring to Leviticus 18:22.

⁴See Soards, *Scripture*, pp. 16-18.

⁵See Walter C. Kaiser, “Leviticus,” *NIB*, vol. 1, pp. 999-1000, 1127-28, 1143-44. Also, see Hays in Siker, p. 6.



Why a Purity Code?

Critical interpreters note that it is insufficient to quote Leviticus 18:22 to answer our modern dilemma about being exclusive or inclusive of gay and lesbian people. It also is insufficient to quote Romans 1:26-27. Even if Paul did refer to Leviticus in Romans (and it is not clear he did), that is not enough. Christian scripture contains many illustrations and prohibitions that Christians have generally discarded as irrelevant since Paul's time. Slavery, divorce, women's silence in church, and taboos about menstruation are a few of those discarded rules.

Critical interpreters also note that, in the principally agrarian society of ancient post-exilic Israel, procreation meant the difference between survival and destruction. Ancient Israel's sexual relationship laws reflected such a concern and should be understood in that context. Ancient Israel's procreation concerns are not necessarily our concerns today.

Critical interpreters also note that the Levitical writer was concerned with purity issues, not "moral" issues as we know them today. The writer was concerned with what sacrificial items could and could not be brought to the Temple and which persons might and might not approach it. The writer drew a sharp line religiously and culturally to identify who was "in" and who was "out," who could acceptably approach a holy God and who could not. Those who were pure could; those who were impure could not.

Impurities were called abominations (things that were contrary to proper religious practice). They included such things as certain sexual activities, certain dietary habits, all blemished or differently abled people, all blemished sacrificial items, and improper ways of worshipping God. One of these abominations was male same-sex intercourse. The severity of the punishment for engaging in it shows the seriousness of such conduct for ancient Israelite males.

Finally, critical interpreters note the reasons for the severity of the prohibition against same-sex activity. *Why* was male same-sex activity such a serious offense in ancient Israel? The explicit reason given is that a man should not "act like a woman" sexually or "cause" another man to act like one (Leviticus 18:22). The ancient world assumed that purity meant keeping the categories of creation distinct. People thought that God created males and females with distinct social gender roles that were innate and unchangeable. *Mixing* those gender roles through same-sex activity created an impure situation.⁶

The seriousness of the offense goes a little deeper, however. Ancient Israelite men, if they kept themselves pure (or repurified themselves), could come before a God who was holy. They couldn't get as close to God in the Temple as the priests could, but they could get closer than women. Women could only enter the Court of Women in the Temple. The Court of Women was closer to the holy of holies than the court reserved for Gentiles, but it was farther away than the Court of Israel that was reserved for Israelite men. Being or "acting like" a woman thus placed one in a far inferior status.⁷ Today most of us reject the idea that women are inferior.

Are Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 still relevant for our decisions about same-sex conduct today? What do you think?

What Does It Mean?

1. What is the meaning of "holy" in Leviticus?

See HCSB notes for 18:1-20:27.

2. Why were the Israelites and even resident aliens expected to obey various purity laws?

See HCSB notes for 18:1-30 and 18:25.

3. Why is "like a woman" considered bad in Leviticus?

Notes

⁶See Furnish in Siker, p. 20; Furnish, "What Does", p. 5; and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 54.

⁷For more on this discussion, see Melanie Morrison, *The Grace of Coming Home* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), p. 22. Hereafter noted as Morrison, *Grace*. Also, see Judith Romney Wegner, "Leviticus," *WBC*, p. 38; Richard H. Hiers, *HBD*, p. 6; and Countryman, *Dirt*, part 1.

Historical Background

Before we draw final conclusions about the two Levitical verses on same-sex conduct, let's explore the social, cultural, and political context in which Leviticus emerged.

One sociocultural interpreter, Sarah Melcher, proposes that Levitical regulations and prohibitions were tied to ancient Israel's economic well-being. That well-being was specifically tied to male inheritance laws. Levitical prohibitions (including ones prohibiting adultery, interracial marriages, and same-sex conduct), were enforced to keep Israel's bloodlines pure and undefiled for inheritance purposes. The strict "purity codes" of Leviticus kept the resources and the land in Israel's hands and out of foreigners' hands.⁸

Another sociocultural interpreter, Gary David Comstock, explores the historical context of Leviticus. Leviticus, he says, was shaped by two events. First was the forced exile to Babylon of Israel's upper class (royalty, state officials, priests, army officers, and artisans). Second was King Cyrus's decision forty-nine years later (about 536 B.C.E.) to allow those leaders to return to their homeland. Cyrus's strategy was to stabilize his vast empire by allowing the conquered peoples considerable autonomy in their indigenous cultural and religious lives while keeping them dependent politically.

The Israelite leaders, says Comstock, returned to find villages destroyed, Jerusalem and the Temple largely in ruins, and the people in poverty. Many foreigners had entered the land. They inter-married with Israelites who had not been exiled. They thus commingled their religious and social customs. The returning priests attempted to stabilize the land by drawing lines—differentiating Israel from the peoples of other nations who also lived on the land. That distinction was made visible through regulations about circumcision, dietary laws, Sabbath, sexuality and relationship prohibitions, sacrifices, and festivals. Observance of those rules identified who was inside or outside the community, who could be cut off from the community, and under what conditions. The Israelite leaders reoccupied the land by attempting to bring a now ethnically and religiously diverse people under religious conformity through a complex code of purity regulations. Their strategy reflected religious and ethnic exclusivity, male superiority, religious superiority, economic protectionist rules, and restrictive land inheritance laws.⁹

We might take a step out of our current church dilemma by placing the book of Leviticus into its historical context (during and after the Exile). It can help us recognize the reasons for the same-sex prohibition and other sexual prohibitions in Leviticus. It might also help us remember that ancient Israel was diverse in its understandings of holiness and right relationship with God. Other biblical writers did not focus on the purity concerns the way the writer of Leviticus did. "Third Isaiah" (Isaiah 56-66), which was also written in post-exilic times, calls for inclusiveness and justice, not exclusive ritual customs.¹⁰

The exclusiveness of Leviticus sounds bad today. However, without it, post-exilic Israel would likely have blended into the pagan nations and lost the genius of its faith in the one God. Nevertheless, as Christians we focus on Jesus who offered us another Jewish understanding of God—a God who blended the sacred and the common into an inclusive holiness!



How Did Jesus Draw on the Law?

Read Luke 10:25-37. Check study Bible notes or commentaries.

1. What two Hebrew laws did Jesus quote in answering the lawyer's question about inheriting eternal life?

2. What impurity concerns might the priest and Levite have had?

3. Who were the Samaritans?

See study Bible annotations; also a Bible dictionary.

4. How did Jesus expand the Hebrew law about who one's "neighbor" is?

See Comstock's discussion in *Gay Theology Without Apology*, pp. 62-63.

Notes

⁸Sarah J. Melcher, "The Holiness Code and Human Sexuality," in Brawley, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 87-102.

⁹Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology Without Apology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1993), pp. 63-67. Hereafter noted as Comstock, *Gay Theology*.

¹⁰See Isaiah 56:1-8; 58:1-9, 11. See also Richard J. Clifford, "Isaiah 40-66," *HBC*, pp. 586, 588. Also note that this post-exilic diversity may also help account for the acceptance of same-sex affection implied in earlier times in Israel, such as in the story of David and Jonathan (2 Samuel 25-26). Israel was not of one mind on this matter. The Bible is not of one mind on it.



What's It All About?

"What's it all about?" the lawyer asked Jesus two thousand years ago.

"It's about God, neighbor, and self." "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus told a parable: "One day a man was attacked and left wounded beside the road. Different people responded in different ways. Who was the neighbor?"

"The one who helped—the Samaritan?" they responded hesitantly and incredulously. *The Samaritan?* That despised foreigner? That unclean outsider? That religious enemy? That dog?

"It's about loving those around you," Jesus insisted. "Doesn't matter who or when or under what circumstances. Be merciful, compassionate, mature, like your God. It's about love and justice."

What Do You Think?

1. What, for you, is "the heart of the matter" about homosexuality and the church and why?

2. Is the neighbor in Jesus' parable the one who helps—or the one in the ditch? If we only consider the neighbor to be the strong one, are we being elitist?

3. What would it be like to use the Hebrew understanding of heart as an ethic for our lives as Christians?

The Pharisee movement in Judaism sought to bring holiness and the sacred into everyday life. Some Pharisees believed that faithful Jews should follow a detailed prescription of purity laws. They would have avoided the "unclean" Samaritan in Jesus' parable. These were the Pharisees Jesus criticized the most. Other Pharisees—such as Hillel (who died when Jesus was a youth)—sought an inclusive holiness (where all life, including the marginalized person, was sacred) rather than a strict adherence to particular purity laws. Clearly, Jesus fell within this Hillel tradition. Jesus did not agree with the whole Levitical premise of exclusive holiness. It did not fit with his understanding of who God is or how God wants people to relate to each other. For Jesus, God was not separate and apart; God was relational and compassionate.¹¹

Jesus turned the purity system inside out, rejecting its basic principle of ranking some people as pure and others as impure. Purity codes keep people and societies in their "proper" places. Purity codes promote domination of some over others, based on rankings of pure, clean, holy. Without such codes and rankings, distinctions between and among people as holy or unholy are lost. Women become equal to men; outsiders become equal to insiders; Gentiles become equal to Jews. Designations of "clean" and "unclean" are rejected. All join at the same table and sit in the same pews.¹²

Jesus said that God doesn't demand physical purity from us. Purity of heart is what matters. On the surface, it seems that Jesus ranked inner heart over outer behavior. However, in Hebrew the heart is "the instrument of action." If the desire is there, you *act* on it—if you are free to do so. If action is not forthcoming, then the desire is not really in the heart. Perhaps, then, Jesus' point about the neighbor in the parable was that some of his contemporaries, though concerned to keep the external purity laws, did not act from the heart of the law in identifying and loving their neighbors.¹³

What's it all about? It's about an inclusive kind of holiness—a living process of justice and love towards one's neighbors—that comes straight from the heart.

Notes

¹¹Many biblical scholars and interpreters now generally agree that the Gospel writers did not accurately portray the Judaism of Jesus' day. Judaism, then as now, was multi-faceted. Jesus' battle with the Pharisees was really an "in-house struggle" with some parts of the Pharisee movement in Judaism. See Elizabeth Stuart, *Just Good Friends* (New York: Mowbray, 1996), p. 145. Hereafter noted as Stuart, *Just Good*. Also see Hall, *Christian Anti-Semitism*, pp. 23-36, 159, note 20; notes to Osterman, August 1996.

¹²See Walter Wink, "Disability and Normalcy: 'Holy and Without Blemish Before God'," *Auburn Views* 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 3-4.

¹³See Morrison, *Grace*, pp. 20-26, and Stuart, *Just Good*, pp. 146-47.

Expressing Our Faith



In Celebration of a Catholic Spirit

Leader: We remember that we are Christians, people of the church universal: women and men, gay and lesbian, bisexual and straight, of many faiths and races, and many social locations.

People: Resisting the temptation to become fragmented by differing opinions, we focus clear eyes on the heart of the gospel.

Leader: But what is the heart of the gospel?

People: The heart of the gospel is you and me, struggling toward a common ground from which to relate.

Leader: The heart of the gospel is you and me, together working toward a world where people are respected and differences celebrated.

People: The heart of the gospel is me affirming your unique gifts as a child of God and you affirming mine.

Leader: We remember that we are a people called Christians and that we are called to be true to the catholic spirit that gave us birth.

People: We ask for strength, courage, and clarity as we open our hearts and take each other's hand.



—Source unknown
Adapted

Benediction

May the love in my heart
pass through my hand to you.

—Source unknown

On Your Own

There were other places in the Bible, in addition to the Samaritan parable, where Jesus seemed to overturn the purity system. Look up Mark 7:15, 14-23. What do you think Jesus was really saying?



Focused Reading

Helminiak, Daniel A. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*, ch. 4.

Comstock, Gary David. *Gay Theology Without Apology*, pp. 38-40 and 61-78.

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Chapter 7

Can I “reconcile”
and seek justice
at the same time?



2 Corinthians 5:17-20 ♦ Matthew 5:43-48

Reconciliation: God's Way

Reconciliation assumes that distance, separation, controversy, and even outright enmity, exist. If something or someone needs to be reconciled, there is a problem or a misunderstanding or a disagreement. Someone originally created a rift through a rejection of some kind. What does it mean to seek to reconcile across a chasm, or with an enemy, or in spite of a controversy?

In 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, we have a model of God's reconciling actions. When God reconciled us all to God's Self, God *connected with us* even before we had turned radically and without reserve toward God. God *included us* as heirs apparent of the existing, and still to come, new creation. God *claimed us* in relationship—as children, as family. God *called us* to be reconciled with God. God *engaged us* in reconciling ministries with each other. It's a radical model that is not easy to implement.

Note

¹Prayer was written by Corlette Pierson.

Gracious Creator,

We are gathered here, in your name.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Anoint our heads with the oil of understanding;

Weave within our hearts the fabric of love;

Sew throughout our tongues the thread of reconciliation;

Write upon our spirits the story of peace. Amen.¹

Full Circle

We return one last time to our troubling dilemma: Will the church fully welcome God's gay and lesbian heirs into the church or will it exclude them/us from it? Where do we personally stand? If we are heterosexual, do we fully accept gay men and lesbian women and nurture their gifts? Do we fully reject same-sex conduct and justify all actions against gay and lesbian people? Do we find ourselves somewhere in between? If we are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, the choices look different. Do we fully celebrate ourselves as God's heirs or fully reject ourselves?

Turn to page 47 and complete the “Where Do You Stand?” Scale before continuing this chapter.

We will explore this continuum of choices more fully. We do so by exploring Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 about God's reconciliation with humanity and God's call for us to engage in ministries of reconciliation. This is not an easy message. We will need to decide what “ministry of reconciliation” means for different groups of people. We will also examine Jesus' words about loving one's enemies and being “perfect” as God is “perfect” (Matthew 5:43-48). Jesus' words provide us with an ethical vision that might help us understand the relationship between (1) seeking reconciliation between oppressors and oppressed ones, and (2) seeking justice for those who have been rejected and oppressed. Being reconciling disciples of Christ requires that we do both.

The question is *how?* What does engaging in reconciling ministries mean for those who have rejected and oppressed gay and lesbian people? What does it mean for those of us who are lesbian and gay? What does it mean for those who are “gay-friendly” allies? *Can* reconciliation occur with people and groups who continue to reject and oppress gay men and lesbian women? Can any of us engage in acts of reconciliation and still engage in justice work on behalf of lesbian and gay people?

God's Claim on Us

*God [has] reconciled us to himself through Christ,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.*

—2 Corinthians 5:18 NRSV



In 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Paul expresses God's claim on us. God reconciled all the world while we were still turned away, still undeserving, still "enemies" of God. God did not count our transgressions against us. Instead, God made us new creations and entrusted us all with a ministry. Paul spoke these words of faith and witness to gentile Christians in the middle of the first century. His words ring across the centuries. Good News! God—who has the power to accept or reject—accepts and reconciles with all of us.

What is to be our response? As God's gentile heirs, we are to be new creations in Christ. We are to engage in reconciling ministries with each other. God calls us not to *beliefs* or to biblical *interpretations*, but to *reconciling actions*.

What does this mean? We may have a tendency to interpret Paul's words "ministry of reconciliation" as a personal call to evangelize and convert people to our religion, our beliefs, our ways of interpreting the Bible, our ethical norms. Yet that's not what God did! God simply claimed us as God's own—and set us to work.

We also may have a tendency to reconcile with our own kind, but not with those who are very different from us. We reconcile on a one-to-one basis, but not on an institutional level. Engaging in a ministry of reconciliation when we are on different sides of a huge dilemma in the church is harder and more elusive.

We have some hard questions to face. Can those of us (gay or straight) who affirm and celebrate gay and lesbian people as God's children reconcile with those who refuse baptism to children of gay or lesbian couples? Can we reconcile with those who remove gay and lesbian people from church positions, invite them to move to the back pews, or uninvite them completely? What does it mean to engage in reconciling acts in denominations that refuse ordination to lesbian or gay persons who have "a call to ministry" and obvious gifts and graces for that ministry? Reconciliation under such circumstances may not be *fully* possible until the ones who have the power to reject people take steps to reconcile with the ones who have been rejected. We all have to face these hard realities if we are to carry out a ministry of reconciliation. The question is: Which side are we on and how will we witness?

Dangers: Whether we are conservative, moderate, or liberal, we are sometimes tempted to embrace reconciliation prematurely. We have perfectly "reasonable" and "understandable" reasons for trying to reconcile quickly. We want to ward off or resolve conflict that is uncomfortable or anxiety-producing. We want to "keep the church from splitting." Sometimes we even detach our concrete actions from our Christian vision. One example: In our national assemblies we vote to exclude lesbian women and gay men from full participation and leadership in ministry and then rise to sing "Jesus, United By Thy Grace." We value unity so much that we cry "peace, peace" prematurely. We forget that there can be no true peace, no full reconciliation, without justice for the rejected and oppressed among all God's people.

What Does It Say?

1. What does Paul mean by his term "new creation"?

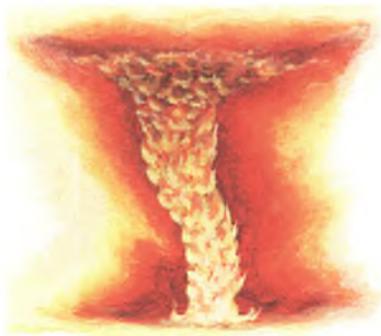
See 2 Corinthians 5:16-17. Also, look up Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22 in an NRSV study Bible to understand the Hebrew prophet's use of this term.

2. What does "not counting their trespasses against them" mean in 2 Corinthians 5:19?

Look up Romans 4:8, Psalm 32:1-2, and the note on Psalm 1:1.

3. What is it that God has done and what does God want us to do in response?

Reread 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.



“Dance” with Different Folk

“Jesus insisted that it was no virtue to love those who love us
—those of our own interpretive community—
because anybody can do that much.”

—Virginia Ramey Mollenkott²

Jesus, in words that are part of the Sermon on the Mount, says we are to love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, bless those who curse us, and be perfect as our God is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48).³ We want to explore two phrases in Jesus’ words: “love your enemies” and “be perfect.” We step outside the Northern-European-based field of critical biblical scholarship to examine “love your enemies” from a Middle Eastern mystical point of view.⁴ Then we return to critical research to examine the meaning of the word “perfect.”

Neil Douglas-Klotz applies an interpretive, meditational approach to a Syraic-Aramaic version of Jesus’ words “love your enemies.” He suggests that the Syraic-Aramaic word for love (*ahebw*) does not mean compassion and mercy. Rather, it means an “even more mysterious, impersonal force, one that acts in secret to bring separate beings together to create new life.” He further suggests that the word “enemy” in Syraic-Aramaic (*bwheldbabaykhun*) “conveys the image of being out of rhythm, moving with jerky, harsh movements.” Our enemy (whether it is a person, a different interpretive community, or a nation) “is out of step, impeding, vacuous, and puffed up in relationship to us.”⁵

Turn to page 45 and read Neil Douglas-Klotz’s meditation
“Love your Enemies” before continuing this page.

In reflecting on Douglas-Klotz’s meditation, Virginia Mollenkott observes that we and our enemy are like “really clumsy dancers.”⁶ Doesn’t that sound just like us in the church today? We are out of rhythm, moving jerkily, stepping on each others’ toes, sometimes not even dancing to the same music. Douglas-Klotz’s meditative interpretation of “love your enemies” suggests that Jesus meant for us to learn to “dance” a hidden dance with folks who are different from us so that we might bring us all back into the rhythm of God’s ways.

Let’s turn now to the second phrase in Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:43-48. At first glance, “be perfect” seems to be a digression from Jesus’ main point of loving one’s enemies. One scholar thinks it echoes “be holy” in Leviticus. Others note that the Greek word we read as “perfect” can mean “whole, complete, mature” or even “all-embracing.”⁷ Luke’s version of this verse (Luke 6:36) used a word we translate in English as “merciful.” Jesus seemed to be saying: Love your enemies... (do not imitate the behaviors of those who victimize you); be whole, mature, generous, merciful... (do not imitate your friends only, but instead imitate God).⁸

Two hard messages: Dance with your enemies, and be merciful as God is merciful. If someone is rejecting me and maligning my identity, I’m not sure I want to bring myself into rhythm with him or her—or respond with mercy. This, perhaps, is the hardest step of reconciliation. I think it means we dance a wary dance, not abdicating our own “rhythm” but loving our enemies with a tough love that keeps the spotlight on justice issues. It also means understanding the process that people go through to move from a position of rejecting gay and lesbian people to a position of fully celebrating and nurturing them/us.

What Does It Mean?

Read Matthew 5:43-48.

1. Besides loving our enemies, what else did Jesus say we should do for them and why?

2. What does “perfect” mean in Matthew 5:48 according to the notes in your Bible?

Notes

²Mollenkott, *Sensuous Spirituality*, p. 171.

³Also see Mark 12:28-31; John 13:34-35; 15:12-15; Luke 6:27-36. For background critical work on the Sermon on the Mount, see Hans Dieter Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*. Hermeneia (Augsburg, 1995).

⁴Caution: From a critical biblical point of view, one cannot with any authority translate early Greek manuscripts of Matthew “back” into Aramaic and know with any certainty at all that we have the “real” words of Jesus. This meditation is not presented with that thought in mind. It is presented in recognition that sometimes we can learn new things about something that is familiar to us by looking at it from a different perspective.

⁵Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), p. 85. Hereafter noted as Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers*. Syraic-Aramaic is similar to the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke.

⁶Mollenkott, *Sensuous Spirituality*, pp. 171-72.

⁷See Reginald H. Fuller, “Matthew,” *HBC*, pp. 957-958 for a view that “be perfect” echoes the Holiness Code of Leviticus. For other views, see *HCSB* notes on Matthew 5:48, p. 1868, and Matthew Fox, “Foreword” in Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers*, p. ix.

⁸See *HCSB*, notes on Luke 6:36, p. 1969, and Fred B. Craddock, “Luke,” *HBC*, p. 1023.

Reconciling Steps

The “Where Do You Stand?” Scale on page 47 sketches out various ways that individuals, the church, and society have responded to lesbian women and gay men. Psychologist Dorothy Riddle described the eight choices as repulsion, pity, tolerance, acceptance, support, admiration, appreciation, and nurturance. She identified the first four positions as homophobic attitudes and the last four as positive ones.⁹

Riddle’s continuum offers us a way to understand that the current dilemma the church faces is not a simple “welcome” or “reject” decision but, rather, a range of rejecting, less rejecting, more welcoming, and fully welcoming responses. Many of us may find ourselves at position “5”—the basic ACLU position of protecting and guaranteeing civil rights for lesbian and gay persons.¹⁰

What does this scale say about engaging in ministries of reconciliation? For those of us who are gay or lesbian, movement toward position “8” represents steps of an internal process of reconciling with ourselves. It means ridding ourselves of negative attitudes and misinformation that have caused us to be internally homophobic. Moving toward position “8” involves becoming proud of who we are—God’s gay or lesbian heirs with unique gifts and graces. It also means advocating for ourselves and our sisters and brothers who are not yet at position “8.” Finally, it means ridding ourselves of any *heterophobia* we have and learning to “dance” with our gay-friendly or “straight but not narrow” heterosexual allies who are standing at position “8” with us—or striving to get there.

Those of us who are gay or lesbian or bisexual might also think about where we place ourselves on another scale—a “church relationship” scale. Do we (1) reject the church and all it stands for; (2) reject the church but have faith in God; (3) partially accept the church, but with strong reservations; or (4) fully welcome and celebrate the church in our lives and take on full rights and responsibilities as members and leaders?

For those persons, churches, agencies, and denominations who have been rejecting and oppressing gay and lesbian people, movement toward position “8” of Riddle’s continuum might be the steps of a reconciling ministry. Changing attitudes through Bible study, prayer and discernment, interactions with gay and lesbian Christians, and intentional efforts to understand the complexities of human sexuality can lead eventually to a full reconciliation with gay and lesbian people.

Dangers: As we engage in reconciliation efforts, we may unthinkingly treat all the parties involved as if we were on a level playing field. However, the power to welcome or reject on a corporate or institutional level lies with the church and its majority voters—heterosexual members. Reconciliation efforts begin with those who have rejected, oppressed, or somehow discriminated against others. We may be tempted to reconcile only on a personal level and never think about the need for the church as church to reconcile with people who have been excluded. Maybe our church hasn’t personally excluded a gay or lesbian person, but others in our denomination have. The gay and lesbian community across the country knows very clearly that Christianity has condemned and rejected them. They won’t make an exception of us or our church unless we say we disagree, unless we say we are welcoming.



What Do Others Think?

As you continue to explore what it means to engage in welcoming and reconciling ministries, talk with people about the following questions. Ask gay and lesbian persons and parents of gay and lesbian children:

1. What do you think it would mean for a church or a denomination to reconcile with gay men and lesbian women?

2. How welcoming do you think our church (or group or campus ministry) is? Would gay and lesbian people generally know our stance? How?

3. How fully do you accept and celebrate the church in your life?

Notes

⁹The original Riddle Scale, not copyrighted by Riddle, has been widely adapted and used in the gay and lesbian community, in anti-homophobia workshops, and in various manuals and writings. Note: “Acceptance” is considered a homophobic stance because it implies there is something to accept rather than reject.

¹⁰This is also the position some judiciataries and denominations have taken, calling for civil rights while still denying full inclusion into the Christian community.



Claiming the Promise

What is the promise we are claiming? We claim that we and all human beings are God's family, heirs apparent of God's inclusive new earth. Together, we claim that all of creation is God's gift and blessing. We claim to be descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

We claim that, through the blessing of God's reconciling actions in Christ, *nothing* can separate us from the love of God—not closets or shame or self-hatred or doubt—not threats of violence or fear or bigotry—not denominational debate or church policy or law or closed doors! Absolutely nothing can separate any of us from God's love. *We are God's heirs because God chooses us.* That is the promise!

How do we claim that promise? We claim it when we *live* as God's heirs apparent in the inclusive household of God. We claim it as we live as new creations in Christ—part of God's here-but-not-yet "new earth."¹¹ We claim it when we "*faith*" God's reconciling acts with us.¹² *Faithing* is different from "having faith in" or "believing in" something. When we *faith* something, we engage our whole selves—body, mind, heart, and soul—in response. We embody it. So, when we claim the promise, we *faith* God's action of not counting our trespasses against us—we *embody* forgiveness (1 Corinthians 5:18, 19). When we claim the promise, we *faith* freedom in Christ—we *embody* individual and communal responsibility and justice-love (Galatians 5:13-14). Finally, when we claim the promise, we *faith* God's trusting us with the ministry and message of reconciliation—we *embody* reconciliation (1 Corinthians 5:18, 19, 20).

How do we embody reconciliation? We embrace it with our whole bodyselves. We radically change the ways we relate to other people. We move beyond practicing an insiders' code of hospitality for strangers of our own kind toward being a neighbor—being open, supportive, affirming, and welcoming—to all God's children. Embodying reconciliation involves an interactive process of seeking "more light" on the biblical and theological differences that divide us. It confers dignity, integrity, and capacity for moral decision making on each person. Finally, embodying reconciliation means naming as accurately as we can what or who it is that needs to be reconciled—and with what or whom. William Sloan Coffin observed:

The problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages that appear to condemn it, but rather how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ. I do not think it can be done. I do not see how Christians can define and then exclude people on the basis of sexual orientation alone—not if the law of love is more important than the laws of biology.¹³

Are we ready to engage in ministries of reconciliation? It's easy to say "Yes!" But what would it mean for a local church who ousted a gay or lesbian minister to reconcile with that person? What would it mean for schools or businesses who fired gay or lesbian employees to reconcile? What would it mean for a denomination to reconcile with its gay and lesbian members? How should those who were rejected respond? There are no easy answers here. The pain is great. The costs have been huge, both for those who rejected and those who were rejected. The concrete, practical, ethical choice remains squarely before us whenever we gather in the circle that is the Body of Christ: Will our circles be open? Will we fully include, affirm, nurture, and celebrate God's lesbian and gay children?

What Do You Think?

1. How real for you is the feeling that "nothing can separate us from the love of God"? Do you feel this more or less strongly than when you were a child?

2. What is the next step you personally want to take in regard to the church and homosexuality?
Explore not what you think you ought to do, but what you want and intend to do.

3. What, for you, is the justice-loving thing for the church to do in relation to gay and lesbian Christians?

4. If you are heterosexual, what does it mean to you to dance a hidden dance of the heart with those who are different from you? If you are gay or lesbian, what does it mean to you?

Notes

¹¹See Isaiah 65:17 and Galatians 6:15.

¹²"Faith" is usually a noun, not a verb. However, James Fowler deplors that as a defect in our English language. Faith, he says, "is an active mode of being and committing, a way of moving into and giving shape to our experiences of life." We use "faith" and "faithing" here as a dynamic, living, interactive verb. See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 16.

¹³William Sloan Coffin, *The Courage to Love* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 43.

Expressing Our Faith



Prayer of Reconciliation

Leader: Great and loving God,
When our burdens are heavy;

People: Come, Eternal Spirit, lighten our load.

Leader: When our fears surround us like a heavy fog;

People: Come, Mothering Spirit, cradle us in the warmth of your bosom.

Leader: When depression and anger darken our souls;

People: Come, Fathering Spirit, send us an outpouring of your love.

Leader: When the dividing walls of hostility surround us;

People: Come, Healing Spirit, send us an outpouring of your Love.

Leader: When society devalues and persecutes our gay and lesbian children, friends and relatives;

People: Come, Unifying Spirit, energize us to continue in the cause of biblical justice for all.

Leader: When disagreements and power struggles leave us weak and worn;

People: Come, Spirit of Peace, cover us with your wings.

Leader: When loving our neighbor seems utterly impossible;

People: Come, Reconciling Spirit, reunite us into the true Body of Christ.

All: *Come now, Holy Spirit of God,
Rekindle our spirits and set our hearts ablaze
so that we may love and live as Jesus Christ taught us;
That we may be in unity with all your people everywhere;
men and women, light and dark,
old and young, straight and gay,
weak and strong, rich and poor—
welcoming all who long for a safe haven in your love.
Amen.*

—Ruth C. Linscheid
Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns
Worship Service, 28 July 1995
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Love your Enemies

*From a hidden place,
unite with your enemies from the
inside
fill the inner void that makes them
swell outwardly and fall
out of rhythm: instead of
progressing, step by step,
they stop and start harshly,
out of time with you.*

*Bring yourself back into rhythm
within.*

*Find the movement that mates
with theirs—
like two lovers creating life from
dust.*

*Do this work in secret, so they
don't know.*

*This kind of love creates, it doesn't
emote.*

—Neil Douglas-Klotz
*Prayers of the Cosmos:
Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*
San Francisco: Harper, 1990, p. 84
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On Your Own

Read Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's chapter 12 on "Building Bridges between Interpretive Communities" in *Sensuous Spirituality*. List her principles and explore ways that you can implement them.



Focused Reading

Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey. *Sensuous Spirituality*, ch. 12 on building bridges between interpretive communities.

Morrison, Melanie. *The Grace of Coming Home*, pp. 144-45 on justice and love.



Appendix A

Doing Least Harm An Ethical Standard and Five Relational Guidelines

Marie M. Fortune

The basic ethical guideline for making sexual or other relational ethical decisions for Fortune is “doing least harm.” Her values for “doing least harm” are reflected in the following five relational guidelines:

Peer Relationships: *Is my choice of intimate partner a peer, i.e. someone whose power is relatively equal to mine? We must limit our sexual interaction to our peers. Some people are off limits for our sexual interests.*

Authentic Consent: *Are both my partner and I authentically consenting to our sexual interaction? Both of us must have information, awareness, equal power, and the option to say “no” without being punished, as well as the option to say “yes.”*

Stewardship of Sexuality: *Do I take responsibility for protecting myself and my partner against sexually transmitted diseases and to insure reproductive choice? This is a question of stewardship (the wise care for, and management of, the gift of sexuality) and anticipating the literal consequences of our actions. Taking this responsibility seriously presupposes a relationship: knowing someone over time and sharing a history in which trust can develop.*

Sharing of Pleasure: *Am I committed to sharing sexual pleasure and intimacy in my relationship? My concern should be both for my own needs and those of my partner.*

Faithfulness: *Am I faithful to my promises and commitments? Whatever the nature of a commitment to one’s partner and whatever the duration of that commitment, fidelity requires honesty and the keeping of promises. Change in an individual may require a change in the commitment, which hopefully can be achieved through open and honest communication.*

—Marie M. Fortune

Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us

New York: Continuum, 1995, based on pp. 33-39

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Where Do You Stand?

Appendix B

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Directions: Read all the statements through and then choose the one that most nearly describes your attitudes and understandings right now. Circle your choice on the scale above.

1. Homosexuality is a “crime against nature” and a sin. Gays are sick, crazy, immoral, wicked. Anything is justified to change them (ex-gay ministries, prison, therapy, shock treatments). People can be excused for gay-baiting, gay-bashing, or gay-killing. They should not be expected to enforce various affirmative policies regarding jobs, housing, military, ordination, custody, or adoption of children, etc.
2. Heterosexuality, as God’s plan, is more mature and certainly to be preferred. Any possibility of becoming heterosexual (or living as a heterosexual) should be reinforced. Those who seem to be born “that way” are to be pitied, “the poor dears.”
3. Homosexuality is just a phase of adolescent development that many people go through and most people “grow out of.” Thus, lesbian women/gay men are less mature than heterosexual persons and should be treated with the protectiveness and indulgence one uses with a child. Gay men and lesbian women should not be given positions of authority (because they are still working through adolescent behaviors).
4. Gay men and lesbian women are to be accepted, as in “You’re not a Gay to me, you’re a person.” Or “What you do in bed is your own business.” Or “That’s fine as long as you don’t flaunt it.”
5. Gay men and lesbian women deserve to have their civil rights protected, even though I may be uncomfortable about their life-styles. The irrationality, fear, and hatred in this country about homosexuality is inexcusable.
6. Being gay/lesbian in our society takes strength, whether a person is in or out of the closet. I am aware that I’m homophobic and that I need to work on my own understandings and attitudes.
7. The diversity of people is a valuable thing. Gay men and lesbian women are a valid part of that diversity. Therefore, I am involved in combating homophobia in myself and in others.
8. Gay and lesbian people are indispensable in society and the church. They have valuable gifts to offer all of us. I have deep affection for particular gay and lesbian persons and I delight in their individuality and their gifts. I work as a lesbian and gay advocate in society and in the church.

Based on the Homophobia Scale developed by psychologist Dr. Dorothy Riddle, Tucson, Arizona. Original scale, not copyrighted. Adapted by Dr. Mary Jo Osterman, 1991 and 1996 to reflect religious attitudes also. This page may be photocopied without permission as long as the credits above are retained.

Appendix C

Abbreviations

B.C.E.	Before Common Era; replaces B.C.
C.E.	Common Era; replaces A.D.
HBC	Harper's Bible Commentary
HBD	Harper's Bible Dictionary
HCSB	HarperCollins Study Bible
KJV	King James Version
NEB	New English Bible
NIB	New Interpreter's Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NOAB	New Oxford Annotated (Study) Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
WBC	Women's Bible Commentary

Abomination: something contrary to proper religion, such as improper ways of worshipping God or unclean things or practices. In Jewish law, non-Jewish behavior.

Annotations: numbered items at the bottom of a study Bible page; the interpreter's views (e.g., in *HCSB*, Victor Furnish wrote annotations for 1 Corinthians; Richard Hays, for Galatians).

Apocrypha: books or portions of books not included in Hebrew scripture, but found in early Christian versions of the Old Testament.

Bibliolatry: an act of idolizing or worshipping the Bible as God's Word, frozen in time.

Bisexuality: a sexual orientation; part of one's sexual identity with capacity to be attracted to either sex. Preferred language is "bisexual persons," not "bisexuals." **Bisexual behavior** can be monogamous, serially monogamous, open relationship, totally uncommitted, dual commitment relationships. Involves the same need for ethical decision making as do heterosexual or homosexual relationships.

Deuterocanonical: books or portions of books of the Old Testament found in the Greek Septuagint translation but not in the Hebrew canon; accepted by Roman Catholic and orthodox communions, but not by reformation churches.

Ethical discernment: a particular process, based on one's values; involves considering options and consequences of sometimes complex choices in an intimate relationship, sexual or otherwise.

Ethics: a basic principle or a set of principles and relational guidelines which guide moral decision making (discernment-based ethics); a set of rules to follow (rules-based ethics); a flexible decision-making process (situation-based ethics).

Family: persons related by biology, marriage, or adoption—and those with whom one chooses to live in a committed relationship of some kind.

Gay man: one who self-identifies as attracted to men.

Glossary

Gender identity: a component of sexual identity; our basic conception of ourselves as being either male or female; includes "transgendered" and "transsexual" persons (whose gender identities somehow do not match their biological sex or their assigned gender role and who "cross-dress" or seek surgery to change gender).

Gender role: a component of sexual identity; social and cultural expectations that persons of one gender are expected to fulfill.

Gentile: from Latin, *gens*, for nation, tribe, clan, a certain people; referred originally to the seven nations (*goyim*) that inhabited Canaan when the Israelites moved in; later, any non-Jew (*goy*) or non-Jewish nation.

God's Word: God's liberating, saving message, spoken through the words of the Bible as well as through the lives and actions of prophets, church leaders through the ages, and contemporary prophets. For Christians, most perfectly expressed through the Christ-event—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Heir apparent: legally, an heir who cannot be deprived of the right of inheritance if he or she survives an ancestor.

Heterosexuality: a sexual orientation, part of one's sexual identity; being attracted toward the other sex in one's sexual desires. **Heterosexual behavior** can be monogamous, serially monogamous, open relationship, totally uncommitted. Involves the same need for ethical decision making as do heterosexual or bisexual relationships.

Homosexuality: a sexual orientation, part of one's sexual identity; being attracted to the same sex in one's sexual desires. **Homosexual behavior** can be monogamous, serially monogamous, open relationship, totally uncommitted. Involves the same need for ethical decision making as do heterosexual or bisexual relationships.

Idolatry: the worship of human-made images of God; a primary commitment to something or someone other than God (and neighbor).

Kindom: the all-inclusive family or realm of God; an inclusive term used by many for *kingdom*; omits sexist (king) and classist (royalty) implications; emphasizes "common kinship with God and one another."

Justice-love: an attribute/action of God: God is just, God is love; an attribute/action God requires of us: focus on the poor and needy; right social inequalities; put an end to situations that produce or continue unjust actions; "be new creations."

Lesbian woman: one who self-identifies as attracted to women.

Lust: intense or unrestrained craving or obsessive desire, especially one that is sexual.

Moral agency: a human capacity to make moral choices and then to act on them. Adult men and women are considered to be moral agents.

Pharisees: learned, well-respected laypeople, not clergy, who opposed the strict written interpretation of Torah of the priestly Sadducees; preferred an oral interpretation of the written Law; lived and worshipped with the people; Jesus' teachings parallel those of the liberal Pharisees—followers of Hillel; conservative Pharisees were followers of the school of Shammai.

Reconciliation: a changed relationship for the better between persons or groups who formerly were enemies or at odds with each other. **Reconcile:** to move toward a healing relationship.

Sexual identity: the basic sexual make-up of a person; involves three separate yet interrelated components: gender identity, gender role, and sexual orientation.¹

Sexual orientation: a component of sexual identity; indicates to what degree we are potentially sexually attracted to the same sex or the other sex; implies affectional orientation; for some, a wholistic way of "being."

Sexual preference: sometimes used to indicate one has a "choice" rather than an orientation; often used narrowly and negatively to refer to person's same-sex activities, rarely to describe other-sex choices; offensive, especially if used instead of "sexual orientation" to deny genetic or biological factors of sexual attraction.

Sodomy/sodomite: anal sex, heterosexual or homosexual; often applied only to male-male sex; an unfortunate word coined from the Sodom story in Genesis; *KJV* translates a Hebrew word which some scholars believe meant male temple prostitutes, although the accuracy of that is in dispute; first used in English in 1297.²

Syncretism: the partial combining of differing systems of belief which results in a heterogeneous product or diverse culture.

World-view: a broad perspective from which one sees and interprets; a collection of beliefs, customs, and assumptions about life and the universe held by an individual or a group; dominant world-view involves power and decision-making ability.

Notes

¹Mollenkott, quoting Green, *Neighbor*, rev. ed., pp. 111-12.

²*Oxford English Dictionary*.

