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Homosexuality, Scripture, and the Body of Christ



Michael D. Williams

In an article entitled "Homosexuality and the Old Testament" (1983), Michael Ukleja claimed that "only towering cynicism can pretend that there is any doubt about what the Scriptures say about homosexuality." It is patently clear, Ukleja concluded, that the Bible condemns homosexuality. While this position generally represents the majority of the Christian scholarly community, the consensus that Scripture bans and condemns homosexuality has come under attack during the past decade or so. This is due to the rise of a revisionist movement that has

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attempted either to give approval to homosexuality (orientation as well as behavior) on the basis of Scripture, or to suggest that Scripture is silent on or irrelevant to the issue of homosexuality. The latter suggestion—that Scripture does not provide us with normative insight in regard to homosexuality—is the more unfortunate of the two tactics because the net result is one that undermines the Christian community's confidence in Scripture to speak authoritatively on the issue of human sexuality or any other topic.

To read the inscripturated Word of God passionately, believingly, and open to its transforming message is good; in fact, it's the necessary starting point for a faithful encounter with the text. But more needs to be said than this. As evangelicals, we in the Reformed tradition have plenty of good terms that define the nature of biblical authority. The Bible is the inspired Word of God. It is faithful and reliable in its intended purpose of proclaiming the redemptive message of God centered in Jesus Christ. As the all-sufficient redemptive word of God, the Bible is perspicuous, that is to say, clear, in its presentation of that message. While such phrases get at the nature of biblical authority, and they inform an appropriate heart-stance toward the text, they say almost nothing about *how* we can be confident that our interpretation of the Bible is correct. The main purpose of this essay is to discuss the biblical attitude toward homosexuality. But along the way I will point out ways that homosexual hermeneutics has imposed an agenda upon the biblical text, in the hope that it will help us become a bit more confident in our reading of Scripture.

Before we proceed, something of a caveat. I do not believe that there is anything wrong per se with

questioning traditional interpretations. In fact, I would contend that without constant reappraisal the traditional becomes traditionalism. It is true that reappraisal opens one up to the possibility of revision, but it also opens the door to reaffirmation, and the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Our consideration of the biblical attitude toward homosexuality will center around Paul's argument in Romans 1, a text that has long been assumed to constitute the *locus classicus*, the sum of biblical teaching on the subject. The popular notion seems to be that if Romans 1 is upheld as condemning homosexuality, then homosexuality must be condemned by the Christian community. Conversely, and this makes far less sense to me, it is assumed that if Romans 1 can be interpreted in any other way than condemning homosexuality, then there is no biblical argument against it.

What is often missed here is that Romans 1 is not the sole biblical text relevant to the issue. Paul's argument in that text stands upon, and indeed derives its force from, attitudes toward homosexual activity that are to be found in the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism.

The Old Testament Background for Paul's Argument in Romans 1

The first reference to homosexuality in Scripture is found in Gen 19, the story of Lot and the angelic visitors. The story of Gibeah in Judges 19 provides a parallel. Two angels are sent to Sodom to investigate the outcry against the sins of Gomorrah and the city in which Lot is residing, Sodom (Gen 18:20-22). Lot received the angels into his house, and that evening men surrounded the house and demanded to see his visitors: "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out that we may know them" (19:5). The meaning of this text is plain enough. The men of Sodom are demanding that Lot release his visitors in order that the men may sexually abuse them.

Yet, in *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, D.S. Bailey argues that the crowd was seeking only to make the acquaintance of Lot's guests—or more precisely in Bailey's argument, to check the credentials of these foreigners, an act that violated the hospitality of Lot's house. Bailey notes that the Hebrew verb *yada* carries the explicit idea of sexual relations only some 10 to 15 times of its 943 occurrences in the Old Testament. The more

usual meaning of the word is "to get acquainted with" or "to have knowledge of." While Bailey's count of *yada* as referring to sexual relations is undoubtedly low, in general terms he is correct. The verb *yada* is an extremely common word, and its usual denotation is "to know." How does one word do double duty for such diverse meanings as "to know" and "to have sexual relations?" By the Hebrew association of both knowledge and sexuality with intimacy. Intimacy is the key to both in the Old Testament. The KJV of Gen 4:1 reads "And Adam knew Eve his wife." The NIV renders it "Adam lay with his wife." The idea is that Adam and Eve were nakedly intimate, as the next phrase makes clear (she

The suggestion that Scripture does not provide us with normative insight in regard to homosexuality undermines the Christian community's confidence in Scripture.

conceived). The book of Hosea capitalizes upon *yada*'s semantic richness in its use of Hosea's intimacy with his wife (and lack of it) as an analogue of Yahweh's intimacy with his covenant people Israel, and in the process tells us something about the biblical understanding of the knowledge of God.

But this does not directly help us with Gen 19. Which denotation of *yada* is appropriate in this text? Bailey's interpretation suggests that the story of the angelic visitors is not about homosexuality but hospitality; thus it is irrelevant to the subject. John Jefferson Davis (*Evangelical Ethics*) points out that this has become something of a stock homosexual approach toward this text. Bailey has allowed a word count rather than context decide the meaning of *yada* in Gen 19:5—and a very advantageous word count at that. It is instructive to note that *yada* appears 12 times in Genesis, 10 of which refer to sexual intercourse. Have I myself just engaged in a word count and used it as a clue to meaning? Yes, but I've done so purposefully in order to make a couple of comments regarding hermeneutics.

First, the decisive determination of a particular word's denotation is made by its use in a given context. Words have meanings, but only within contexts.

Think of the English word "bar." What different meanings can it convey? One can eat a candy bar as he or she is barring a door. A legal neophyte passes the bar and then celebrates by going to a bar. Context is the key to meaning.

Second (and this one is a bit more technical than the last), when immediate context fails—and sometimes it does—, when a word or phrase is capable of ambiguous interpretations, the reader must look for meaning clues in progressively more remote contexts. One might say that that is what Bailey is doing; and he is. The problem is that he has jumped immediately to the most remote context before exhausting more approximate contexts. If the immediate context of a word or phrase is ambiguous, one then moves to other occurrences within the next larger context, the book—hence our comment regarding the occurrences of *yada* in Genesis. If still ambiguous, the interpreter must look at other books written by the same author, then books of similar vintage and genre, and so on until one finally arrives at the least remote context necessary. In his reply to Bailey, Derek Kidner (*Genesis*) notes that statistical approaches to word meaning militate against the rarer sense of a word as a possibility. Yet sometimes the denotation is other than the more usual sense.

In the case of Gen 19, however, word countings and remote contexts are equally beside the point. The context of the angelic visitation and its set up in chapter 18 make it clear that a homosexual relationship is the only possible understanding of the text; that is to say, the men of Sodom were demanding that Lot's visitors be turned over to them in order that they might engage in homosexual acts. Desperately seeking to keep the men of Sodom from "knowing" his visitors, Lot says to the townsmen: "Don't do this wicked thing. Look I have two daughters who have never slept (*yada*) with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them." When the LORD sends the angelic investigators to Sodom he speaks of the grievous sin of the inhabitants of that city. Is it not clear that Lot was offering his virgin daughters as a sexual substitute to those who were demanding to have sexual relations with Lot's visitors? Is it not the behavior that is named after that city that supplies the example of the grievous sin referred to in 18:20? The NIV rendering of Gen 19:5 is appropriate to the only possible sense of the passage:

"Bring them out to us *that we can have sex with them.*"

Christian and Jewish commentators alike have seen this text as a clear reference to homosexuality. Bailey's attempt to dismiss Gen 19 from the discussion is unwarranted and self-serving for homosexual hermeneutics. Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, wrote that the men of Sodom "lusted after one another, doing unseemly things, and not regarding or respecting their common nature . . . the men became accustomed to be treated like women" (*On Abraham*). The writer of the book of Jude noted that "Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion" (v 7).

The Jewish and Christian reaction to sodomy as a perversion, a pagan abomination, is consistent with the Old Testament law. The Mosaic legislation brands sodomy as particularly heinous. "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (Lev 18:22). Homosexual intercourse was grouped with incest and bestiality, and carried the capital penalty: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination (something detestable and hated by God); they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them" (Lev 20:13).

Some have suggested that what is in view here and elsewhere in the biblical condemnation of homosexual activity is actually the ritual prostitution that was common in the ancient Near Eastern fertility religions such as Baalism. Thus it is a cultic rather than a moral matter under consideration. That argument, however, is clearly untenable in that the prohibition appears with others of a clearly moral nature, and that Leviticus places no conditions upon the condemnation.

In an article in the *Des Moines Register* in 1990 ("What the Bible Says About Homosexuality"), Martha Reineke admitted that homosexuality is condemned by the Old Testament Holiness Code (Lev 17-26), but dismisses the entire contents of the Levitical legislation on the grounds that the Old Testament case law has been rendered obsolete under the terms of the New Covenant. In other words, the Old Testament law stands for Christians as dead Jewish law. Again, the intent is to declare the biblical materials irrelevant to the issue of homosexuality. Reineke cites examples from the code which show that she conveniently misses the

distinction between cultic instruction and moral imperative. The homosexual condemnation is grouped with injunctions against eating pork and wearing garments made of blended fibers and instructions about shaving one's beard. The Holiness Code consisted of instructions for the maintenance of purity in the communal life of Israel. Reineke's examples are taken from the purely cultic arena, instruction that was designed to make Israel visibly peculiar from her neighbors, and thus socially help to protect her unique relationship to Yahweh. But there is more to the Code than cultic instruction. The legislation of Leviticus also includes case applications of the moral law codified in the 10 Commandments. And the condemnation against homosexuality in 18:22 is found within such a context. Immediately prior to the ban on sodomy we find condemnations of sexual relations with a neighbor's spouse (v.20) and the sacrifice of children to the pagan god Molech (v.21). Immediately following the ban on sodomy we see a condemnation of bestiality (v.23). Following Reineke's logic, are we to assume that these also are merely cultic instructions of a bygone Hebrew dispensation? Once again, context is run over roughshod in the press to affirm homosexuality.

The Old Testament condemnation of homosexuality was so strong that by intertestamental times it was a sin that was seen by the rabbis as being very rare in Israel. Indeed sodomy came to be associated with a paganism that was identified as characteristic of Israel's heathen neighbors. One talmudic tractate prohibited leaving animals in the care of Gentiles, because they "frequent their neighbor's wives, and should one by chance not find her in, and find the cattle there, he might use it immorally" (cited in Davis).

The New Testament contains prohibitions against homosexuality in three places: Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10. Both the Corinthian text and that of 1 Timothy include prohibitions against homosexuality within vice lists (which Paul often used to illustrate the kind of behavior or disposition that he is condemning). The relevant portion of 1 Cor 6:9 reads: "Don't you know that . . . no sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes (*malakoi*) nor homosexual offenders (*arsenokoitai*) . . . will inherit the kingdom of God?" The vice list of 1 Tim 1:10 condemns adulterers and pervers (*arsenokoitai*).

Homosexual hermeneutics has produced a fair amount of debate regarding the meaning of the words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. Reineke suggests that the proper meaning of *arsenokoitos* is "pederast," a male who has sex with a boy. Based upon a few classical Greek uses of the term to refer to pederasty, R. Scroggs (*The New Testament and Homosexuality*) goes so far as to say that Paul "must have had, could only have had, pederasty in mind." What Scroggs chooses to overlook is that Paul is most likely using the term on the basis of the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament) of Lev 18:22 and 20:13, where homosexuality generally without any pederasty qualifier is in view. Paul is an Hebraicist, not a

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Greek. His primary confessional source is the Old Testament. In terms of the Leviticus texts, there is absolutely no reason to come to Reineke's and Scroggs' conclusion. Again, homosexual hermeneutics breaks the guidelines of context (in terms of our second comment). The Septuagint is contextually closer to the text of the New Testament than is classical Greek literature. Most of the authors of the New Testament were devout Jews before becoming Christians. This is especially true of Paul, "a Hebrew of the Hebrews." His primary frame of reference was the Old Testament Scriptures.

Even though both *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* are fairly rare words in the New Testament (the latter word appears only twice), based upon the Old Testament attitude toward homosexuality and the bridge between the two texts (1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10) and the levitical legislation via the Septuagint use of *arsenokoitai*, there is no sound reason to disagree with the entries in Louw and Nida (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*). They suggest that *arsenokoitai* appears to refer to the active partner in the homosexual act, the sodomist, and *malakoi* refers to the passive partner, the receiver to the sodomy. No conditions, not rape, cult prostitution, or pederasty, appear to qualify Paul's condemnation of homosexuality in either 1 Cor 6:9 or 1 Tim 1:10.

This debate about the meaning of words in abstraction from contexts provides occasion for one

further hermeneutical comment. While word studies can be valuable, they are often poorly done, and even more poorly applied. They are all too often convenient ways of proving exactly what one wishes to prove. If there is a hermeneutical rule regarding word studies, it is that they need to be done, used, and accepted with caution. One must remember that the exegete does not come to the word study as a neutral investigator. He brings his confessional and theological prejudices with him, and those biases often shape his findings more than he allows his encounter with the text to shape his commitments. While there are many ways to abuse the word study, the particular error that we see in Scroggs' pederast interpretation of *arsenokoitai* is that he has rigged his study by jumping past the Septuagint's use of the word to get to classical occurrences of the word that seem to agree with his commitments.

Romans 1

Self-serving uses of the word study have made Romans 1 equally problematic. The debate has revolved around the word "nature" (*physis*) in vv.26-27. J. Boswell (*Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*) argues that the word means "what is natural to me." Thus Paul is not referring to those whose primary orientation is homosexual. According to Boswell, Paul is condemning heterosexuals acting as homosexuals in the context of either unwanton lust or ritual prostitution. *Physis* lacks a Hebrew equivalent since "the Jews referred all existing things to creation or to the Creator God, and the OT is primarily concerned with history, not philosophy and speculation" (James DeYoung, "The Meaning of 'Nature' in Romans 1"). DeYoung was unable to substantiate Boswell's "what is natural to me" meaning of *physis* from extra-biblical sources. Upon looking at intertestamental Apocrypha and pseudepigraphical literature DeYoung concluded that where *physis* is used in reference to sexuality, it clearly condemns homosexuality. Both Philo and Josephus (contemporaries of the New Testament) used the word in reference to sexuality; both call up the ghost of Sodom, and both condemn homosexuality in whatever form it takes.

A relevant text comes to us from the pseudepigraphic Testament of Naphtali. After affirming that God has "made all things good in their order," the author notes that Gentiles "have forsaken the Lord and changed their order." Then he writes

But you shall not be so, my children, recognizing in the firmament, in the earth, and in the sea, and in all created things, the Lord who made all things, that you become not as Sodom, which changed the order of nature (*physis*). In like manner the Watchers also changed the order of their nature, whom the Lord cursed at the flood, on whose account he made the earth without inhabitants and fruitless.

The author of the Testament of Naphtali is obviously using a creation order argument as a condemnation of homosexuality.

The general consensus of New Testament exegetes is that *physis*, both in its Pauline use and its use by other New Testament writers, refers to an appropriateness, usually a creational appropriateness. What is according to nature (*kata physin*) is then that which is in accordance with the intention of the Creator, and what is against nature (*para physin*) is that which is contrary to the intention of the Creator. C.E.B. Cranfield (*Romans*) speaks of *kata physin* as it is used in Romans as "the very way God has made us." Similarly, John Stott (*Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*) concludes that Paul's use of *physis* in Romans 1 refers to "the natural order of things which God has established." It is to be admitted that the word *physis* is more slippery than I have indicated. DeYoung notes no less that eight different denotations within the word's semantic range. Yet the context seems to substantiate a "creation order" understanding of *physis* in Romans 1. Note how the Creator and the creation immediately precede in the context (vv.19-23). From the context there does not appear to be any sound reason to suggest that what we are looking at is anything other than a creation order "which men have no excuse for failing to recognize and respect" (Cranfield).

We have already mentioned Scroggs' pederasty argument. Romans 1 has also been read as referring to this behavior. This makes no sense whatsoever in the context of Romans 1. Listen again to v.27: "leaving the natural use of the female...males with males committing indecent acts." Paul does not say "men with boys." Whether one takes *physis* in v.27 as referring to creation order (I think the context leans heavily in this direction) or merely as customary behavior, the sense is clear. Heterosexual behavior is ignored for the sake of homosexual expressions of sexuality. Further, Paul compares

("likewise") lesbianism with male perversion. As lesbianism was most often between adults in mutuality, so the force of the comparative argues for adult-adult mutuality.

But we must deal with this "mutuality" idea further. It is typical of the homosexual argument to say that Paul knew nothing of male-male mutuality, long term, committed sexual relationship and that the only patterns known to him were those of pederasty, cult prostitution, and hedonistic promiscuity. Since Paul nowhere addresses "the caring adult relationship of mutuality" his argument against homosexuality in Romans 1 is irrelevant to the modern situation (Scroggs). In reply, it must be said that there simply is no evidence for this suggestion. It is all very convenient supposition. It is merely assumed that mutuality is more common today than it was then. Even if male-male mutuality was rare in antiquity, so what? What makes mutuality (long term loving commitment) the determining criterion for appropriate sexual relationship? One could just as legitimately argue, it seems to me, for a mutuality model within incest, polygamy, polyandry, or adultery. As long as permanency and mutual consent characterize the relationship, it is good.

The net effect of homosexual-revisionist interpretation, lexical fiddling, and unreliable word study comes to this conclusion: the biblical prohibitions are not at all against homosexuality. Rather, they are against violations of hospitality (Genesis 19 and Judges 19), cultic taboos (Leviticus 18), male prostitution and defilement of the young (1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1), and lustful promiscuity (Romans 1). None of these passages even alludes to, much less condemns, a loving, mutually committed homosexual partnership.

One must also remember, allege homosexual protagonists, that the biblical writers were ignorant of the modern distinction between "inverts" (those who are homosexual by orientation) and "perverts" (those who are heterosexual by orientation but engage in homosexual practices). It is the latter Scripture is condemning, so goes the argument, not the former (Scanlon and Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?*). Thus Norman Pittenger (*Time for Consent*) argues that homosexuality is "natural" and "normal" for the homosexual invert. The line that often accompanies this notion for the homosexual Christian is "God created me this way, and he only makes that which is good."

This is where the context of Paul's statement in Romans 1:26-27 becomes crucial. James Dunn (*Romans*) contends that there is an "obviously deliberate echo of the Adam narratives (Gen 2-3) in vv 19- 25." The wrath of God is being revealed against those who have deviated from creation norms. It was Adam who gave up his knowledge of God for the sake of an idolization of the creaturely. The Bible is not without a norm for sexual relationships, and it's a norm that argues against all deviations from it as well as against those who want to dismiss the biblical prohibition against homosexuality as culturally irrelevant due to an alleged ignorance of the distinction between inverts and

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perverts. God met Adam's need for companionship by way of sexual differentiation and the institution of heterosexual marriage. John Stott nicely sums up the Genesis norm:

Scripture defines the marriage God instituted in terms of heterosexual monogamy. It is the union of one man with one woman, which must be publicly acknowledged (the leaving of parents), permanently sealed (he will 'cleave to his wife') and physically consummated ('one flesh'). And Scripture envisages no other kind of marriage or sexual intercourse, for God provided no alternative.

The biological complementarity of male and female sexual organs joins the Genesis account of God's norm for human sexuality in a unified creational argument against homosexuality as "normal" or "natural." I find no reason to disagree with Stott's conclusion:

The reason for the biblical prohibitions is the same reason why modern loving homosexual partnerships must also be condemned, namely that they are incompatible with God's created order. And since that order (heterosexual monogamy) was established by creation, not culture, its validity is both permanent and universal. There can be no 'liberation' from God's created norms; true liberation is found only in accepting them.

The stream of phrases in Romans 1, 1 Corinthians

6, and 1 Timothy 1 makes Paul's attitude toward homosexuality quite clear. He calls it a *degrading passion*, an *indecent act*, an *error*, the product of a *depraved mind*, and even *worthy of death*. In light of the creation context of Romans 1, it is quite evident that homosexuality *per se* is contrary to the will of God for Paul. Homosexual activity is inexcusable, because men are sinning against the light of creation (1:18-20; 2:14-15). They instinctively realize—with an awareness that they repress (1:18)—that such conduct is contrary to the will of God. In Romans 1, homosexuality is seen not merely as a violation of some sectarian code, but as a transgression of the basic law of God known in all cultures.

The condemnation against homosexual activity is universal and absolute throughout the biblical record. It is never contemplated that one specific form of homosexuality is condemned while others are tolerated or accepted. Paul, like the rest of Scripture, affirms only a monogamous, heterosexual relationship as the only appropriate form of sexual expression.

Paul's Argument in Romans

Notwithstanding all that we have said regarding the biblical ban against homosexual activity, the condemnation of homosexuality does not appear to be Paul's intent in Romans. To take Rom 1:26-27 as a proof-text against homosexuality does an injustice to what Paul is saying. While I would stop just short of saying that proof-texting Rom 1:26-27 is wrong, I think Paul would respond to it by saying something like this: "Yes, but you've missed my point." Conservative Christians have traditionally taken the text as one that compels them to call down the wrath of God against homosexuality. That "calling down of divine wrath" is precisely the sin that Paul is here condemning!

Paul is not seeking to indict some classes of men for their sin, but all classes, all people, because all are sinners and thus deserving of the wrath of God. He is writing to condemn any Jewish overconfidence in God's favor for and obligation to Israel. He opens up that theme by making it plain that all people, ethnic and religious heritage notwithstanding, are sinners and therefore in need of God's redemptive grace in Jesus Christ. "The principal focus of Paul's critique," writes James Dunn in his excellent study of Romans, "is Jewish self-assurance that the typically Jewish indictment of Gentile sin (1:18-32)

is not applicable to the covenant people themselves (2:1-3:20)." Thus: "There is no one righteous, not even one" (3:10).

Verses 16-17 of the first chapter of Romans are programmatic for the whole book:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "the righteous will live by faith."

In the light of the gospel there is no question of men's being righteous before God otherwise than by faith. All are under the judgment of sin and death. We have all fallen from our original estate in righteousness. That's the point of Rom 1:18-25. In fact, Dunn suggests that verse 18 functions as a heading for this entire section of the epistle. What we have then in 1:18-3:20 is a summary of human failure under the general heading of *adikia* (unrighteousness).

Paul's indictment of human wickedness focuses on man as such. Even though God's creational word sounds in our ears, we pervert it in our rebellion from God, the order of creation, and our proper relationships with one another. The ploy that Paul uses to arrive at this universal indictment of man under the law and without grace is an us-versus-them argument. He begins with the Gentile "them" over against the Jewish "us" in 1:18-32. The Gentile sins against the truth of God (vv 22-24), against nature (vv 25-27), and against others (vv 28-32). Hendrik Hart ("Romans Revisited") is correct when he says that Paul is employing the standard Jewish polemic against Gentile idolatry. Paul's intent is to characterize human unrighteousness from a Jewish perspective. The Jewish abhorrence of Gentile idolatry and the degradation of Gentile sexual ethics are part of the vicious circle of human sin—failure to acknowledge God leads to a corrupt self-understanding and degenerate behavior.

Paul's Christian audience in Rome, Gentile as well as Jewish would be sympathetic to the traditional Jewish understanding of the abomination of homosexuality and the Jewish opinion of all Gentiles as sexual perverts. As Dunn puts it: "indeed it was no doubt precisely this tighter ethical discipline which had previously helped attract many of them to the synagogue in the first place." One can almost hear Paul's audience saying "Yes Lord,

those Gentiles are pagans. Judge them Lord. Let them have it!" The Gentiles (the pagans) are not only sexual perverts, but they are also slanderers, God-haters, insolent, and arrogant. They are full of pride, malice, envy, and murders (vv 28-32). All in all, they are not the sort of people you would invite to church or have over for Sunday dinner.

By the time Paul's audience heard the words of 2:1ff it became clear that he had set a trap for them (a good reason to ignore chapter divisions). He switches from speaking in the third person plural "they," swinging around, as it were, to speak in the second person singular "you," my hearer. The hook had been baited in 1:18-32, and now it is set with the words "You, therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgment . . . because you . . . do the same things." Who are you to condemn anyone, you sinner? The net of unrighteousness catches the Jew as surely as it does the Gentile—or in more modern terms—the devout Bible believer as surely as it does the pagan. Dunn catches the moment well:

Paul's onlooker is presumably one who listens to the polemic of 1:18-32 and heartily joins in its condemnation of idolatry, homosexual practice, and the rest. Such a one would feel safe in passing judgment on "the other," either because he thought himself free of such vices, or because he thought the attack was directed against others and not himself. This silent onlooker is envisaged then as striking a judgmental pose either thoughtlessly or as one who presumes himself exempt from such criticism. Paul's rhetorical tactic is designed to expose the self-deceitfulness of such a pose.

This kind of rhetorical trap is not unknown in Scripture. Two well-known examples come immediately to mind. Nathan's rebuke of David's sin with Bathsheba takes just this form in 2 Samuel 12. When David hears of the rich man who refuses to butcher a sheep from his own vast herd to feed a visitor to his home, but instead butchers the only sheep of a poor farmer to feed his guest, David "burned with anger" and condemned the rich man as worthy of death. In Nathan's retort "You are the man," David sees that he has indicted himself. Amos' use of the rhetorical trap (Amos 1-2) is a bit more drawn out, but equally effective. Amos begins his prophecy condemning the sins of the Northern Kingdom's neighbors. With the formula "for three sins of . . . even for four I will not turn back my

wrath" the Lord thunders his judgment against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab—all traditional enemies of Israel. Then the Lord decries the idolatry and lawlessness of Judah. Amos's northern audience is cheering throughout the declaration of judgment, apparently oblivious that it is moving ever closer to Israel, until 2:6: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath." Whenever I read the opening chapters of Amos I can't help but wonder whether Amos' audience was still cheering on the approaching judgment of God when they heard the prophetic word that that judgment was being addressed to them.

Henk Hart has recently suggested that Paul's argu-

*As the body of Christ we
are called to represent
God's mercy and grace
within the world.*

ment in Rom.1:18-32 is not his own position but merely a rhetorical ploy to draw his audience into the trap of 2:1ff. According to Hart, Paul is using a traditional Jewish view in order to turn the tables on them and indict their own censorious and self-righteous spirit. This is but one more example of homosexual hermeneutics attempting to say that the biblical text is irrelevant to the issue of homosexuality. Of course Paul is passing on typical or traditional Jewish conceptions. As Albert Wolters put it in his reply to Hart (*CTJ*): Paul passed on the traditional Jewish view that Yahweh is the Creator of the universe. We must respond to Hart along three lines. There is nothing in the text to suggest that Paul is using an argument with which he personally disagrees. Second, in order for the rhetorical trap to work it must be sincere. That is to say "both speaker and audience would have legitimate cause to feel duped" (Wolters). Thus, the trap works only *if* Paul agrees with the argument. The judgment of God against the nations in Amos 1-2 was true. Nathan's implied condemnation of the rich man was sincere. Third, are we also to assume that Paul disagrees with the traditional Jewish conception of man's rebellion from God (vv 18-24), and that Paul did not honestly believe that fallen humanity devises ever new and hateful ways of oppressing one another (vv 28-31)? The truth-status assigned to vv 25-27 must also be assigned to the rest of the passage as

the three panels fit together as a loose sequential illustration of unrighteousness.

Nathan springs the trap: "You are the man"; Amos: "For three sins of Israel . . . I will not turn back my wrath"; and in similar style Paul: "You, therefore, have no excuse . . . for . . . you do the same things." While Paul is not legitimating homosexual activity, and neither should we, he is saying that we cannot condemn the homosexual, because apart from Christ we are equally under the righteous judgment of the law. Refusing to condemn is not the same as affirming. However strongly we may disagree with homosexual practices, we have no liberty to denigrate the humanity of the homosexual. Paul's point is that grace is the only way to acceptance with God. Grace, not condemnation, is God's solution to sin. Paul is contesting and removing any basis for soteriological boasting. Romans 1 is not about homosexuality but the universal need for God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Homosexuality and the Body of Christ

As the body of Christ we are called to represent God's mercy and grace within the world. A fundamental characteristic of those who are made just by God is the doing of mercy and the sharing of grace—as God has done in Christ to us. Part of that sharing of grace is truth-telling, and when it comes to homosexuality, truth-telling consists not only of proclaiming the redemptive love of God in Jesus Christ, but also declaring God's norms for human sexuality.

It seems to me that Paul's argument in Romans is largely missed by two mutually exclusive positions or groups of persons. On the one side stands an increasingly belligerent Christian gay movement, which says that in order to affirm me as a Christian—to welcome me as a brother or sister in Christ—you must affirm all of me. Just like you, my sexuality emanates from the core of my being, and I am gay. To affirm a gay Christian, one must affirm him or her as not only Christian but gay. Norman Pittenger quotes the revivalist hymn "Just As I Am; Without One Plea" right here. "The whole point of the Christian gospel is that God loves and accepts us just as we are."

On the other side stand a group of people who are equally belligerent: those Christians who believe that gay people are to be ignored as if they do not

exist or else that they are to be condemned and persecuted as perverts, for certainly the kingdom of God is not made up of such damnable and disgusting sinners. The unpleasant, but very real supposition of this second group is that there is a condition upon salvation: heterosexuality. Evidently, God's grace is not sufficient for the homosexual. As a Calvinist, I can't help but suspect that there is something intrinsically Pelagian about the homophobic option.

While both positions display dysfunctional understandings of sin and forgiveness, the second is easier to deal with in the context of Romans, for it is the very thing Paul is condemning. The homosexual has been marginalized within modern evangelicalism. He or she is the modern equivalent of the biblical leper, the untouchable, the unsavable, the unwanted, the despicable "other." The uncomfortable fact for naive, genteel, Bible-believing, go-to-meeting twice on Sunday, heterosexual evangelicals is that Jesus died for lepers.

God's grace is sufficient for all, and it's all that's sufficient. The sole criterion that I can find for acceptance into the body of Christ is redemption in Christ by the power of the gospel administered by the Spirit of God. The fact that we are all sinners saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ disallows any spirit of self-righteousness toward the homosexual believer, or any stance that would result in the shunning or marginalization of believers.

It is increasingly common today to hear those who disapprove of homosexuality called intolerant bigots or homophobics. Under the imperialistic regime of post-modern, politically correct, ideological pluralism, those who affirm the biblical ban against homosexual practices are decried as sexual and lifestyle fascists on almost every television comedy. As I recently heard a young gay college student on The Oprah Winfrey Show: "How could anyone call a loving relationship wrong?" If the word *truth* has any currency left at all in our secularist culture, the true is merely that conception which is passionately held. Sincerity is the sole criterion for truth when individual experience is taken as normative.

We need to realize that we live in a culture characterized by sensitivity, but a sensitivity bounded by no absolutes or fixed certainties. To speak Christianly to that culture about sexuality, the church must also be sensitive, sensitive to and affirming of the divine norms for human sexuality, but also sensitive to sin, both the sin of the homosexual

lifestyle and our own sinful self-righteousness and sexual hypocrisy. Where we have been homophobic we need to seek God's forgiveness. Where we have been arrogant about our own sexual "normalcy," we also need to seek forgiveness, for none of us is truly normal sexually. If we are truly sensitive to our own depravity, if we confess that sin has tainted and twisted this area of our lives that is so central to our nature, we will realize that we have no right to set ourselves up as moral superior to our homosexual brothers and sisters.

And homosexual brothers and sisters do exist in our confessional community. Each of them, as does everyone who belongs to Christ's body, deserves to be understood, accepted, loved, forgiven, trusted, and affirmed. The love command commands love. We are never to belittle, hate, insult, or kill one another by thoughts, words, looks, gestures, nor any other way (Heidelberg Catechism, Q105). As believers, homosexuals are members of Christ's body. They fully belong.

Yes, Scripture condemns homosexuality, in exactly the same way that it condemns pride, parental disobedience, adultery, and gossip. No one who is included in Christ's body is a perfectly sanctified creature. We are people who have the promise of participation in the new creation. While we live by the promise, we are not yet there, none of us. Augustine was right, the body of Christ is not a collection of normal and healthy people, but a hospital for sick souls. That means that until the Lord returns and makes the promise our reality, the body of Christ

will remain a collection of redeemed—and I pray progressively being reformed—tax cheats, alcoholics, wife beaters, child molesters, polluters, prideful persons, gossips and slanderers, self-absorbed careerists, racists, adulterers, sexists, money lovers, slum lords, and homosexuals.

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