

HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE BIBLE:

A Consideration of Pertinent Passages¹

The Rev. Charles D. Myers, Jr., Ph.D.

Homosexuality has been a topic of great discussion and debate in recent years. Legislative and judicial bodies have struggled to define how “equal protection under the law” and “the right to privacy” apply to the homosexual population. Besides the issue of discrimination in employment and housing based on sexual orientation, the legality of same-sex unions and the right of gay and lesbian couples to adopt children have been the subjects of recent legislative action and judicial opinion.

Another body that has grappled with the issue of homosexuality is the body of Christ. The Christian Church has struggled with its own understanding of homosexuality and the implications of its understanding for life in the body of Christ. Attempting to be true to sacred Scripture and long-established practice while at the same time trying to take into account the realities of life in the twenty-first century is no simple task.

Those attempts have not always brought unanimity of opinion. The 2003 consecration of V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church, has created divisions in the Episcopal Church, U.S.A., as well as in the world-wide Anglican Communion. In 2005 the General Synod of the United Church of Christ voted overwhelmingly to recognize same-sex marriages. Although this decision is not binding on local congregations, some churches in the U.C.C. have threatened to withdraw from the denomination because of the General Synod’s action.

Other mainline Protestant denominations have struggled with homosexuality in recent years. In 2004 the General Conference of the United Methodist Church received a report from its Task Force on Homosexuality and the Unity of the Church, which it is currently considering. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Churchwide Assembly will vote in 2005 on a series of recommendations concerning church membership as well as ministry to and ministry by gays and lesbians that result from the Report and Recommendations of the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has been discussing issues related to homosexuality in one way or another since 1976.² The most recent discussions have been taking place within the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, which was created by the 213th General Assembly in 2001.³ Beginning in December of 2001, the twenty members of this Task Force, who were appointed by former General Assembly Moderators Jack Rogers, Syngman Rhee, and Freda Gardner, have worked diligently and prayerfully on a variety of issues that divide Presbyterians, including homosexuality and standards for ordination.

The emotionally-charged topic of homosexuality has not only been the subject of significant debate at the national church level. Laypersons and clergypersons in local churches have been and are continuing to wrestle with this issue as well. Most people have definite

opinions on this subject, and those opinions are often defended with great passion. For the time being, however, I ask the reader to suspend her or his personal feelings in order to look specifically at what the Bible says (and does not say) about the subject.⁴ The impact of the biblical witness on discussions about homosexuality then and now cannot be underestimated, for this topic raises many questions about how the Bible will be read and appropriated by all Christians at the dawn of a new millennium.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Homosexuality is not a prominent concern in the Bible, which may come as a surprise to some Christians. Only a few biblical passages address the particular issue of homosexuality between consenting adults. Only three texts explicitly refer to homosexual behavior between consenting adult males (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:27), and only one text refers to homosexual behavior between consenting females (Romans 1:26). Two additional texts (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10) may refer to persons associated with some type of homosexual conduct, but the exact nature of that conduct is difficult to determine.

Other biblical texts that traditionally have been cited in the discussion about homosexuality actually have little direct bearing on the subject. The most familiar example is the story of Sodom in Genesis 19. At the outset of the story two angelic creatures in the form of men arrive in the city of Sodom, where Lot, the nephew of Abraham, resides. Lot offers these strangers a place to spend the night, but "Before these [visiting] men lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house and they called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we may *know* them'" (Gen. 19:4-5; italics mine).⁵

The Hebrew verb rendered "to know" in Genesis 19:5 means "to have sexual relations with," which is demonstrated by the use of the same verb in Lot's counter-proposal in the following verses:

Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not *known* a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof" (Gen. 19:6-8; italics mine).

Before the Sodomites got their way the two angelic visitors "struck with blindness the [Sodomite] men who were at the door of the house. . .so that they were unable to find the door" (Gen. 19:11). The next morning, after Lot and his relatives had escaped, the LORD utterly destroyed Sodom and all of its inhabitants with fire and brimstone (Gen. 19:24-25).

The story of Sodom in Genesis 19 has commonly been cited to prove that homosexuality provoked divine judgment. In fact, our modern term *sodomy*, which refers to non-coital intercourse and is associated with homosexual behavior, is taken from the name of that ancient "evil" city. But in the Hebrew Scriptures, Sodom's sin was not understood as homosexuality but rather as complacency and social injustice. According to the prophet Ezekiel, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49). Besides, the barbaric sexual act described in the Sodom account is not consensual homosexual relations but attempted gang-rape.

Although Genesis 19 is not applicable to homosexual relations between consenting adults, this account reveals some important aspects of ancient thinking about sexuality. For example, Lot's counter-offer of his two virgin daughters to the men of Sodom discloses more than ancient attitudes about the sacredness of hospitality and the devaluation of women. This generous offer assumes that heterosexual relations could easily be substituted for homosexual acts. That is because in antiquity homosexuality was perceived as different from heterosexuality merely in terms of the quantity of lust. Whereas a normal amount of sexual desire would drive one to a member of the opposite sex, an excessive amount of desire would drive one to a member of the same sex! In the ancient mind, therefore, homosexuality was associated with a super-abundance of unbridled sexual lust.

These same ancient preconceptions are seen in a story in Judges 19 that parallels the story of Genesis 19. Here the men of Gibeah desire "to know" a visiting male Levite (Judges 19:22).⁶ Wishing to protect his visitor, the host instead offers the visitor's concubine to the group of men (Judges 19:24-25). Unlike the Genesis 19 account, however, the men of Gibeah accept the counter-offer and proceed to ravish the woman throughout the night. This instance of actual gang-rape demonstrates that heterosexual sex can be freely substituted for desired homosexual activity. But the story in Judges 19 also illustrates the belief that homosexual behavior results from an over-abundance of sexual desire, for the men of Gibeah are so overcome by lust that they sexually abuse the concubine until she falls down dead on the doorstep of her host's house at daybreak (Judges 19:26).

Other biblical texts that are often cited in the discussion about homosexual behavior include several passages that condemn male cultic prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7). In these texts cultic prostitution is the real issue and not consensual homosexual behavior *per se*. Besides, one cannot be absolutely sure that male cult prostitution involved homosexual relationships. Since these priestly prostitutes were associated with ancient fertility cults, their services may not have included homosexual sex, which does not promote fertility. What is certain, however, is that male cultic prostitution is associated with paganism and idolatry, two practices that are condemned throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and the link between homosexual behavior and idolatry continues on into New Testament times.

To reiterate, then, only a few biblical passages concern homosexual behavior between consenting adults. To these specific texts we now turn our attention in an effort to determine what these passages meant in their ancient literary, historical, and theological contexts and to understand what they might mean to us today.

LEVITICUS 18:22 AND 20:13

Both of these texts from the Book of Leviticus prohibit a man lying with another male "as with a woman." Leviticus 20:13 says that the practice is punishable by death. These texts are part of the Holiness Code found in Leviticus 17-26. The central theme of these chapters is "holiness before the Lord," which meant ritual purity achieved by a complete separation of Israel from her neighbors (see Lev. 18:3). A holy Israel would keep the land, but a sinful Israel would be expelled (see Lev. 18:24-30). Therefore, because disobedience to the moral or ritual Law endangered the future of the entire people, the disobedient person warranted the severest punishment.

The prohibition against homosexual behavior between consenting adults in Leviticus 18:22 comes in the context of prohibitions against incest (Lev. 18:6-18), adultery (Lev. 18:20), child sacrifice (Lev. 18:21), and male and female bestiality (Lev. 18:23). Whoever commits any of these offenses is to "be cut off from among their people" (Lev. 18:29). Leviticus 20 repeats many prohibitions from chapter 18 and adds a few new prohibitions. Again, homosexual behavior between consenting adults is labeled "an abomination," and the punishment for such behavior is specified as death (Lev. 20:13). Homosexual behavior between consenting adults, therefore, was expressly forbidden, and the severity of the punishment demonstrates that homosexual behavior was not taken lightly in ancient Israel.

But one must not ignore the other practices in these chapters that are identified as serious crimes. For example, those who consult a medium or wizard "will be cut off from the people" (Lev. 20:6). Engaging in sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman is considered a grave offense (Lev. 18:19, 20:18), and those who curse their father or mother "shall be put to death" (Lev. 20:9).

This diverse collection of prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20 raises some interpretive questions for the modern reader. Surely some of the sins that are listed in these chapters are still considered grave offenses worthy of severe punishment, such as incest and child sacrifice. Other actions prohibited in Leviticus 18 and 20, such as adultery, bestiality, and cursing one's mother or father, are still viewed negatively but are no longer considered capital crimes. And other actions, such as sex with a menstruating woman and consulting a fortune-teller, are not seen as offensive behavior at all.

The question, then, is how is homosexual behavior between consenting adults to be viewed, based on what is stated in Leviticus 18 and 20? Does homosexual behavior fall under the category of sexual sins that are still considered heinous crimes? Or is homosexuality to be viewed negatively but not seen as a capital offense? Or is homosexuality of the same order as some of the other actions that were understood as grave offenses in the "Holiness Code" but are no longer perceived as offenses at all?

What is apparent from the Hebrew Scriptures is that homosexual behavior among consenting males was not common among Israelites. Nowhere in the historical literature is this practice mentioned. More importantly, prophetic denunciations of Israel's sins do not include homosexual behavior. The result is that among ancient Israelites homosexual behavior was perceived as a "Gentile" phenomenon (see Leviticus 18:24-29).

Homosexual love did in fact occupy a relatively prominent place in Greek social life beginning in the 6th century B.C.E.⁷ *Pederasty*, the love of an older man for a younger, was one of the forms that homosexuality took. Pederasty played an important role in the youth's education,⁸ and it was extolled by philosophers as the purest form of love.⁹

But in the world of the first century C.E., homosexuality was viewed differently. While it was still practiced among some segments of society, moral philosophers were beginning to question its merit. Homosexuality came to be understood as a gross form of *self-indulgence*. Homosexuality was also perceived as essentially *exploitative*, the stronger forcing himself or herself on the weaker. Homosexuality continued to be thought of as an expression of *insatiable lust*. Moreover, homosexuality was seen as a *violation of the natural order*. Since heterosexual intercourse was necessary for procreation, relations with the opposite sex were "natural," whereas relations between same-sex partners were viewed as "unnatural." All of this provides important background for the New Testament perspective on homosexuality.

Like the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament contains very few statements related to homosexual relations between consenting adults. The four canonical gospels are silent on the subject. According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus never spoke about homosexual behavior. Likewise, the Acts of the Apostles contains nothing about homosexuality. The only New Testament verses taken as applying to homosexual practice are in three of the epistles that the Apostle Paul (or his followers) wrote to communities of faith in the eastern Mediterranean world.¹⁰

1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-10

In this passage in 1 Corinthians Paul lists the various "unrighteous" people who will not inherit the kingdom of God. This list occurs during Paul's response to the immorality that he hears is taking place among the Corinthian believers. Paul has learned that a man is having a sexual relationship with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1-13), other believers are suing fellow-believers in pagan courts of law (1 Cor. 6:1-8), and still others, who believe that Christ has set them free to do whatever they desire, are visiting local prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:12-20).

In the context of this discussion Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 unrighteous behavior that will disqualify persons from the kingdom of God. It should be noted that the presence of non-Pauline vocabulary in 6:9-10 (terms such as "kingdom of God" and "inherit," to name two) probably signals Paul's use of a standard piece of oral tradition (see another list in 5:10-11). While the origin of the list is in question, the function of the passage is not. This is a description of the unjustified, untransformed, non-Christian lives of Gentiles. These vices characterized the lives of some of the Corinthians before their conversion and baptism, as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 6:11, and continuing in this style of life is improper for those who profess faith in Christ, even though "all things are lawful for [them]" (1 Cor. 6:12).

What is unclear about 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, however, is the exact meaning of the two Greek terms (marked A and B) in the text that follows:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor [A] *malakoi*, nor [B] *arsenokoitai*, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9-11; my translation).

The first term, *malakoi*, is the plural form of a first-century Greek word that simply means "soft" and is used elsewhere to describe the kind of elegant robe worn by royalty (see Matt. 11:8; Luke 7:25). By extension the term *malakoi*, when applied to persons, means those who are dissolute, debauched, of weak moral fiber.¹¹

The second term, *arsenokoitai*, is not found in any extant Greek text before 1 Corinthians.¹² *Arsenokoitai* appears to be a combination of two Greek terms: *arseno-* meaning "male" or "masculine" and *-koitai* meaning "ones who go to bed with." If this term is understood as "ones who go to bed with males" (with "males" being the object), then this may be a rather literal translation of the Hebrew phrase *mishkav zakur* ("lying with a male") derived from

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13¹³ and, therefore, a reference to homosexual behavior. But the same term may also mean "males who go to bed" (with "males" as the subject) in the sense of male cult prostitutes. This same term is found in a vice list in 1 Timothy 1:10, where its meaning is equally unclear.

The point of this brief linguistic discussion is to point out the ambiguity of the two terms in the original Greek. Some older English translations add to the ambiguity of these terms. The *King James Version* of 1611, for example, is quite unclear at this point. The *KJV* renders the Greek word "soft" as "effeminate" and the Greek "those who lie with men" as "abusers of themselves with mankind," whatever that means!

The 1938 translation of the New Testament by Edgar J. Goodspeed also clouds the issue. Goodspeed's rendering of "soft" as "sensual" greatly broadens the meaning of the original term. His translation of "those who lie with men" as "given to unnatural vice" is not much help either. Does Goodspeed mean to suggest that one would not be excluded from the kingdom of God, if one were only given to *natural* vice? Probably not!

As the following chart indicates, many modern translations go to the other extreme by specifying in English what is not so obvious in the original Greek. By failing to convey the ambiguity of these two terms, some recent translations may confuse or may even mislead the modern reader who is relying solely on the English text.

	[A] <u>malakoi</u> ("soft")	[B] <u>arsenokoitai</u> ("ones who lie with men")
RSV 1 (1946)	-----> homosexuals	<-----
RSV 2 (1971)	-----> sexual perverts	<-----
NRSV (1989)	male prostitutes,	sodomites
NEB (1970)	-----> homosexual perversion	<-----
REB (1989)	-----> sexual pervert	<-----
JB (1966)	catamites,	sodomites
NJB (1985)	self-indulgent,	sodomites
NASB (1963)	effeminate,	homosexuals
Phillips (1972)	effeminate,	pervert
NIV (1978)	male prostitutes,	homosexual offenders
NKJV (1979)	homosexuals,	sodomites
CEV (1995)	a pervert	behaves like a homosexual

The translators of the first edition of the *Revised Standard Version (RSV)* of the New Testament, which was published in 1946, chose to translate the two distinct Greek words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 by the single term "homosexuals" and thereby introduced this modern term into the English Bible. In the 1971 revision of the *RSV* the translators decided to render the two Greek terms by two English words, so they arrived at "sexual perverts." In so doing, however, they lost the exclusively homosexual connotation. After all, are there not some heterosexuals who could be charged with sexual perversion?

In the third edition of the New Testament, which is part of the *New Revised Standard Version Bible (NRSV)*, the terms are now rendered as "male [cult] prostitutes" and "sodomites." While this latest translation is more specific, these new terms are even less explicitly related to homosexual behavior. As noted earlier, male prostitutes are not necessarily homosexuals. And the term "sodomites" is somewhat misleading, for in modern parlance sodomy merely refers to any form of non-vaginal intercourse. Oral and anal intercourse, which constitute sodomy, are not practices limited to homosexuals.

The *New English Bible (NEB)* came out in 1970 with the translation "homosexual perversion." Like the second edition of the *RSV Bible*, the translators of the *NEB* lumped two words together, thereby making it clear to the English reader that these terms refer to "homosexual" activity. But is "homosexual perversion" different from regular homosexual behavior? Is this passage only condemning perverted homosexual behavior, such as homosexual rape? Is it possible to have unperverted homosexual behavior? Again, this translation leaves a lot to be desired. The *Revised English Bible (REB)*, which is the latest version of the *New English Bible*, added further confusion when it followed the lead of the second edition of the *RSV Bible* and adopted the very general phrase "sexual pervert."

The *Jerusalem Bible (JB)* of 1966 uses the terms "catamites" and "sodomites,"¹⁴ which identify the passive (receiving) and the active (giving) partners respectively in a homosexual act, but these terms are not exactly part of the vernacular. The *New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)* of 1985 retains "sodomites" for the second term, but for the first term replaces "catamite," which is a clear reference to homosexual behavior, with "self-indulgent," which may not have anything to do with sexual behavior.

Other modern versions render these terms variously: the *New American Standard Bible (NASB)* uses "effeminate" and "homosexuals," the *J. B. Phillips* paraphrase says "effeminate" and "perverts," the *New International Version (NIV)* reads "male prostitutes" and "homosexual offenders," the *New King James Version (NKJV)* goes back to "homosexuals" and "sodomites," and the *Contemporary English Version (CEV)* contains "a pervert" and "[one who] behaves like a homosexual."

The preceding review demonstrates that Bible translators do not agree among themselves on exactly what is being described by these two Greek terms. Nevertheless, numerous recent translations clarify for the English reader the meaning of two words that are rather unclear in the original language. Depending on the translation consulted, the reader who does not know the language behind the modern English translation can all too easily read 1 Corinthians 6:9 and accept without question the condemnation of homosexuals. But it may be that homosexuality is not even referred to in the original of 1 Corinthians 6:9. This may instead be a reference to debauched individuals and to male cult prostitutes. As a result, 1 Corinthians 6:9 along with 1 Timothy 1:10, two of the three passages in the New Testament that are usually cited as condemning homosexuality, may not even be referring to consensual homosexual behavior.

Whatever the correct translation of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, our understanding of 1 Corinthians 6:9 is badly corrupted by the tendency of most modern readers to single out homosexual behavior in this listing as more sinful than the other behaviors that are also mentioned. Even if one or both of these Greek terms in 1 Corinthians 6:9 relate(s) to homosexual behavior, then it must be realized that homosexuality is not understood as a greater form of sin than the other behaviors in this passage. While the actual meaning of some terms in 1 Corinthians 6:9 may be unclear, one thing is not unclear: here the Apostle Paul does not grade behavior according to degree of sinfulness.

ROMANS 1:26-27

Due to the interpretive difficulties presented by 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10, a more fruitful source of investigation is Romans 1:26-27, which reads:

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error (Romans 1:26-27).

In the course of discussing idolatry among Gentile unbelievers, Paul in Romans 1:26 makes the only reference in the Bible to lesbianism, and in Romans 1:27 the Apostle makes the clearest statement in the New Testament regarding male homosexuality. But in order to understand properly Paul's remarks in Romans 1:26-27 one must see them within the context of Paul's complex argument in Romans 1-3. To a summary of this argument we now turn.

After the salutation (Rom. 1:1-7) and thanksgiving (Rom. 1:8-17), Paul begins his argument with a denunciation of the Gentiles' wickedness. In 1:18-20 Paul states that God has revealed himself so clearly through his creation that Gentiles who do not believe in God are "without excuse." This establishes the culpability of the Gentiles. In 1:21-23 Paul argues that the Gentiles refused to worship the true God and fell instead into idolatry. In 1:24-32 Paul asserts that, because of their idolatrous behavior, God has abandoned the Gentiles to a state of sin. The result of Gentile idolatry, therefore, is homosexual conduct (Rom. 1:26-27) and all other manner of sordid behavior, which Paul describes as follows:

And since they [the Gentiles] did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die--yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them (Rom. 1:28-32).

Scholars note parallels between Paul's description of the Gentile world in Romans 1 and the Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish apocryphal book of the first century B.C.E. (especially to

chapters 11, 13-15). In other words, Paul draws a traditional Jewish picture of Gentile sinners in the opening chapter of his Epistle to the Romans. According to Paul, Gentiles make the fatal mistake of worshipping the creation instead of the Creator. Homosexual behavior, which was commonly viewed by Jews as a Gentile practice, is portrayed in Romans 1 as a *consequence* of Gentiles refusing to worship the one true God.

Note that Paul's assumptions about homosexuality in Romans 1:26-27 are similar to those of Paul's contemporaries and his biblical forebears. Homosexuality is freely chosen, which is indicated by Paul's use of the active verbs "exchanged" (Rom. 1:26) and "gave up" (Rom. 1:27). Homosexual behavior is associated with insatiable lust and unbridled passion, as seen in Paul's use of the phrase "consumed with passion" (Rom. 1:27). Homosexuality violates the natural order, which is why Paul calls it "unnatural" (Rom. 1:26). Finally, homosexuality is understood as the consequence of idolatry (see Rom. 1:24-25).

Paul obviously accepts the description of the Gentile world in Romans 1, but the point of Paul's third-person indictment of the Gentiles ("they") in Romans 1:18-32 becomes clear at Rom. 2:1, when Paul begins speaking in the second-person ("you"): "Therefore, *you* have no excuse, whoever *you* are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another *you* condemn yourself. . ." (Rom. 2:1; italics mine). Paul's point here is that the one passing judgment on the behavior of others is not innocent, because no one escapes judgment by God's standards (Rom. 2:1-5), "For God shows no partiality" (Rom. 2:11).

Paul goes on to argue that God has revealed himself to the Jew through the law of Moses, but the Jew has turned his or her back on God's revelation by failing to observe the law (Rom. 2:17-24), for "it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law will be justified" (Rom 2.13). Thus the Jew is as worthy of condemnation as is the Gentile.

Therefore, to single out Paul's reference to homosexuality in the first chapter of Romans is to miss the point of Paul's larger argument in these initial chapters. Within Romans 1 homosexuality is perceived as one of the consequences of the Gentiles' root sin of refusing to worship the one true God. Because the Gentiles "exchanged" worship of the Creator for worship of the creation (Rom. 1:23), they are profoundly dis-oriented. And because of this profound theological dis-orientation, the Gentiles are profoundly dis-oriented in other areas of life. For this reason they have "exchanged" heterosexual relations for homosexual ones (Rom. 1:26f).

Paul argues that those who do such things (1:32a), or those who approve of others doing them (1:32b), or those who pass judgment on those who do them (2:1) are all worthy of condemnation. Paul's graphic description of Gentile behavior in Romans 1, however, is merely the first step in an argument that leads to the conclusion in Romans 3:9b that "all [people], both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin."

Therefore, the purpose of Paul's argument in Romans 1:18-3:20 is to demonstrate the universality of sin and to highlight the need of humanity for the purpose of explaining the significance of God's gracious and loving act of mercy through the death of his son Jesus (3:21-26). Since humanity was unable to put itself right with God because of its bondage to sin, God did what humanity was unable to do. As Paul states, "since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Romans 3:23-25a). The message of Romans 1-3, therefore, is about the universality of sin and about how God's grace and mercy, demonstrated in the saving death of Jesus Christ, are even greater than human sinfulness.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

On the basis of the preceding study I make the following observations:

1. **Homosexuality is not treated extensively in the Bible.** Only a handful of verses in the sixty-six books of the Bible make explicit mention of homosexual behavior between consenting adults. Jesus never mentions it at all. In terms of emphasis, therefore, one would have to conclude that homosexuality is a minor concern in the Bible.

Other passages from the Bible that have a bearing on the current discussion, however, are more numerous, more substantive, and more related to the central message of the Bible. While these biblical passages do not mention homosexuality explicitly, these passages do address the proper treatment of homosexuals.

There are, for example, numerous biblical admonitions that encourage believers to love one another. During the Last Supper Jesus told his disciples, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). We see this same thought in other parts of the New Testament as well. In 1 Peter we are told, “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8; see also 1:22). From 1 John we learn, “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. . .if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:11-12; see also 3:23, 4:7; 2 John 5). Paul also encourages us to “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8; see also 1 Thess. 3:12).

The need to show mercy to others is a distinctive feature of the biblical narrative. In his Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6 Jesus said, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37; see also Matt. 7:1-2). In other words, how we treat others has repercussions for how we will be treated. In his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus warns about the danger of judging others when he says,

“Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matt. 7:3-5; see also Luke 6:41-42).

Admonitions against self-righteousness also abound. For example, the parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:10-14), which is told in response to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18:9), should serve as a warning to every Christian, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:14b; see also Luke 14:11).

Passages related to humility are also relevant to the discussion of homosexuality. The author of 1 Peter counsels, “And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings

with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Peter 5:5), and Paul says “in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3b).

Arrogance, on the other hand, is never extolled, even when that arrogance is based on correct thought and righteous behavior (Romans 12:3, 16). The Psalmist declares, “One who secretly slanders a neighbor I will destroy. A haughty look and an arrogant heart I will not tolerate” (Psalm 101:5). Likewise the author of Proverbs says, “All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord; be assured, they will not go unpunished” (Proverbs 16:5; see also Malachi 4:1).

Then there are biblical passages that encourage us to welcome “the other,” to practice hospitality to the stranger (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2) and to other believers (Rom. 15:7; 1 Peter 4:9). We also have the example of the public ministry of Jesus who was sent “to bring good news to the poor. . .to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Isaiah 61:1-2a = Luke 4:18-19). In fulfillment of his commission Jesus welcomed outsiders and foreigners (Luke 7:1-10, Matt. 15:21-28=Mark 7:24-30), dined with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:27-32, 7:34, 15:1-2, 19:1-10), and healed lepers (Matt. 8:1-4=Mark 1:40-45=Luke 5:12-16), demoniacs (Matt. 8:28-34=Mark 5:1-20=Luke 8:26-39), and other outcasts (Matt 9:20-22=Mark 5:25-34=Luke 8:43-48).

The question that confronts all of us, then, is whether we have lived up to our biblical obligations to love others and to welcome everyone to participate freely and fully in the Christian fellowship. Or have we, by our attitudes and our legislation, made homosexual Christians feel like second-class citizens who are allowed to join our communities of faith but are prohibited from ever serving as church officers? Those who condemn homosexuals because of what the Bible says need to recall that self-righteous condemnation, expressions of contempt for others, and failures to show love and mercy to one another are condemned in the Bible far more often than homosexual behavior.

2. Homosexual behavior is never singled out in the Bible. On those rare occasions when it is mentioned, homosexual behavior between consenting adults is always found in a list of prohibitions. The question for modern readers, then, concerns consistency of interpretation. Can one legitimately argue that homosexuality in any form is morally wrong based on what the Bible says unless one gives equal weight to the other prohibitions in those lists?

Some of those other prohibitions in Leviticus 18 and 20, such as the prohibition against engaging in sexual intercourse during a woman’s menstrual period, are clearly tied to ancient views of purity and impurity. Because we no longer accept those ancient notions of purity, we no longer view this form of sexual behavior as sinful behavior.

Prohibitions in the Bible against homosexual behavior are tied to ancient assumptions about homosexuality that are no longer accepted as valid. Many scholars now doubt that homosexuality is freely chosen, as Paul assumes in Romans 1. Rather, it is the product of nature (genetics) or nurture (upbringing), neither of which we choose for ourselves. Moreover, few persons would argue that homosexuality is heterosexual lust gone wild, as Paul suggests in Romans 1. Rather, it is a completely different sexual orientation. In light of these assumptions that we no longer accept, perhaps we should not be so quick to condemn all forms of homosexual behavior between consenting adults.

This is not to suggest that every form of homosexual behavior is acceptable. On the contrary, homosexual harassment, rape, and promiscuity are every bit as wrong as heterosexual

harassment, rape, and promiscuity. But the discussion about homosexuality needs to be more nuanced than in the past.¹⁵ No one would argue that all heterosexual relationships are right merely because they are heterosexual. Can we in all fairness say that all homosexual relations are wrong simply because they are homosexual? Even though the writers of the Bible could not have envisioned it, there are gay and lesbian couples currently living in loving, faithful, and committed relationships. These modern relationships are not related to paganism, prostitution, exploitation, permissiveness, and unfaithfulness, which seem to be the reasons that homosexual behavior is condemned in the ancient world. Do these ancient prohibitions, therefore, apply to all forms of present-day consensual homosexual behavior?

The lists of prohibitions in Leviticus, 1 Corinthians, and Romans that condemn homosexuality also prohibit certain behaviors that are tolerated to a degree in society and in the church at the present time. For example, we do not shun “all those who curse father or mother” (see Lev. 20:9), even though we may find such behavior distasteful. Neither do we deny jobs in the business world to “the greedy,” automatically discharge from military service those who are use abusive language (“revilers”), or ban those who drink heavily (“drunkards”) from marching in the St. Patrick's Day parades in New York City and Boston (see 1 Cor. 6:10), even though all of these behaviors are condemned in the same listings that condemn homosexual behavior.

Moreover, we do not exclude from church office “gossips,” “slanderers,” the “boastful,” or those “full of envy,” all of which Paul also condemns in Rom. 1:29-30, shortly after his remarks about homosexual behavior in Romans 1:26-27. By condemning homosexual behavior while tolerating other forms of behavior that is prohibited in the same lists, homosexual behavior is singled out, which is exactly what the Bible does not do.

Some concessions have also been made of late in the understanding of other prohibited behavior. This is true for “adulterers,” which Paul includes in his listing of prohibited behavior in 1 Corinthians 6:9. What is the biblical definition of “adultery”? Jesus never said a word about homosexuality, but he did speak about adultery. In fact, in the earliest of the canonical gospels, the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11-12; see also Matt. 19:9, where divorce is qualified by “except for unchastity”). According to Jesus’ definition, therefore, to remarry is to commit adultery (see also Paul’s remarks in 1 Cor. 7:10-11).

Most Protestant denominations, however, do not recognize remarriage as adulterous behavior. In fact, the Presbyterian Church’s *Directory for Worship* provides guidelines for how to prepare for “a marriage following divorce” (W-4.9002a). Here is an instance, then, where the Church has chosen not to be guided by clear statements in Scripture, probably because those statements do not conform to present-day realities. The Church recognizes that divorce happens and remarriage can be a tremendous blessing to both partners, so the Church downplays Jesus’ definition of adultery that seems to grow out of concerns that are no longer present.¹⁶

The Church’s willingness to reinterpret in light of present realities biblical passages that characterize remarriage as adultery, however, has implications for the Church’s present day view of homosexuality. In the amendment to the *Book of Order* that excludes avowed, practicing gays and lesbians from assuming office in the Presbyterian Church (proposed in 1996, then adopted by a majority of presbyteries in 1997), the new standard for ordination is “fidelity within the covenant of marriage of *a* man and *a* woman. . . or chastity in singleness” (G-6.0106b; italics mine). The original language of this amendment, however, contained the phrase “fidelity within the covenant of marriage of *one* man and *one* woman” (italics mine). The language was changed

to “a man and a woman” on the floor of General Assembly for the express purpose of allowing divorced and remarried people to serve as officers of the Church.

Therefore, an amendment that effectively bars avowed, practicing gays and lesbians from assuming positions of leadership in the Presbyterian Church was revised to allow remarried persons to serve in leadership capacities. In essence, the Church decided not to be guided by explicit biblical statements regarding adultery, as a concession to the heterosexual community, while at the same time it condemned homosexual behavior, because “the Bible tells me so.”

If the Church is willing to reinterpret some forms of what the Bible labels as adulterous behavior, then why is it absolute and unyielding in its condemnation of all forms of homosexual behavior? Here again the very attempt to uphold the literal meaning of the Bible on the matter of homosexuality results in treating homosexual behavior differently than other prohibited behaviors and thus becomes most unbiblical by singling out homosexuality in those listings.

3. Both Jesus and Paul reinterpret faithfulness to the Law. Homosexual behavior is prohibited in the Holiness Code found in Leviticus. But are those who oppose homosexual behavior because of prohibitions in Leviticus concerned with upholding other parts of the Mosaic law? Do we see anything wrong with eating a rare steak or enjoying a boiled lobster dinner? Of course not! Yet the Mosaic law prohibits the eating of shellfish (Lev. 11:10-12) and bloody meat (Lev 17:10-14; 19:26).

But it is not only the dietary laws of the Hebrew Bible that Christians do not keep. Most Christians do not keep the sabbath, which goes against one of the Ten Commandments, the very heart of the Mosaic law. In this 24/7 world, Christians do not “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8=Deut. 5:12; see also Lev. 23:3), even though God says that “Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work. . .” (Exodus 20:9-10a=Deut. 5:13-14a).

Sabbath observance is a significant requirement of the Mosaic law, and the observance of the seventh day rest goes all the way back to the time of creation, according to the account in Genesis 1:1-2:4a. Profaning the sabbath is a capital offense, for the Lord says to Moses, “You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people (Exod.31:14; see also Exod. 35:2). There is even an account of the community stoning to death a man who was found “gathering sticks” on the sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36).

The punishment for failing to keep the sabbath rest, therefore, is identical to the punishment for homosexual behavior (see Lev. 20:13). But in today’s world do we treat those who break the sabbath in the same way that we treat those who engage in homosexual behavior? What, then, is the rationale for demanding strict adherence to two relatively minor statements in Leviticus that prohibit homosexual behavior between consenting adults while at the same time not requiring Christians to keep key aspects of the Mosaic law?

Christians, however, do not obey all of the particulars of the Mosaic law, because much of the New Testament reinterprets Christian faithfulness to the law in light of the work of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul is in large part responsible for making this case. In his Epistle to the Galatians Paul confronts a Gentile community that is requiring adult males to undergo circumcision (Gal. 5:2; 6:12; see also 1:7b, 3:1, 4:17, 5:10, 12). Paul informs the Galatians that they cannot choose to follow only one part of the law, for “every man who lets himself be circumcised. . .is obliged to obey the *entire* law” (Gal 5:3; italics mine).

Paul argues passionately and persuasively in the rest of the epistle that Christians are free from the 600+ regulations that make up the law. Nevertheless, Paul does not lose sight of the law, for he concludes his argument by saying, “The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14). Therefore, those who love their neighbors as themselves fulfill the requirements of law. In the same manner the Apostle writes to the Romans:

“The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:9).

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus criticizes the Pharisees who have gotten caught up in the more trivial aspects of the law and thus “have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matt. 23:23b). Jesus also encourages the fair treatment of others in the so-called Golden Rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12; see also Luke 6:31).

From these New Testament texts we learn that the essence of the Mosaic law is the loving, merciful, and fair treatment of others. Those who do this have fulfilled the law of the Hebrew Bible, whereas those who focus attention on a single prohibition that is mentioned in two verses can easily neglect those “weightier matters” of the very law that they are trying to uphold.

Since Jesus never spoke about homosexuality, the Apostle Paul’s remarks in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Romans 1:26-27 (along with the comment in 1 Timothy 1:10) serve as the New Testament warrant for excluding homosexuals. This is ironic given the fact that Paul spent his entire apostolic career securing for “Gentile sinners” (Gal. 2:15) the right to be included in the Christian movement over against the objections of some Jewish believers who deemed Gentiles as unworthy of inclusion. Paul argued cogently that Gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to become Christians, for God accepts both Jew and Gentile as they are (see Rom. 3:30).

Paul even confronted Peter in Antioch, when Peter and Barnabas and other Jewish Christians from Jerusalem withdrew from table fellowship with Gentile Christians (Gal. 2:11-13). By refusing to eat with Gentiles, Paul claims that these persons “were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14a), for in essence Peter and the others were trying to “compel the Gentiles to live like Jews” (Gal. 2:14b).

Later in Galatians Paul writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). The law divides, for it distinguishes the obedient from the disobedient, the Jew from the Gentile, the male from the female, the free from the slave. But “faith working through love,” not obedience to the law, unites all believers in the body of Christ. Therefore, according to Paul, “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” (Gal. 3:28).

The Apostle Paul’s unique contribution to the early Christian movement was his persuasive argument that “they” [Gentiles] do not have to become like “us” [Jews] in order to be accepted into the people of God. How tragic it is that a few of Paul’s words are now used to compel “them” [homosexuals] to become like “us” [heterosexuals] in order to participate fully in

the body of Christ. Those who focus attention on a couple of Pauline verses instead of looking at the overall thrust of his life's work run the risk of undermining the distinctive message of the Apostle Paul.

4. The Church has been led by the Holy Spirit to change some long-held views. In the earliest years of the Christian movement, Peter and others thought that the promises made to the people of God related only to the Jews. But God changed the minds of Peter and other early Christians. It began with a dream Peter had in which he was informed, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). This dream resulted in Peter's journey to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile centurion in Caesarea, where Peter preached the gospel (Acts 10:34-43). At the conclusion of Peter's preaching “the Holy Spirit fell upon all [the Gentiles] who heard the word” (Acts 10:44), with the result that, “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:45).

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit that those Gentiles received and the discernment of the Spirit that Peter and his companions were given, God demonstrated that those who were once viewed as unclean “God has made clean” (Acts 10:15) and has made room for them in the fellowship of believers (Acts 10:48). Thus God changed the thinking of Peter and other Jewish leaders of the early Christian movement by means of the leading of the Holy Spirit.

In the context of the Last Supper with his disciples Jesus discussed the *Paraclete*, which is rendered in the NRSV Bible as “the Advocate” (see John 14:15-17). From his first four statements we learn that the *Paraclete* is “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:17; 15:26) and “the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send” (John 14:26) after Jesus has departed (John 16:7). In his fifth and final comment about the *Paraclete* Jesus said, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:12-13a).

Jesus' statement shows an openness to the future that Christians can easily lose sight of. Jesus did not give all the answers to his disciples before he left. Instead he assured his followers that they would not be alone, that the Spirit would be with them to guide them through the challenges that they would face after Jesus is gone. Similarly, we often assume that all of the answers to our problems and dilemmas are to be found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. While the Scriptures are indispensable, we also need to be sensitive to the leading of “the Spirit of truth” who “will guide [us] into all the truth” (John 16:13)

Sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit, I believe, motivated the Church in the last century or so to overturn what were long-held views defended by explicit statements in the Bible. Even though the weight of the biblical evidence was clearly on the side of those who supported slavery,¹⁷ some churches in the nineteenth century opposed slavery as unjust and inhumane. Even though there is clear biblical evidence that prohibits women from speaking and teaching in church and having authority over men,¹⁸ some mainline Protestant denominations in the twentieth century admitted women to positions of leadership in the Church. In both of these cases persons of faith followed the leading of the Holy Spirit and reexamined and ultimately rejected hundreds of years of past practice that had been justified by appeals to selected verses in the Bible.

Is the homosexual issue like these other issues? Although at present there is great controversy about it, will we look back in several decades and recognize how foolish we have been for excluding from full participation in our churches and in our society gifted and devoted

Christians who happen to be gay or lesbian? At a time like this we need to be particularly sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. As Peter and his companions did in Acts 10, we need to recognize that “God has made clean” (Acts 10:15) those who possess the gift of the Spirit and has given them the right to full participation in the body of Christ.

History teaches us that the Bible is dangerous literature. We need to interpret the Bible with great care, for in years past some have used what the Bible says to justify atrocious acts. Whether it was massacring Muslims during the Crusades or exterminating Jews during the Holocaust or enslaving Africans for centuries or excluding women for millennia, the Bible has been used to hurt people.

Perhaps the lesson to be learned from our past experience is that interpretations of the Bible that demean, destroy, enslave, and/or exclude others are interpretations that need to be re-evaluated. Such a re-evaluation may require us to reinterpret some explicit statements in the Bible. But reinterpreting a few specific verses is preferable to missing the Bible’s overall message of God’s love and mercy and invitation.

5. All of us are in need of the grace of God. If the Apostle Paul is to be believed, then homosexuals and heterosexuals have much more in common than is generally realized. Homosexuals as well as heterosexuals are under the power of sin and are in need of God’s forgiveness. But the good news for all of us is that God’s grace is greater than our human sinfulness. We are all put right with God purely “by [God’s] grace as a gift” (Romans 3:24). In spite of our own unrighteousness we are justified by God’s gracious act. As Paul proclaims, “God proves his love for us in that *while we still were sinners* Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8; italics mine).

Having been justified by God’s grace through faith (Rom. 5:1), homosexual Christians and heterosexual Christians who confess “Jesus is Lord” possess the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3b). We learn in a listing of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 that each one of us is “gifted” in some way. We also learn from this listing that these gifts of the Spirit are not limited to persons of one race or of one ethnicity or of one gender or of one sexual orientation, for the language in this passage is all-inclusive.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in *everyone*. To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To *one* is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to *another* the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to *another* faith by the same Spirit, to *another* gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to *another* the working of miracles, to *another* prophecy, to *another* the discernment of spirits, to *another* various kinds of tongues, to *another* the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to *each one individually* just as the Spirit chooses (1 Cor. 12:4-11; italics mine).

In 1 Corinthians Paul encourages the “gifted” persons in the community of faith to use their gifts “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7) and “for building up the church” (1 Cor. 14:12; see 14:5), and that is an appropriate model for our churches today. All who are “gifted,” regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, should be encouraged to contribute their spiritual gifts to the body of Christ and be given a chance to serve.

Elsewhere Paul informs us that those who possess the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead are children of God and have a future inheritance (Rom. 8:11-17). But Paul also warns that “all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10). Judgment will take place on the Day of the Lord, Paul assures us, but that day has not yet arrived. Therefore, Paul says,

“Why do you pass judgment on your [Christian] brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your [Christian] brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. . . . So, then, each of us will be accountable to God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another”
(Rom. 14:10, 12-13).

Ultimately, God will judge our actions and “the secret thoughts of all” (Rom. 2:16). We all hope that God will recognize that “his grace toward [us] has not been in vain” (1 Cor. 15:10b), but that is a judgment that God alone can make. We are not in a position to judge others, and now is not the time for that judgment.

Heterosexual Christians, therefore, share much in common with homosexual Christians. We share a common need for God’s mercy, a common experience of God’s grace and God’s Spirit, and a common hope for greater sanctification and future glorification. Recognizing all that we have in common, Christians should heed the Apostle’s advice to “love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10). We should also resolve “never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another [Christian]” (Rom. 14:13).

Being a follower of Jesus Christ is not easy. All of us need every bit of love and mercy that the community of faith can shower on us. We need each other in the body of Christ, for mutual support and mutual encouragement, and the Church needs every one of the spiritual gifts with which each of us has been blessed. The exclusion or rejection of gifted persons, for whatever reason, limits the power of the Holy Spirit and impoverishes the body of Christ. At this critical juncture we cannot afford to limit or to impoverish the Church of Jesus Christ.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Charles D. Myers, Jr., earned a B.A. degree at Duke University before he attended Princeton Theological Seminary, where he earned an M.Div. degree and a Ph.D. degree in New Testament language and literature. Before he was hired at Gettysburg College in 1986, Dr. Myers taught religion courses at Princeton Seminary, at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, and at Swarthmore College. For the past ten years Dr. Myers has served as Chair of the Religion Department at Gettysburg College. In 2002 he became Gettysburg College’s Edwin T. and Cynthia Shearer Johnson Distinguished Professor of Teaching in the Humanities. While at Gettysburg Prof. Myers has also been honored three times with the Student Senate’s “Faculty Appreciation Award” for excellence in teaching (1988, 1990, 2001).

For ten years Dr. Myers served as Recording Secretary for the Revised Standard Version Bible Committee whose work culminated in the 1989 publication of the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. His published work appears in scholarly journals and in the *Anchor Bible*

Dictionary, a multi-volume reference work. He is also co-editor of and contributor to *Biblical Theology: Problems and Prospects* (Atlanta: Abingdon, 1995). Dr. Myers is an ordained Presbyterian minister who lives in Camp Hill, PA, with his wife and two daughters.

NOTES

¹ This article is a revision and expansion of a lecture presented on March 19, 1992, at the Orr Forum on Religion at Wilson College in Chambersburg, PA, and published as "What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality" in *ANIMA: The Journal of Human Experience* 19:1 (Fall, 1992) pp. 47-56.

² In 1976 the Presbyteries of New York City and of the Palisades asked the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America to give "*definitive guidance*" concerning the eligibility for ordination to the professional ministry of persons who may otherwise be well qualified but who openly acknowledge homosexual orientation and practice. The 188th General Assembly (1976) of the UPCUSA created a task force to study Christian approaches to homosexuality, with special reference to the ordination of avowed practicing homosexuals. The work of the task force resulted in the adoption of a "Policy Statement and Recommendations" by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the UPCUSA and by the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the PCUS. This statement **admits homosexuals to membership** in the church, but **denies ordination** to any "self-affirming, practicing homosexual person." Although there have been numerous attempts to change this ruling, self-affirming homosexuals are still barred from ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This position was formalized when the *Book of Order* was amended in 1997 to require candidates for ordination "**to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness.** Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the Confessions call sin shall not be ordained or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament" (G-6.0106b).

³ As a Minister Commissioner to the 213th General Assembly in Louisville, KY, I was assigned to the Peace, Purity, and Unity Committee that made the recommendation to the General Assembly to create this Task Force. Our recommendation was accepted by an overwhelming majority of Commissioners.

⁴ I make this plea based on my own experience in dealing with a variety of Christian groups over two decades. I am sorry to report that people today seem more hardened in their views on homosexuality and much less willing to hear anything that might challenge their views than they were ten or twenty years ago. In the past three years I have been shouted at during my presentation by people in the audience on three separate occasions. On another occasion I was asked, after I had finished my first lecture, not to complete my series of three lectures. Nothing like these incidents happened to me during my many presentations on this topic during the 1980s and the 1990s.

⁵ This quote from the Book of Genesis is taken from the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, as are the other quotations in this essay, except where otherwise stated. One of the hallmarks of this translation is the avoidance of masculine-biased language where possible. Therefore, the terms "man" and "men" are not used in the generic sense in this translation. The fact that the terms "man" and "men" appear in these verses indicates that males are being described.

⁶ Note that the *New Revised Standard Version* reads to "have intercourse with him" in Judges 19:22. This is the exact same Hebrew verb that the *NRSV* translates in Genesis 19:5, 8 as to "know."

⁷ In this paper I use the standard scholarly conventions of dating. Therefore, instead of the strictly Christian designation of B.C. ("before Christ") I use the term B.C.E. ("Before the Common Era") and for A.D. (*anno Domini*, meaning "in the year of our Lord") I use the term C.E. ("Common Era").

⁸ Victor Paul Furnish in his chapter on "Homosexuality" in *The Moral Teaching of Paul: Selected Issues* (2nd ed., rev; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) p. 59.

⁹ See, for example, the speech by Pausanias in Plato's *Symposium*, 180c-185c, where the virtues of homosexual love are extolled, and the subsequent speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, 189c-193d, who describes male homosexuals as "the most hopeful of the nation's youth, for theirs is the most virile constitution."

¹⁰ In the New Testament, thirteen epistles or letters are attributed to the Apostle Paul. Many biblical scholars at the present time, however, have concluded on the basis of common vocabulary, writing style, and theological thought, that only seven of the thirteen are genuine Pauline writings. Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon are unquestionably by Paul. All seven of the genuine epistles were composed in the 50s. The other six epistles that bear the name of Paul but are not believed to be by the Apostle are 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. These six deuterio-Pauline epistles were perhaps written by disciples of Paul in the latter decades of the first century C.E.

¹¹ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott in *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) list under *malakos*, when applied to persons, "faint-hearted, cowardly; morally-weak, lacking in self-control" (p. 1077).

¹² The occurrence of *arsenokoitai* in a vice-list in 1 Timothy is generally believed to be later use of the term that appears in 1 Corinthians 6:9 (see note 10 above). While 1 Corinthians was probably written about 53 C.E., 1 Timothy was probably composed sometime during the final decades of the first century C.E. This later occurrence of *arsenokoitai*, therefore, does not shed any light on Paul's earlier use of the term.

¹³ As argued by Robin Scroggs in *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

¹⁴ This understanding of the two terms comes from Walter Bauer's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (4th ed; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

¹⁵ This is the call of Richard B. Hays in his article entitled "Awaiting the Redemption of Our Bodies" in *Sojourners* (1991) pp. 17-21.

¹⁶ It is generally believed that Jesus is reacting in these verses to the prevalence of divorce in the first century world. In Judaism only men could initiate divorce, and wives could be divorced for frivolous reasons, such as burning a meal. What Matthew 19:9 and Mark 10:10-11 indicate is that Jesus takes the "one flesh" idea (see Genesis 2:24) seriously. Two persons become one through sexual relations, and that bond is broken only by the death of one spouse.

¹⁷ See the Tenth Commandment concerning coveting (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21) where it is assumed that slavery exists. See also the story in Luke 7:1-10, where Jesus heals the slave of the Roman centurion. Not only does Jesus not demand that centurion free his slave, Jesus commends the slaveowner, saying, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Luke 7:9).

¹⁸ The primary texts that have been used to exclude women from positions of leadership and authority in the Church are 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36, where women "are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate" during church services, and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, where "no women [is allowed] to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent."