

A COMPANION TO
THE AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY
FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO

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Unless otherwise noted, all scripture translations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Photo of Brian McLaren by Blair Anderson (avisualplanet.com)

LESSON ONE

The Power of a Single Word

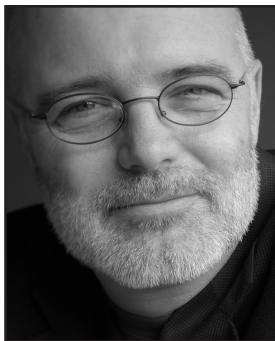
Brian McLaren

I was brought up in a Christian home. A real church-going home. Not just a Christmas-and-Easter home, either. Not just a “Sunday morning only” home either. We went to Sunday morning worship, Sunday night “gospel” service, Tuesday night prayer meeting, and special missionary meetings every month. I did a lot of pew time as a little guy.

We were positioned right of center theologically. We were committed Bible-believing Evangelicals, and truth be told, our church was on the far-right feather of that right wing: We were full-fledged fundamentalists of a highly sectarian variety. When I was in elementary school in the early 1960s, one of my Sunday school teachers told us that inter-racial marriage was a sin because of something called “the curse of Ham,” and in fact, our church was segregated. If people of color came, they were politely invited to attend another church not far away.

When I was in junior high in the late 1960s, I was told by one of my Sunday school teachers that I could not be a Christian and believe in any form of evolution – it was either a young-earth, six-day literal creation or nothing. I remember hearing that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was a communist. We were pretty sure that all Catholics and most Protestants were going to hell, and that when “the rapture” occurred – which we were expecting momentarily (so much so that I had a major scare one day when I came home from third grade and nobody was home) – most of them would be left behind.

My parents uneasily tolerated this kind of fundamentalism because it was normative for them, but they also were of a more gracious spirit, and our home was always a place of warmth and hospitality. Still, the tension between what I learned at



Rev. Brian McLaren, an author and former pastor, is regarded as among the most innovative Christian leaders, thinkers, and activists today.

Named by Time magazine as one of the country's 25 most influential evangelicals, McLaren has lectured widely and written extensively on faith and the “emerging church,” an interdenominational conversation that seeks new ways to worship and to understand Scripture.

McLaren has written such best-selling books as A Generous Orthodoxy, A New Kind of Christian, The Story We Find Ourselves In, The Last Word and the Word After That, The Secret Message of Jesus, and Everything Must Change.

church and what I learned everywhere else left me very conflicted in my early teens. To make matters worse, I was interested in science, and I thought evolution made a lot of sense. I also had an artistic bent, expressed for a while by joining a (gasp) rock 'n' roll band that played at (louder gasp) dances. I grew long sideburns, then long hair, and soon had a rather bushy adolescent beard. My changing appearance reflected a kind of spiritual change: I supposed myself to be on my way out of the church and Christianity.

But then in the middle of this cognitive dissonance, I had a powerful conversion experience, and soon I was deeply involved in the Jesus Movement of the early 1970s. Through this I was exposed to Pentecostal Christians and eventually took aboard a whole range of charismatic experiences – speaking in tongues, singing in the Spirit, preaching words of knowledge and prophecy I fell in love with the Bible and by my senior year in high school, I was leading and teaching up to a hundred young people each week, drawing many of them to Christ. I wrote music and played guitar with a few Christian bands. I even produced a few albums of original music.

By my mid-twenties I had participated in the planting of two new churches, and I was deeply involved in youth ministry, speaking at retreats and conferences. I devoured books on Christian living and theology, and I became adept at grappling with the issues of Calvinism and Arminianism, orthodoxy and neo-orthodoxy, and pre-, post-, and a-millennialism. I tell you all this so that you'll know that my credentials as a conservative, born-again, Bible-believing, Spirit-filled Christian are bona fide and impeccable. I'm not a likely candidate for having second thoughts on the issue of homosexuality.

But reality forced me into second thoughts. While I was still in high school, one of my closest friends “came out” to me. I felt so uncomfortable and unprepared. I was afraid I'd say something overly judgmental and hurt my friend's feelings, but I was also afraid I'd say something overly compassionate and endanger his soul – and my own. Soon, two girls I knew also came out to me, then one of my close relatives. Then a Christian leader I greatly respected told me he struggled with his sexual identity, which really shocked me and shook me up.

I don't know how gay folks got the idea that I was a safe person to talk to – I guess I could have done worse with my responses, though looking back, I also know I could have done a lot better – but over the years, it was as if I had a sign on my back that said, “If you need to come out, talk to this guy.”

Neither 'love' nor 'hope'

Once I became a pastor, the pattern repeated. I met a lot of gay folks who had joined “ex-gay ministries.” A few of them had been helped. A lot hadn't. I tried to be understanding. I tried to be faithful both to the Bible as I understood it and to these people in their anguish and fear. But sometimes, I'm deeply pained to admit, I did a lot more harm than good.

I remember meeting the wife of an Evangelical pastor who told me her husband had finally divorced her after over 20 years of marriage. I'll never forget her tears as she asked, “Do you know what it's like to wake up every morning knowing that the man I loved, the father of my children, couldn't find me attractive? Can you imagine what it's like to trust God to heal him – and heal our marriage – but year after year to have nothing change? Can you imagine what I would have given to have had permission to release him – and me and our children – from the nightmare we

lived for half of our lives?” Her questions unsettled me and made me feel I couldn’t win: If I defended the traditional position, I would offend and damage certain people, and if I changed positions, I would offend and damage others.

There were so many people who sought me out – sons and daughters of pastors and theologians, sons and daughters of close friends, husbands and wives and parents and children of parishioners, and close members of my own family, too. There were parents who had been driven out of their churches because they refused to reject or condemn their gay children; others chose to live with the secret so they wouldn’t become the source of such scandal and division in their congregations. There were former pastors and pastors who had moved from Evangelical churches to gay-friendly denominations. Hardly a season went by without at least one person making an appointment that began, “I’m about to tell you something not one other person on earth knows”

One word describes my struggle in trying to respond to these many people. It’s a four-letter word, a powerful word. I wish it were “love,” but it’s not. I wish it were “hope,” but it’s not. The word is “fear.” Let me allow you into my own private thoughts back when I first began facing the tension between the gay people I got to know and the clear beliefs I held.

Here were some of the fears I faced:

- The fear of hurting and damaging gay people and adding to their pain by not responding as wisely as I should.
- The fear of going against biblical authority and Christian tradition.
- The fear of sliding down the slippery slope of moral relativism, reaching a point where “anything goes,” and there’s no clear line between right and wrong, good and evil.
- The fear of being criticized and judged by my fellow conservative Christians if I changed my views, and the fear of being criticized and judged by progressive Christians if I didn’t change them.
- The fear of hurting or confusing my parents and relatives if I changed my views.
- The fear of losing certain church members if I changed my views, and certain church members if I didn’t.
- The fear of losing my job as a pastor, or speaking invitations as a public speaker, or book sales as a writer, depending on my views changing or not.
- The fear of becoming part of a division in a congregation, denomination, or other religious community if I were outspoken about a change in viewpoint.
- The fear of moral complexity. Things used to be simple “black and white” with no shades of grey. Grey can be scary.
- The fear of social complexity. People used to be easy to categorize into “good guys/bad guys,” “liberals/conservatives,” and “us/them.” Blurred lines and transcended boundaries can be scary.
- The fear of honesty about my own sexuality. I had to admit how far my own thoughts and actions sometimes fell (and fall) below my high ideals and moral standards. If I’m honest about how hard it is for me to maintain sexual self-control at times as a married heterosexual man, how will that honesty affect my opinion of homosexual men and women?
- The fear of being labeled. Whether it be homophobe, liberal, or wishy-washy, I knew that whatever stand I took would be critically – and sometimes viciously – assessed.
- The fear of taking a stand, then having “buyer’s remorse.”

A pivotal moment in my story came when I was asked to write a brief column in a respected Christian journal for pastors. The general topic I was assigned was sexuality, so I decided to relate a recent story from my pastoral experience. It involved an engaged couple who had met through their fathers ... fathers who, after getting divorced from the engaged couple's mothers, had come out as gay and become partners.

The complexity of the couple's situation led to the point of my article: Life is complex, and just having a position on homosexuality isn't enough. Being "pro" or "anti" gay doesn't solve the kinds of practical questions that this couple was asking me: If I was to perform their wedding at our church, would their fathers be completely welcome? Would they be treated with respect and allowed to be "out" as part of the marriage ceremony?

In the article, I never articulated my own position on homosexuality. I simply stated that the issue had real-life complications, and I didn't see how either side could argue with that. But that was enough for me to become the target of some amazingly hostile religious rhetoric.

What we all have in common

The editors of the magazine posted my article on their website under this less-than-accurate title: "McLaren on Homosexuality." Then they invited a predictably fiery pastor to write a counterpoint to my article on their blog. His tone was mocking and vicious, as were many of the comments that were posted in response. The editors, the pastor's counterpoint, and the equally venomous commenters turned out to have given me a precious gift: They helped me feel what it's like to be a gay person in the hands of angry Christians. The unfairness, the fury, the insults, the mean-spiritedness shocked me and faced me with one of the truly important choices of my life: Would I, from that point on, cower in fear and work harder to protect my reputation by not inciting such attacks, or would I become more courageous and refuse to be intimidated by the hostile rhetoric I had just experienced? How would I respond to my fears?

Some of us are gay. Some aren't. Some of us are gay-affirming. Some are not. But we all have this in common: We all are more or less afraid.

And that's OK. It's OK to be afraid. But here's what's less OK: to be afraid but not to acknowledge it. Because unacknowledged fear is far more powerful and dangerous than acknowledged fear. When you haven't admitted to yourself and others what you're afraid of and how afraid you are, your fears are like undercover agents, working beneath the level of your consciousness, and you have no idea what kind of terrorism they'll cause you and others. Few good things can grow and thrive in the presence of fear, especially unacknowledged fear. Creativity shrivels. Charity withers. Hope starves. Faith dies. Kindness shrinks. Energy drains. And other things – ugly things – replace them: clenched teeth, clenched fists, harsh words, small thoughts.

But when you can admit that you're afraid, amazing and beautiful things happen. Others can admit their fears, too. You and they create safe places where more people can admit their fears. And in those safe places, miracles can happen.

How will we get beyond this fear? How will we create safe spaces where people can at least listen to one another? Two unlikely people recently offered some

needed insight.

Shortly after the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama invited Pastor Rick Warren, author of the best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, to deliver the invocation at the upcoming inauguration. The invitation ignited a firestorm, because Warren – who pastors Saddleback Church, the Southern Baptist megachurch in Orange County, California – was an outspoken conservative about homosexuality. He had been a vocal advocate of Proposition 8, an amendment to the state’s constitution that restricts the definition of marriage to opposite-sex couples. The website of his church said exactly what I had been taught in my youth:

“Question: What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

“Answer: The Bible very clearly says that homosexuality is a sin.”

The gay community was hurt and angered by the president-elect’s choice of a man who would hold these views. The clamor grew for the invitation to be rescinded. But then something unexpected happened. One outspoken gay person – musician Melissa Etheridge – wrote an open letter in the *Huffington Post* to her “brothers and sisters” that addressed the controversy in a whole new way.

She told how she, too, had been outraged when Warren was selected and how she assumed he was just “one more hater working up his congregation to hate gays.” But within days of the announcement, she learned something that reminded her “the universe has a sense of humor and indeed works in mysterious ways.” She and Warren were about to be on the same stage at the national convention of the Muslim Public Affairs Council. She was to perform a song that was a call for world peace and unity. He was a keynote speaker.

“I was stunned,” Etheridge wrote. “My fight-or-flight instinct took over, should I cancel? Then a calm voice inside me said, ‘Are you really about peace or not?’”

All of us who engage with this issue with an open heart and open mind eventually feel that fight-or-flight reaction, whatever side we’re on. Here’s how Etheridge responded – first by acknowledging her fear, then refusing to let it control her, and then choosing a response fueled by peace, not fear. She reached out to Warren by inviting him to have a conversation. When he phoned her, she wrote, “before I could say anything, he told me what a fan he was. He had most of my albums from the very first one.”

Warren told Etheridge he believed in equal rights for all. He said he believed “every loving relationship should have equal protection,” but that he supported Proposition 8 because he didn’t want to see “marriage redefined.” He told Etheridge he regretted some of the hurtful things he had said about gays, and he invited her to church. She invited him to her home. When they met face to face later that night, he greeted her “with open arms and an open heart,” she wrote. “We agreed to build bridges to the future.”

Before they could start building bridges, both Warren and Etheridge had to admit they had made mistakes. Both had to overcome the prejudice that so often flows from the fight-or-flight reactions of fear. Etheridge concluded with these words to the gay community:

“Brothers and sisters, the choice is ours now. We have the world’s attention. We have the capability to create change, awesome change in this world, but before we change minds we must change hearts. Sure, there are plenty

of hateful people who will always hold on to their bigotry like a child to a blanket. But there are also good people out there, Christian and otherwise that are beginning to listen. They don't hate us, they fear change. Maybe in our anger, as we consider marches and boycotts, perhaps we can consider stretching out our hands ...

“Maybe if they get to know us, they won't fear us.”

We often speak of gay folks coming out of the closet, but the fact is, we're all huddling in our own closets – closets of fear. What can happen when people tentatively crack open their cramped closets of fear and venture out into the open space of faith, hope, and love? What can happen when instead of pulling back we reach out? What can happen when we admit our regret over things we've said, or the way we've said them? What can happen?

We must remember: It's not just “them” who need to overcome fear; “we” do, too, whichever side we're on. So let's do it. Let's acknowledge our fears. Let's all come out of the closet of fear and let's name our fears and get them out on the table. Let's see what happens then.

Because we already know what happens when we continue letting unacknowledged fear control us: If we keep doing what we've done, we'll keep getting what we've already got. That's why I love the word “maybe” in Melissa Etheridge's message. Maybe. It's a word of possibility, not fear.

Could we get beyond our current paralysis and polarization and division regarding homosexuality ... if we create safe spaces free of unacknowledged fear? Could we find some new way forward? Could love and unity win over fear and suspicion and division? Is it possible? Maybe?

TWO KINDS OF FEAR

A Scriptural Reflection

Fear is at the core of Brian McLaren's struggle with homosexuality. But the word "fear" can be a slippery one. The fear that Rev. McLaren describes initially made him anxious about the issue of homosexuality. But he also answered God's call to learn more and connect closer to real people who were different from him. By so doing, his fears lessened.

In biblical terms, Rev. McLaren's fear would be considered either anxiety or timidity, incapacitating emotions that stand in the way of another sort of fear: the awe and respect we know as "the fear of God." The latter is a concept used repeatedly in the ancient text (see, for example, Job 28:28, Proverbs 1:7, and Isaiah 11:1-9). Surely it is this fear – the fear of God – that casts out the debilitating fear.

A story in Exodus 1, about the birth of Moses, offers a keen distinction between the two kinds of fear. Crucial to the baby's survival are the actions of Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives in the Israelite community. Pharaoh demands that the two women kill all boys whose birth they attend. Astonishingly, they refuse this clear command of the mightiest monarch on earth and allow the boy babies to live. Among them, of course, is Moses, the future liberator of their people. Exodus 1:17 tells us why: "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do."

This "fear" of God is certainly awe and respect for a higher power than pharaoh, but it is also fear that leads directly to right living and right actions. The midwives would normally and rightly be afraid of the great pharaoh who, with a word, could have put them to death. But their fear of God trumped their fear of death and led to the survival of their people.

Deuteronomy 10:17-20 makes this point even more potently:

For the Lord your God is ... the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ... You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear.

In other words, the fear of the Lord leads directly to acts of love for the stranger, the widow, the orphan – any member of society who has been relegated to its margins.

When Brian McLaren tells us his fear kept him from accepting his gay and lesbian friends with the love he had received from God, he's telling us, as well, that our own fears can distance us from the fear of God. "Perfect love drives out fear," as I John 4:18 tells us, but it is equally true that perfect fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It also is the beginning of an openness to those who are not like us but who are, like us, children of God. – *Dr. John Holbert*

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

- In his essay, Brian McLaren shares a long list of fears surrounding the issue of homosexuality. Which fears do you identify with most closely?
- Time and again, Rev. McLaren felt a conflict between Scripture and the stories of pain that people brought to him. How did he deal with that conflict?
- Rev. McLaren says that “it’s OK to be afraid.” What does he think is “less OK”?
- How does Rev. McLaren think the fears surrounding this issue have hurt the church?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- How has fear contributed to making you feel distant from God?
- Rev. McLaren suggests a need for “safe spaces free of unacknowledged fear.” How would you imagine such a space to be?
- How do you think we are called to respond to the command to “fear” God?
- How can we can talk about our beliefs with both respect and conviction?

FOR FURTHER READING

Marin, Andrew, *Love Is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation With the Gay Community* (Intervarsity Press, 2009)

McLaren, Brian, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (HarperOne, 2010)

McLaren, Brian, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Thomas Nelson, 2007)

LESSON TWO

A Matter of Interpretation

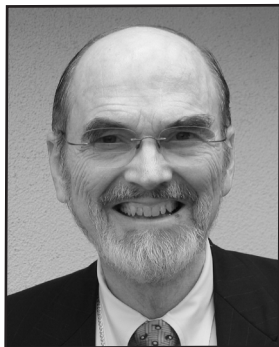
Jack Rogers

All Christian Churches hold that the Bible is the fundamental authority for knowing God and knowing how to live a Christian life. However, in order for the Bible to be effective in our lives we must rightly interpret it, so that we may best understand it. We all, each day, interpret what we read, view, and experience. We do this automatically, without being aware of it. Interpretation is simply our inevitable human attempt to understand our lives and our world.

When we interpret what the Bible says about God, God's works, and God's will, we are being theologians. To be the best theologians we can be, we must be serious, thoughtful and open to learn. And we must be clear that we are using a method of interpreting the Bible that will get us to the heart of its message.

The choice of that method is crucial, and history shows us why. Over the centuries, various methods have come into vogue, often leaving in their wake what we now consider gross misinterpretations of the Bible. Among the most painful periods for Christians to reflect on today is the lengthy era when so many mainstream churches sanctioned and defended the practice of slavery and the oppression of women. For 200 years, the majority of Christians accepted these morally repugnant acts as biblically based without entertaining even a thought there could be another view. Yet theirs was the same Bible that we read today.

How could this be? How could those Christians think so differently than we do today? Why would intelligent and devout people not recognize any of the mitigating factors we can perceive in Scripture? More importantly, why did minds



*Jack Rogers, Ph.D., is an authority in biblical interpretation and author of the best-selling book *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, which is widely regarded as among the most thoughtful commentaries on this issue.*

Dr. Rogers is professor of theology (emeritus) at San Francisco Theological Seminary and moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He also has served as vice-president of San Francisco Theological Seminary and founded its Southern California campus. Previously, he was a professor of philosophical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

*The issues discussed in this lesson are examined more extensively in *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, as well as two of Rogers' other published works: *Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews* and *Reading the Bible and the Confessions: The Presbyterian Way*.*

change? Before we can even address the issue of homosexuality, it is important to look back and understand not only how mistakes can be made in biblical interpretation, but also how they can be corrected.

Getting at the root of the justifications for slavery and women's subjugation takes us back directly to a method of biblical interpretation that rose to prominence in the 18th century. Developed in Scotland, it swept through the growing system of American colleges and universities in the late 1700s.

Known as Scottish Common Sense Philosophy, it was based on a principle that assumes the truth is obvious. Just as anyone could know the essence of a tree just by looking at it, so anyone could know what the Bible meant just by reading it. Everyone could be an expert without any special education or training. This philosophy assumed that all people everywhere thought alike. Therefore, what anyone thought about one of Paul's epistles had to be exactly what the Apostle Paul thought.

Of course, there are several problems with this view. If the truth is obvious, what happens when two people disagree? They cannot acknowledge that their "common sense" could lead them to different conclusions. They also have no respectful way to resolve competing truth claims or differing interpretations of Scripture.

It's no wonder that "common sense" literalism and the practice of "proof-texting" – taking statements out of their ancient context and treating them as literal truths – were among the most potent fuels that ignited the Civil War. For decades, theologians, in both the North and South, looked to the many references of slavery in the Bible to argue for its necessity, as well as for an inherent sinfulness and inferiority that cursed Africans to slavery. In doing so, they gave greater authority to the particulars of ancient culture than to the central themes of the Bible.

The abolitionist movement, however, grew out of a grassroots evangelical revival in the early 19th century that called for repentance of personal sin and dedication to the moral improvement of the community. Christian abolitionists urged that the Bible be taken as a whole, with the focus on Jesus' love and his ministry to the oppressed. As it turns out, their biblical interpretation presaged the Christ-centered method that later became the standard of the 20th century. But as tensions between the North and South mounted, the clash of biblical interpretations ended in stalemate, eventually dividing each of three denominations – Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist – into splinter groups determined mostly by geography.

How the Bible was used to justify slavery

When Southern Presbyterians split from their Northern colleagues, they asked the leading Southern theologian of the day, James Henley Thornwell, to prepare a statement to the world that would explain the beliefs of the new Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. On December 4, 1861, he presented a paper to the church's assembly that set the tone for biblical interpretation in the slave-holding South.

Thornwell addressed the question: Do the Scriptures directly condemn slavery? His answer was no:

"Slavery is no new thing ... It has not only existed for ages in the world, but it has existed, under every dispensation of the covenant of grace, in the Church of God."

He then looked at it another way. Do the Scriptures indirectly condemn slavery? Again his answer was no:

“Much stress is laid upon the Golden Rule and upon the general denunciations of tyranny and oppression. To all this we reply, that no principle is clearer than that a case positively excepted cannot be included under a general rule.”

Thornwell thus articulated an interpretative approach that allowed the particular proof-text to take precedence over the general principles of Scripture contained in the Gospel of Christ.

He concluded:

“Let us concede, for a moment, that the laws of love, and the condemnation of tyranny and oppression, seem logically to involve, as a result, the condemnation of slavery; yet, if slavery is afterwards expressly mentioned [in the Bible] and treated as a lawful relation, it obviously follows ...that slavery is, by necessary implication, excepted.”

Many other Christian treatises and manifestos generated over the years launched similar arguments. The result was official church support for one of the vilest institutions in human history.

Justifying the subordination of women

In the same era, a leading Northern theologian, Charles Hodge at Princeton, applied this “common sense” to support the subordination of women to men, again reflecting the cultural assumptions of the time. For Hodge, just as Isaac Newton’s laws of physics proved an inherent order to the world, so did the traditions of patriarchy confer a natural order and stability on society.

Hodge, in company with most men of his day, opposed women’s suffrage. Between 1825 and 1855, “an association of gentlemen,” as Hodge and his friends referred to themselves, published numerous influential articles on “ornamental womanhood,” a phrase meant to convey the virtues that should characterize a Christian woman. Women, Hodge felt, should express their piety in private. The public realm was for men only.

Also an anti-abolitionist, Hodge used the analogy of the necessary subordination of women to pen a book that attacked slavery. He wrote in his review:

“If women are to be emancipated from subjection to the law which God has imposed upon them ... If in studied insult to the authority of God, we are to renounce, in the marriage contract, all claim to obedience ... there is no deformity of human character from which we turn with deeper loathing than from a woman forgetful of her nature and clamorous for the vocations and rights of men.”

Like Thornwell and Hodge, all the other leading religious authorities in 19th-century mainstream Christendom were white men, and they wielded great power to claim that their experience was normative for everyone. They alone held all the positions of power in church and in state. They interpreted reality according to their experience of being in a privileged position in society. That gave them the authority to label others as inferior. Through their complete domination of society, they were able to pass off their biases as “common sense.”

The Fundamentalist/Modernist conflict

By the late 19th century, the mainstream Protestant consensus on biblical interpretation was fragmented not only by the issues that incited the Civil War but also by another landmark event: the 1859 publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the*

Species. Responses to Darwin's theory of evolution once again separated Protestants into two camps.

One group, who came to be called Modernists, felt obliged to embrace the new science. They believed that the human race was moving toward God; that

Scripture represented the evolving experience of humankind; and that Creeds were only a human attempt to express religious experience.

The other group, who came to be called Fundamentalists, carried on the tradition of "common sense" literalism. They believed that God had created the world once and for all in a certain way; that the Bible contained God's literal words as recorded by humans; and that Creeds represented a systematic presentation of doctrinal truths.

Modernists and Fundamentalists argued for decades over the meaning of Scripture. Modernists denied the authenticity of certain parts of the Bible, while

WHAT ARE THE MISUSED PASSAGES?

It's not difficult to find numerous examples of Bible passages – what Dr. Jack Rogers refers to as "proof-texts" – that have been employed to support practices now considered unacceptable. Occasionally, evidence arises in contemporary settings that shows the verses are still being used with the same intent.

Proverbs 23:13-14 in the King James translation reads: "Withhold no correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with a rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with a rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell." In 2009, an investigation in Ireland into religious schools over the past 50 years uncovered appalling child abuse that, over the years, was considered disciplinary action justified by Proverbs 23.

1 Timothy 2:12 reads, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent." In 2008, this verse was quoted as the reason for the dismissal of a female teacher of the Hebrew Bible from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. The teacher appealed the decision in a public court, but the court ruled against her, claiming it had no jurisdiction in the case of a religious school applying its own standards. Many Bible scholars argue that Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28: "...there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" is the higher standard that the Bible holds for gender equality.

Other Bible passages that appear to endorse the subjugation or inferiority of women include Genesis 3:16, 1 Corinthians 11:3-10 and 14:34-36, Ephesians 5:22-33, Colossians 3:18-19, 1 Timothy 2:8-15, and 1 Peter 3:1-7.

Perhaps the most notorious of the older proof-texts is found at Genesis 9:25 and 10:6, the so-called "curse of Ham." At 9:25, Noah is said to have passed out from an overindulgence of the wine produced from his post-flood vineyard. His son, Ham, wanders unknowingly into his father's tent, and sees "the nakedness of his father" (9:22). Noah wakes up and berates his son: "Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."

In 10:6 the descendants of the cursed Ham are said to be "Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan." Readers of this text in centuries past determined that the four peoples mentioned were all "dark-skinned." Hence they concluded that all dark-skinned people were cursed to be slaves forever. The "curse of Ham" has had a long life in some ultra-conservative religious circles and references to it can still be found today in publications.

Other passages that seem to approve of slavery include Exodus 21:20-21, Leviticus 25:44-46, 1 Corinthians 7:20-24, Ephesians 6:5-8, Colossians 3:22, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, and Titus 2:9-10. – *Dr. John Holbert*

Fundamentalists insisted the Bible, in its original manuscripts, was inerrant. To Fundamentalists, inerrancy meant that God was the author of Scripture, so whatever the Bible said could be applied directly to the present day, overriding science in the case of conflicts between the two. Modernists, in frustration, appealed to the scientific method of observation and experimentation as having greater authority for modern people. The dueling parties deadlocked in what was called, by the early 20th century, the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy. Thus, they replayed the interpretative battle that raged over slavery and the subordination of women.

A Christ-centered approach

Then in the 1930s, a new theological movement emerged in Europe that soon migrated to the United States. Ultimately, it broke the stalemate and enabled mainstream churches to move forward. Most commonly known as Neo-Orthodoxy, it was “Neo” because it was a new approach that was not dependent on either Fundamentalism or Modernism. It was “Orthodox” because it turned people’s attention to Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture, and it depended on the work of the Holy Spirit to make the biblical message come alive through preaching. Neo-Orthodoxy focused on the traditional doctrines of the Christian faith but looked at them afresh in the light of current scholarship. The method of biblical interpretation it introduced was rooted in the methods used by the 16th-century Protestant Reformers.

Swiss theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner were considered the standard bearers of Neo-Orthodoxy in American theological schools in the 1940s and 1950s. When Barth, Brunner, and others encouraged their fellow scholars to read Calvin and Luther, a heritage began to emerge that had been obscured by the 19th-century Scottish Common Sense Theology. So, what was new in the 1940s led theologians and biblical scholars back beyond 18th-century “common sense” to reclaim an earlier, 16th-century Reformation heritage. By reading Reformation theologians, as well as theologians of that era who had been influenced by them, 20th-century thinkers produced a new kind of theology that both revered the Bible and used all the tools of contemporary scholarship to understand it.

Scholars developed a biblical theology movement, influenced by Neo-Orthodoxy, that no longer debated reliable authority versus human authorship as Fundamentalists and Modernists did. The Bible wasn’t viewed as a collection of inerrant facts but as a very human document that reliably recorded a real encounter of real people with a real God. As biblical scholar Eugene March noted:

“It seems clear in retrospect that the main concern among biblical theologians of the ’40s and ’50s was to declare the validity of biblical authority in such a way as to steer clear of the mistakes of both [the Modernists’] Liberalism and Fundamentalism.”

The Common Sense philosophy that had dominated theology in the preceding era was now replaced by a method of biblical interpretation that embraced the Bible as a whole with Jesus Christ as its central character.

The method affirmed that the Bible is about God and what God is doing in the world. Scripture is not simply an assortment of quotable sayings. It has a central unifying theme – Creation, Fall, and Redemption in Jesus Christ. For Christians, Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the incarnation of God in our world. Thus, Jesus is the best interpreter for discerning God’s revelation for humanity.

A fresh look at Scripture

The influence of Neo-Orthodoxy and the biblical theology movement enabled theologians, and the pastors they taught, to take a fresh look at oppressive social institutions. Instead of proof-texting, they looked at the totality of the Bible in its cultural context. They began by viewing each passage of the Bible with Christ's life and ministry as the central interpretive principle. From that starting point, and stimulated by changes in American society, church leaders began to rethink many social issues.

Events, such as the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that desegregated schools, soon provided an occasion for the new biblical understandings to be applied to real-world problems. Guided by Neo-Orthodoxy, the church began to deal responsibly with issues of social justice and civil rights.

In 1956, the descendants of the church founded on James Henry Thornwell's treatise formally repudiated his "common sense" argument for slavery. A report by the Southern Presbyterian Church stated in part:

"Coming closer to our own day, we no longer argue that human slavery is justified by the Bible, and in accord with God's will. Some of our grandfathers did so argue, declaring that slavery was God's permanent institution. Through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we have come to a different understanding on this subject. We see that the Bible passages they quoted were not kept by them in the larger context of the Bible as a whole."

Under the influence of a Christ-centered understanding of Scripture, the church continued to speak out against racial segregation and other injustices, and it began to ordain people of color. Spurred on by women's suffrage, as well as women's growing responsibilities in congregational life, scholars undertook more reassessments of Scripture, focusing on the many biblical women who were affirmed in their leadership roles. Soon, mainstream denominations also began ordaining women.

Today, equal treatment of racial minorities and women is considered an integral part of mainstream church life. We are thankful that most Christians reject racial and gender hierarchy. Now, however, faced with the issue of homosexuality, a significant number of Christians are turning to proof-texting and superficial literalism to cope with cultural change. Once again, when the cultural status quo is being questioned, many Christians are instinctively becoming defensive, ignoring the earlier tradition of biblical interpretation on which Protestantism was founded. Instead of reading the Bible through the lens of Jesus' life and ministry, they have again tried to make the Bible a law book, which they then apply selectively only to those with whom they disagree.

History has taught us there is a better way.

PUTTING THE WORD INTO CONTEXT

A Scriptural Reflection

Dr. Jack Rogers warns us of the perils of “proof-texting” – plucking a particular Bible passage out of its context and using it to prove a theological absolute.

Yet we are all naturally accustomed to absorbing the Bible in bits and pieces. In this day and age, few Christians sit down to read and study the entire Bible. Instead, we hear snippets during worship, or we may read a few verses as a daily devotional. Jesus himself often expressed his view by pulling out specific passages from what we now know as the Old Testament.

So what’s the difference between these practices and proof-texting?

No doubt some scripture rings with such timeless clarity that we don’t need to know its particular place in the Bible: “You shall have no other gods before me.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

But generally, scripture shouldn’t have to hide from its context. Indeed, context often heightens or diminishes a passage’s meaning and significance.

This point is driven home in Acts 8:26-34 when the apostle Philip happens upon an Ethiopian eunuch who is reading the Book of Isaiah on the side of a road.

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asks.

“How can I,” he replies, “unless someone explains it to me? ... Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”

The eunuch knows: To fully grasp the message, we need to determine the circumstances in which it was delivered. Who said it? Where in the Bible was it taken from? When was it written? Without that information, we can easily be misled, or worse, flat get it wrong.

How often do we hear this familiar passage quoted to justify revenge: “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Exodus 21:24). But the actual meaning becomes clear when taking into account that some nonviolent criminals during this ancient time were sentenced to execution. In fact, the admonition was advocating punishment that fit the crime. It was an appeal for mercy.

Some people use Jesus’ observation, “The poor you will always have with you” (Mark 14:1-9), to justify a less-than-charitable spirit. But Jesus actually uttered these words to honor the generosity of Mary Magdalene as she anointed his feet with an expensive perfume.

Another important point to remember is that not all Bible passages were created equal. The books of the Minor Prophets, such as Obadiah and Malachi, can’t be compared to the power and significance of Genesis or Exodus. There is a reason many Bibles use typography to set Jesus’ words apart; the red lettering highlights their importance relative to the surrounding text.

The Apostle Paul offers Christians considerable counsel – from commanding women not to cut their hair (1 Corinthians 11:6) to admonishing the squabbling Corinth congregation “that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians

12:25). But the “pecking order” of the two directives seems obvious when considering one speaks to a cosmetic custom and the other reflects Christ’s spirit of reconciliation.

So the story goes, the bawdy Vaudevillian W.C. Fields was once caught reading the Bible. When asked why, the comedian replied, “Looking for loopholes.”

The anecdote underscores our very human urge to fit the Bible to meet our wants and needs, and proof-texting has often served that urge. But the Bible means something apart from the knowledge and experiences we bring to it, and we honor God by prayerfully seeking these eternal truths.

Yes, Scripture can speak to us, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we get to steer the conversation. – *Bishop Richard B. Wilke*

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

- What is Jack Rogers’ definition of biblical interpretation?
- What is the problem with the “common sense” approach to interpreting Scripture?
- How has “proof-texting” been used to justify doing harm to other people?
- How did the concept of “Neo-Orthodoxy” resolve the conflict between two competing approaches to interpreting Scripture?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- How did you become aware that Christian tradition defines homosexuality as a sin? What was your response?
- How important has context been in your understanding of Scripture?
- How do you react to the idea that there is only one “right” way to read Scripture?

FOR FURTHER READING

Barton, John, *How the Bible Came to Be* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998)

Goldingay, John, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995)

Rogers, Jack, *Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995)

Rogers, Jack, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006)

Rogers, Jack, *Reading the Bible and the Confessions: The Presbyterian Way* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999)

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LESSON THREE

Text and Context

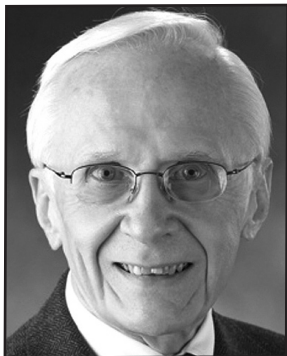
Victor Paul Furnish

The languages of the ancient world, in which the biblical traditions and writings developed, had no word for “homosexuality.” This is a recent term, coined only in the second half of the 19th century after human sexuality became a subject for investigation by biologists, sociologists, and psychologists. The same is true of “heterosexuality.” Both words are used in reference to *sexual orientation*, a concept that was unknown in the ancient world. The ancient Israelites and the earliest Christians, like ancient peoples in general, presumed quite simplistically that everyone is erotically attracted to the opposite sex. No doubt homoerotic activity (same-gender sexual relations) did exist, but depending on the culture, it was considered anything from an uncontrolled lust to simply an alternate form of sexual behavior, and not a separate characteristic.

Of course, the Bible is not silent on the subject of sex as an essential fact of life. It speaks of the creation of “male and female,” tells stories that have sexual aspects, and sometimes conveys rules or advice about sexual conduct. In recent discussions of homosexuality, however, the few, brief passages that address homoerotic conduct have gained a notoriety far beyond their prominence within the Bible itself. As we turn to these scattered references, we need to keep two important points in mind.

First, each of the so-called “homosexuality” passages has to be read in the light of all of its contexts. Each passage has a particular literary, situational, cultural, and religious setting. When we ignore those settings we risk trivializing the Bible by turning it into a mere collection of verses.

Second, there is no passage where homoerotic conduct constitutes the



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The issues and passages discussed in this lesson are examined more extensively in Chapter Three of The Moral Teaching of Paul (third edition).

main topic or receives extended discussion. We find only incidental references and passing allusions, and in some cases we have to look hard even for those. Because two passages in Paul's letters are so often cited as definitive of what the Bible "tells us" about homosexuality, we shall pay special attention to them. We must begin, however, by considering two contextual factors that shaped Paul's outlook: the Bible that was part of his Jewish heritage (what Christians call the "Old Testament") and the views of homoerotic sex that prevailed in the Greco-Roman world.

The Jewish Bible (Old Testament)

The Creation Accounts: When the book of Genesis was compiled, two distinct accounts of creation – representing different traditions – were combined, one after the other. The later version, which actually appears first in the text (Genesis 1:1–2:4a), tells of God's creating "male and female" on the sixth day and blessing them to "be fruitful and multiply" (1:26-28). According to the earlier account (Genesis 2:4b-24), the Lord God first created only a man. Then, to provide him an appropriate partner, God created a woman from one of the man's ribs, "bone of [his] bones and flesh of [his] flesh" (verses 20-23). Some people interpret these accounts as proof that God's creation of two different sexes is for the exclusive purpose of heterosexual union and procreation. Thus, they conclude, any homoerotic activity violates the will of God.

No one can dispute that these accounts, taken together, were written under the assumption that human sexual activity was only for the purpose of procreation (Genesis 1) and male-female companionship (Genesis 2). This is exactly why they should not be used as "anti-gay" texts. The question of homoerotic relationships was nowhere on the horizon for those who formulated these accounts. Moreover, the writers did not address what people should and shouldn't do. They sought to explain why things were as people commonly perceived them to be. Question: why are some people male and some female? Answer: to assure the continuation of the human species that God created. Question: why is a man so filled with desire to become "one flesh" with a woman? Answer: because she was created for him, of his own flesh and bone. These accounts say nothing about any of the moral issues associated with sexual conduct, such as monogamy, adultery, or prostitution. And they take no account of people who have chosen celibacy, for example, or who are physically or emotionally incapable of sexual relationships.

Sodom: If the creation accounts are silent about homoerotic relationships, what about the story of Sodom that comes later in Genesis (Chapter 19)? After all, the word "sodomy," which derives from the name of this ancient city, eventually came to describe any homosexual act. But that isn't what lies at the heart of these passages. Genesis 19 tells what happened when Lot, who was following the accepted practice of the day, invited two presumably weary travelers to spend the night in his home (verses 1-3). Some of the city's ne'er-do-wells, hearing about Lot's visitors, came knocking on the door wanting to have sex with them. When Lot, committed to protecting his guests, offered the ruffians his virgin daughters instead (verses 4-8), they were declined. The visitors, who were really angels in disguise, finally escaped unharmed by blinding their would-be attackers.

These men of Sodom were intent on committing what we call homosexual rape, and it is fair to cite this story as condemning all such violent acts. But the subject of consensual, committed same-sex relationships is not in view. Even the story's "homosexual" aspect is not as prominent in the original telling as it has been made out to be in modern re-tellings. According to Ezekiel, for example, the "abominable things" committed in Sodom were pride, gluttony, excessive prosperity, and indifference to the poor (16:49-50). Finally, anyone who wishes to lean on this story for moral guidance in matters of sex has to reckon with its implicit endorsement of Lot's offer to let the men of Sodom have at it with his virgin daughters! This should be a reminder that the ancient world viewed sex and sexual relationships from a decidedly patriarchal point of view.

Leviticus: The only direct biblical prohibition of homoeroticism is the rule that appears in two slightly different versions in Leviticus: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (18:22); and "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them" (20:13). The so-called "Holiness Code" (Leviticus, chapters 17-26) specified ways in which the Israelites were to maintain their distinctive identity as God's chosen people, a people "set apart" (the basic meaning of "holy") from the other peoples of the earth. We may think of the requirements of this Holiness Code as marking the boundary line that should separate Israelites from non-Israelites.

Some of these boundary markers, such as the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18), are *moral* laws that were intended to ensure harmony and mutually respectful relationships. But there are also *purity* laws, which were provided to assure that objects and people would remain authentic representatives of the category God had assigned them. In this context, "purity" was not understood as a moral characteristic but as being true to one's *kind* in an objective sense. This was the aim of laws against eating food with blood in it, sowing two kinds of seed in the same field, wearing two different fabrics at once, having intercourse with a menstruating woman, incest, and bestiality. It also was the reason for the prohibition of male same-sex intercourse, which contains two particular expressions that deserve attention.

First, the activity is called an "abomination" in both versions of the law. This translates a Hebrew word that was used to express a strong sense of abhorrence; the remarriage of divorced women and eating unclean food are among other behaviors so described in the Hebrew Bible. This term expresses one's "gut reaction" to something that has been experienced as inherently repulsive. However, it does not express a judgment arrived at through a process of moral reasoning. This rule neither offers nor allows for any sort of moral reflection about the conduct it condemns so absolutely.

Second, in both versions the prohibited act is identified as a male "lying with a male *as with a woman*." From the standpoint of the Holiness Code, both partners in male same-sex intercourse were violating what ancient society took to be their true male nature. One was seen as defiling his masculinity by subjecting another male, rather than a female, to sexual penetration; the other was seen as defiling his masculinity by submitting to penetration as only a female should. It is easy to see

that both the content and the formulation of this law reflect the patriarchal outlook that Israel shared with the rest of the ancient world.

If we buy into the Levitical condemnation of male homoeroticism, we also must buy into the presuppositions on which it is based: acceptance of the Israelite system of ritual purity and the belief that women are inferior to men and obliged to submit to them. This rule takes no account whatever of the matters that are pertinent to any *moral* assessment of homoeroticism, such as the ages of the males involved, whether the relationship is consensual, and whether female homoeroticism is equally taboo. For a rule to have true moral authority, it must be based on specifically moral reasoning.

The Greco-Roman World

Paul's views were shaped not only by his knowledge of the Jewish Bible but also by other currents of thought in his day. From other writers, we know a good deal about the attitudes toward homoeroticism that prevailed in the Greco-Roman world. A few observations about these will help prepare us to understand the apostle's comments on this subject.

In the first century of our era, most Mediterranean societies were organized in accord with the belief that males were "by nature" smarter, stronger and more morally fit than females. This gender stereotyping contributed to the widespread belief that men who engaged in same-sex intercourse were letting their sexual desires run wild, and – even worse – dishonoring their manliness by failing to exercise dominance over a woman. Similarly, women who had sex with other women were seen as failing to submit as they should to men. For example, the moral philosopher Musonius (30–102 C.E.) contended that "sexual excess" drove a man (he did not mention women) to seek "a variety" of lovers; so the man who had sex with another male was calling his manhood into question. Like other philosophers, Musonius also believed that the very same lusts that drove men to female prostitutes would drive them, at length, to seduce other men (12.1-10 in "Musonius Rufus," trans. Cora E. Lutz). Again, homoerotic relations were generally regarded as a lustful sexual outlet, not as an expression of any sort of intimate emotional bond.

First-century Jewish writers supported and expanded these views on the basis of their scriptures and traditions. For them, homoerotic conduct was a rejection of God's purpose in creation and thus also of one's "true" nature – because God had differentiated "male and female" and commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply." A statement of the Jewish philosopher Philo (who died about 45 C.E.) is typical: men who lie together are pursuing "an unnatural pleasure" and thereby "destroying the means of procreation" (*Special Laws* 3.39). Elsewhere, echoing the common view that uncontrolled sexual desires may drive one toward either a man or a woman, Philo refers to the Sodomites' sexual intercourse with men as if it were one form of their "mad lust for women" (*On Abraham* 135-37). Another Jewish writing of about the same time condemns not only intercourse between males but also intercourse between females, who are admonished not to "imitate the sexual role of men" (*Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* 190-92).

Of course Jesus was also a first-century Jewish teacher, but there is nothing in the Gospels to suggest that he ever taught or said anything about homoerotic

relationships. Although Sodom is mentioned a few times in the sayings attributed to Jesus, the city is not identified with any particular vice, and there is no reference at all to the Levitical rule against a male having sex with another male. If Jesus had anything to say on the subject, those who compiled his teachings seem not to have regarded his views as distinctive or important enough to hand on.

The Apostle Paul

Paul's letters contain no passages that discuss same-sex intercourse as a topic in its own right. The only letters in which the subject surfaces even briefly are 1 Corinthians and Romans.

1 Corinthians: In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul lists thieves, robbers, adulterers, and the greedy as “wrongdoers [who] will not inherit the kingdom of God.” In the apostle's day, such behaviors were regarded as obviously wicked, not only by Jews and Christians but also by society in general. As modern readers, we have no quarrel with this judgment. But also on the list are two Greek words that require further consideration. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates them, respectively, as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites.”

The root meaning of the first word is “softness,” and it was often used to describe males who were regarded as effeminate. This term was applied not only to boys who sold sexual favors to male clients, but to any male who engaged in homoerotic conduct, whether as a prostitute or not.

“Sodomites” (NRSV) is a misleading translation for the second word because it does not derive from the name “Sodom.” It is a combination of the Greek words for “male” and “bed,” both of which occur in the Greek version of the Levitical rule against a male having sex with another male. Paul's usage is the earliest known occurrence of the word in Greek literature, and it may have been coined by the apostle himself. Paired with the reference to “softness,” it presumably refers to the dominant partner in male same-sex intercourse. (The term also occurs in 1 Timothy 1:10 in a letter written in Paul's name after his death.)

The wording in this list leaves it unclear whether Paul was thinking of male prostitutes and their male clients (as the NRSV has it) or of any two males who have sex together. We can be reasonably certain that he condemned at least the first, because his next paragraph goes on to admonish males who visit female prostitutes (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). But several questions go unanswered. Does Paul mean to rule out all male homoerotic relationships? If so, on what basis? And what about female homoeroticism? Another passage in Paul's letters offers other clues about his stance on the topic.

Romans: There is no question, given what the apostle says in Romans 1:24-27, that he regarded homoeroticism as evil whether or not prostitution was involved, and whether it occurred between males or females. His reference to such conduct is worth quoting in full:

²⁴Therefore God gave [idolaters] up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the

truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, ²⁷and 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.

To understand what is going on here, we need to consider its many contexts.

In its literary context, this passage stands in the first main section of Romans where Paul is arguing that the whole of humankind has fallen under the power of sin (1:18–3:20). After emphasizing that sin tyrannizes both Gentiles (1:20-32) and Jews (2:17–3:20), he proclaims the good news that sin’s power has been broken by God’s love revealed in Christ Jesus (3:21–8:39). We should notice two critical points. First, as in 1 Corinthians, same-sex intercourse is only one of the vices that Paul lists. He also mentions such evils as covetousness, murder, deceitfulness, gossip, insolence, and arrogance. Second, he names these evils not as the essence of sin but as examples of the consequences of sin’s power.

To grasp his point, we also need to consider the passage’s theological context. Paul states the theme of his letter to the Romans in 1:16-17: the gospel is God’s “power for salvation to everyone who has faith,” both Jews and Gentiles, and it discloses God’s righteousness. The bad news about humanity’s sin is, therefore, only a sub-theme in this letter. It paves the way for Paul’s much longer exposition of

WHAT IS ‘NORMAL’? WHAT IS ‘NATURAL’?

In modern English the word “normal” is sometimes used to identify a person as “heterosexual,” implying that anyone of homosexual orientation is “abnormal.” In ancient Hebrew and Greek, however, there are no exact equivalents for “normal” and “abnormal.”

It is worth noting, for example, that the widely used New Revised Standard Version of the Bible employs the word “normal” only three times, only when paraphrasing, and never where sexual conduct is the topic (Exodus 14:27, Kings 20:10; and in the Apocrypha, Wisdom 19:20).

There are, however, references to “natural” and “unnatural” sexual conduct in many ancient Greek texts, including the works of philosophers and Jewish writers before and during Paul’s life. When the apostle himself uses this expression in Romans 1:26-27, he is merely echoing the long and widely held view that all same-sex intercourse is “unnatural” (literally, “against nature”). People thought that sex was “natural” only when it was an expression of a male’s superiority over a female and could result potentially in her pregnancy.

Ancient opinions concerning “natural” and “unnatural” sex were shaped by superficial observations, random impressions, and cultural stereotypes. They were not based on the kind of evidence that modern science requires before judging something to be “natural” or “unnatural.”

In one letter, for example, Paul declares quite matter-of-factly that “nature itself” teaches women to let their hair grow long and men to keep theirs short (1 Corinthians 11:14). But where Paul appeals to “nature” in support of his view, we would speak instead of what is currently fashionable. – *Rev. Victor Furnish, Ph.D.*

the good news of God's saving grace that is bestowed in Christ. This gospel of grace is the heart and soul of Paul's message. He does not identify the sin that holds human beings captive with any particular vice or accumulation of vices, but as the refusal to let God be God – the refusal to accept one's life as a gift, and to acknowledge one's accountability to the Giver. We may think of this as a Pauline version of Murphy's Law: when the gift and claim of God are spurned, anything that can go wrong will. As in 1 Corinthians, Paul includes same-sex intercourse as one of the obvious evils that results from the fundamental sin of idolatry. To understand why, we must consider the social context of his reference.

When Paul uses blunt expressions like “degrading passions,” “unnatural,” “consumed with burning desire” (my translation), and “shameless acts” with reference to same-sex intercourse, he is echoing the attitude and even the language of many moral philosophers in his day. From the works of Greco-Roman writers like those previously cited, we get a good idea of what led Paul and so many of his contemporaries to view homoeroticism as an “obvious” vice:

- Critics of homoerotic activity invariably associated it with raging lust and uncontrolled sexual desires.
- Even the most sophisticated thinkers of the day had no concept of sexual orientation, and so never had the opportunity to consider these acts through that lens.
- All same-sex intercourse was judged to be unnatural – both because it could not produce offspring and because it was thought to violate the “natural” superiority of males to females.

These are the assumptions and stereotypes that lie behind Paul's two negative references to same-sex intercourse. It certainly makes no sense to fault Paul and other ancient writers for ignoring knowledge that has been gained only in the last century and half. But we are in a different situation. On the one hand, we do not take the Bible seriously if we fail to appreciate that its references to same-sex relationships reflect ideas and values that were deeply ingrained in the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world. On the other hand, we will not be taking our own task of moral discernment seriously if we fail to understand that those ideas and values were based on assumptions and prejudices that are no longer credible.

WHAT IS 'THE TRUTH'?

A Scriptural Reflection

Over the centuries, biblical interpretation has been an exercise of getting at the truth. This springs, of course, from a desire to do God's will. We want to "get it right."

But before the search for the truth can begin, a fundamental question must first be asked: What exactly is the truth?

This is no easy question. To a mathematician, the truth could be two plus two equals four. To a judge, the truth could be uncovering the motive behind a criminal act. To the Pharisees in Jesus' time, the truth no doubt was the letter of the law. They believed they were pleasing God by following strict doctrine: Don't labor on the Sabbath. Circumcise male babies. Refrain from eating from a list of "unclean" foods. Keep separate from Gentiles and other non-believers.

Clearly, the concept of truth was central to Jesus' ministry. Time and again, before he uttered a parable, a command, or a response to a question, he prefaced it by saying, "I tell you the truth." Yet time and again, what followed often was in direct conflict with accepted doctrine.

When Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink of water, she knew well the perilous line he was asking her to cross: "'How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?' For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." (John 4:9).

But Jesus insisted on the water, and when he did so, he was rejecting the standard definition of the truth. No longer was it simply a matter of do's and don'ts, rights and wrongs. To Jesus, the truth transcended legalisms. It dealt with how people treat one another.

Every time Jesus crossed boundaries, he communicated a level of selfless compassion that didn't fit inside the neatness of rules. "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her," he told a group of teachers and Pharisees who wanted to follow the law and punish an adulterer (John 8:7). "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," Jesus replied when asked to identify the "greatest" rule of all (Matthew 22:37).

We need rules and laws to bring order to our households, our communities, our world. Indeed, rules and laws are important, often crucial. But Jesus tells us they aren't necessarily the last word. When he offered the Samaritan woman "the water of life," he placed love – not rules – at the very center of truth. – *Bishop Richard B. Wilke*

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

- What was important to the writers of the Old Testament that would make them condemn so-called “homoerotic” behavior?
- How does our understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation differ from the perceptions of early Christians?
- How did gender roles and gender stereotypes contribute to Paul’s understanding of same-sex relations?
- How does Victor Paul Furnish interpret Paul’s concept of sin?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- The Bible issues many commands, both large and small. How do you determine which are important as you seek to lead a Christian life?
- How do you reconcile ignoring some rules in the Bible (such as those that prohibit eating pork or shellfish) while adhering to others?
- What is your own definition of “the truth”?

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LESSON FOUR

The Sweep of History

Nancy Kruh

Almost 2,000 years have passed since Paul spread the gospel and wrote his epistles, and in that time, Christian beliefs and practices have evolved in ways that no doubt would be mind-boggling to the apostle. Many of his admonitions have come and gone. Women no longer have to remain silent in church. Divorce is accepted for reasons besides adultery. His warnings not to marry now strike us as downright peculiar. Yet over two millennia, Paul's belief in the sinful nature of homoeroticism has endured.

We know well the words he wrote in that distant past; we also know well how the issue is affecting the present. But most of us have only the vaguest idea of what transpired in between. How have we gotten from then to now? How has this meager amount of scripture come to play such a provocative role in Christian culture? No doubt history is on the side of Paul. But what exactly is that history?

We tend to use our own contemporary views on sexual identity to interpret ancient eras, but Dr. Victor Paul Furnish has already given us a glimpse of how differently the people in Paul's day grasped their sexuality. As David Halperin, a historian in the field of gender studies, notes, we not only "have a hard time understanding the logic at work in other historical cultures' organization of sex and gender, but we have an even harder time understanding our own inability to understand them. We can't figure out what it is about our own experiences that are not universal."

In recent decades, as scholars in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, and religion have begun serious study of sexuality, their task has been to set aside our ingrained assumptions and try to figure out what has led us to where we are today. Through the study of writings and other evidence left behind, what they have pieced



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together is a global history of sexual behavior as diverse and complex as every other realm of human experience. Lively debates abound over the interpretation of data, but this can be said for certain: Same-sex eroticism has existed in cultures throughout recorded history around the world, and it has been met with responses ranging from hostility to tolerance to acceptance and even to reverence.

For this study, our focus naturally is on the beginnings of Christianity and the forces that shaped the Christian response to homoerotic behavior down through the ages. Dr. Furnish has started the narrative. Examining what ensued can help us understand more fully how the development of Christianity guided perceptions of sexuality, as well as how those perceptions sustained the aversion to homoerotic activity.

The influence of early Christian thinkers

Christianity took many different routes as it first made its way through Africa, Asia, and Europe. The canon of writings that eventually became the New Testament was just beginning to be assembled, and countless sects splintered off, each with its own interpreters struggling – and competing – to establish the tenets of Christian faith. A sense of identity was crucial to the newly faithful, and sexual behavior played a large part in it: Early Christians needed to act in ways that separated them from Jews and pagans, and customs regarding marriage, gender roles, and sexual behavior were considered major dividing lines. As the different groups jostled in the same geographic areas, sexuality proved such a flash point that accusations of orgies and sexual deviancy were regularly hurled between Christians, Jews, and pagans.

Paul's condemnation of homoeroticism may have laid a cornerstone for early Christian tenets, but many others followed to add the rest of the foundation. Paul drew his denunciation from the concepts of holiness and purity found in Leviticus, as well as from the deeply entrenched cultural stereotypes of gender roles. Clement of Alexandria (circa 150-215 C.E.), one of the most prolific and prominent early theologians, referred to a wide range of religious and secular sources. His rationale can be examined as a model of what eventually became prevailing opinion.

Like Philo, the Jewish philosopher who was a contemporary of Jesus and Paul, Clement framed his contempt for homoeroticism within his more general views about procreation (which Paul wrote little about) and gender roles. In Clement's view, having sexual intercourse "for any purpose other than generating children" was to "violate nature." Indeed, homoeroticism may have been deemed among the worst transgressions, but it also was lumped in with a litany of other "unnatural" sexual practices, including masturbation and any form of marital intimacy undertaken for the sake of pleasure.

Clement's convictions seem to have as much to do with existing Christian sources as with two other cultural forces during the era: the Greek philosophy of Plato and a severe form of self-denial known as "asceticism."

A champion of discipline and reason, Plato considered sexual pleasure an evil to be resisted; in his view, the experience of an orgasm was the ultimate humiliation. Asceticism was an age-old lifestyle associated with Jewish and Christian holy men (such as the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist), and renunciation of worldly pleasures, particularly sexual pleasure, was a key aspect. Though few practiced asceticism, it still fostered the belief that abstinence, and particularly virginity, made the body a more suitable receptacle for divine guidance.

Clement's concept of gender roles, which coincided with Paul's, formed his other argument. God made man, Clement believed, to be the dominant actor in the world; woman, his inferior, was to submit to him devotedly. Any sign of weakened virility – not only in sexual behavior but also in dress and grooming – was to act like a woman, and so contrary to nature. "He who denies his masculinity in broad daylight," Clement wrote, "will certainly prove himself to be a woman at night." Conversely, homoerotic behavior among women was considered contrary to nature because it flouted their role as man's wife and helpmate.

The scholar also adhered to a dominant view that the "male seed" was the source of God's creative power, and women's wombs were merely vessels. To Clement, any sexual act that wasted seed, whether between a man and a woman or between two men, was considered "unnatural." "The male seed contains within itself nature's thoughts," Clement wrote. "To shame nature's thoughts by irrationally bringing them on unnatural paths is totally godless." Here, his term for "irrationally" literally meant not in accord with divine reason.

Clement at least championed marriage as an institution that sanctified the man's seed. The institution of marriage, however, was far different from the one we know today. While religious moral standards had their impact, marriage still was the province of the Roman state, not the church. In fact, a religious wedding ceremony was not required by the church until the 13th century, more than a millennium after Christ's time. The purpose of Roman *matrimonium* – taken from the Latin root word for "mother" – was the creation of legitimate heirs among the upper class. In an era burdened with an astonishing mortality rate, procreation was all-important; compatibility between husband and wife was optional. Because of the significance of property rights, marriage between classes, as well as between slaves, was forbidden. For upper-class men who shunned the strictures of marriage, taking a concubine from a lower class was an accepted practice, even among Christians.

Clement's contemporary, Tertullian of Carthage – the influential theologian who coined the term "trinity" – favored celibacy over marriage, or at the very least, a celibate marriage once children came along. He believed intercourse drove out the Holy Spirit, thus depriving even married couples of its divine guidance. Tertullian blamed women for men's sexual philandering; he compared remarriage by a widow to fornication, adultery, even murder; he classified homoerotic women with prostitutes and castrated men; he also gave the same weight to gendered dress codes as he did to rules about sex.

Tenets of the early church

The fact that both Clement and Tertullian communicated so passionately on these topics clearly suggests they were observing what they considered sexual deviancy in their midst. How successfully early Christians followed their pronouncements, though, is far less clear than the words these men left behind. Yet in time, their injunctions and other similar ones took on a life of their own and were carried forward as tenets of the early church.

More than a century later, two more enduring molders of Christian conduct emerged: Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.) and John Chrysostom (347-407 C.E.).

In modern debates over homosexuality, Adam and Eve often appear as examples of God's plan for humanity. But when Augustine formed his views about sexual behavior, he gravitated to another aspect of the couple's story – their fall from grace. He interpreted the moment "they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7)

as the introduction of sexual shame. From that point on, Augustine concluded, man and woman were corrupted by sexual urges independent of God's will. Therefore, every act of sex, "natural" or "unnatural," was a sinful reminder of the Fall. He believed marriage was important to keep the libido in check, but even in procreative sex, Adam and Eve's "original sin" was passed on at conception. Augustine just as insistently condemned homoeroticism, again drawing on arguments concerning gender roles and procreation, but his blanket assessment of the sinfulness of all sex had the further effect of banishing homoerotic behavior to an even darker corner of transgression.

John Chrysostom decided the Fall had made marriage a necessity, most specifically to dampen lustful impulses. And to him, no lust was as sinful as homoeroticism. His sermon on Romans 1:26 was the most exhaustive pronouncement on homoerotic behavior in the first millennium of the church; he also was the first biblical interpreter to identify homoeroticism as not just Sodom's worst sin, but its only sin. Like so many of his predecessors, Chrysostom primarily based his outrage on the culture's gender roles. Of male homoeroticism, he preached: "For I should say not only that you have become a woman, but that you have lost your manhood, and have neither changed into that nature nor kept that which you had. You have been a traitor to both of them at once." His recommendation for the sinful was death by stoning.

Doubtless the judgments of these early church fathers were intended to instill civility during a time of social strain and upheaval, as well as to help chart a course for a new religion. But their restrictions and renunciations essentially created a pall of sexual repression over early Christianity – repression, it could be argued, that still reverberates in our discomfort with the subject today. Perhaps not unpredictably, the pronouncements that identified the separate ways to salvation and damnation eventually infiltrated governmental laws and punishments. It proved to be a relatively short distance between advocating stoning and the actual executions.

Persecution, torture, and death

By the early fourth century, Christianity had earned the favor of the emperors, ushering in Roman laws that mirrored the religion's sexual code of conduct. At first these laws were directed at suppressing pagan homoeroticism, and in particular, the passive male. Then, in 527 C.E., a devout but ruthless Christian named Justinian assumed the eastern Roman emperors and compiled a set of laws that would have a sweeping influence all the way up to the age of Napoleon. Included in the Code of Justinian was the legal weight that sanctioned the persecution, torture, mutilation, and execution of the men, particularly, accused of homoeroticism:

"Therefore We order all men to avoid such offences, to have the fear of God in their hearts, and to imitate the example of those who live in piety; for as crimes of this description cause famine, earthquake, and pestilence, it is on account, and in order that men may not lose their souls, that We admonish them to abstain from the perpetration of the illegal acts above mentioned."

Evidence exists that a series of earthquakes occurred in Justinian's time – events that would have demanded an explanation to a terrified populace. And so the fusing of the "sin of Sodom" and God's punishment of Sodom was now complete: Homoeroticism was officially blamed for the catastrophic loss of innocent human life.

Evidence also exists that Justinian didn't limit his application of the law to people caught in the act. Eyewitness accounts weren't required to lodge accusations; the merest hint or rumor of homoerotic activity was often enough to bring charges. Justinian's court historian left behind private accounts suggesting the emperor was not above accusing his wealthy subjects of sodomy, paganism, and heresy in order to extort money. Later, rulers across Europe would exploit sodomy laws to cement control over their subjects, rid themselves of rivals, and create scapegoats for defeats on the battlefield.

The statutes gained additional credibility from "penitentials," catalogs that priests used to determine the severity of a confessor's specific sins. Homoerotic acts were among the most serious sexual transgressions, but the guidelines also enforced a severe form of sexual discipline on even marital intimacy, which tended to leave the faithful both guilt-ridden and fearful of eternal damnation. The church exploited these responses, even offering the promise of salvation in exchange for a suitable contribution.

Categories of sexual sin

In the 13th century, medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas penned *Summa Theologiae*, a treatise of such profound importance that aspects of it echo even today in the Catholic Church. Once again, procreation was raised as a reason to refrain from "unnatural" sex acts; Aquinas also argued (incorrectly) that same-sex behavior was unknown in the animal world. His four categories of sexual sin, in order of seriousness, were masturbation; male-female intercourse in the "wrong vessel" or in the wrong position; relations between the same sex; and, worst of all, bestiality. By Aquinas' standard, masturbation and contraception were less "natural" than rape, which at least held the possibility of creating new life.

How much these harsh laws led to executions is unclear. A Swiss document records the earliest known death in 1277 when a "Lord Haspisperch" was burned at the stake for sodomy. Men were more frequently the targets of prosecution and punishment; the first known legislation that mentions women was written in France in the 13th century. Records from the Spanish Inquisition show "sodomites" were actively sought out for prosecution, torture, and execution. Prosecutions occurred in Venice in the 15th and 16th centuries with many ending in execution. In the first half of the 17th century, more than two dozen men in Portugal were burned at the stake, including four nobles and seven priests. Executions in England peaked in the early 19th century. Many recorded incidents involved mobs that dispensed their own torture and punishment without benefit of interrogation, let alone a trial.

The Reformation may have led to more religious freedom in Europe, but the culture of sexual repression successfully made the transition to Protestantism. It also reached the New World as Puritans set the moral tone in the American colonies.

The 19th century finally ushered in legal reforms. Attitudes eased on punishing religious crimes, and burnings became regarded as barbaric. France decriminalized sodomy in 1791, and other European countries eventually followed suit. In the United States, the death penalty for sodomy was abolished, state by state, through the 1800s. Though laws still made sodomy illegal, prosecutions lessened. Pockets of tolerance and male homoerotic subcultures began to emerge in urban areas, both in Europe and the United States. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a shared household between two unmarried women was accepted as a so-called

“Boston marriage,” though it was assumed the relationship was platonic.

Despite these shifts, however, the Christian church generally responded with intolerance. The straitlaced Victorian era added to the centuries-old discomfort with sex that was first instilled by the early church; one common view held that women had little sex drive at all. The importance of strict gender roles, and the subordination of women, continued to endure.

The 19th century also marked a time when the systematizing of sexuality expanded beyond religion and the law into the growing fields of science, medicine, and psychology. The word “sexuality” didn’t make its first recorded appearance in English until 1700, and the concept of an innate sexual “identity” didn’t firmly take hold until the late 19th century. With it came a growing understanding that homoerotic behavior wasn’t necessarily a choice, and its cause was variously described by doctors and psychiatrists as a genetic disorder, a mental illness, or a failure to sexually mature.

The word “homosexual” appears in some 20th-century Bible translations, despite the fact it wasn’t even invented until the 19th century. The word first appeared in print in an 1868 pamphlet in Germany; its American debut arrived 23 years later. The first public use of “heterosexual” occurred in Germany in 1880, but its original meaning actually pertained to sexual perversion. Though today’s debates often assume the heterosexual/homosexual symmetry has always been a given, the juxtaposing of the two terms didn’t even begin to be popularized until the 1930s.

The cause and criminalization of homosexuality have been widely re-evaluated only in the past few decades. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association dropped it from its official list of mental illnesses, and research now leans toward a biological basis for sexual orientation – whether homosexual or heterosexual – though a so-called “gay gene” has yet to be identified. The last U.S. laws criminalizing sodomy were overturned by a Supreme Court decision in 2003.

Yet the condemnation of homosexuality in certain Christian circles persists, based in part on “church tradition.” But what of that tradition? Early church fathers’ insistence that sexual relations are intended exclusively for procreation has long since been abandoned. Most people now consider mutual pleasure to be a wholesome aspect of sex, encouraged by the widespread acceptance and use of birth control, which has made procreation optional. The modern church no longer considers all forms of sex to be based in sin. Gender roles have changed dramatically, ushering in equal rights and redefining what it means to be “masculine” and “feminine.” The contemporary understanding of sexuality as an identity contradicts the ancient notion that homoerotic behavior is simply deranged male-female lust. Original assumptions about what is “natural” break down in the face of so many competing, and contradictory, definitions of the word over the centuries.

Finally, to embrace the whole of “church tradition,” we also must include the church’s historic endorsement and encouragement of persecution, torture, and barbaric execution.

No doubt much of what we consider church tradition has formed the faith we cherish today. But we can’t afford to forget that the goodness – indeed, the godliness – of Christianity has often revealed itself when certain parts of that tradition were abandoned.

THE GIFT OF COMPROMISE

A Scriptural Reflection

Dissonance is essential in music. Arguments are an integral part of family life. So in the church of Jesus Christ are differences of opinion, even cataclysmic conflict, part of church tradition.

The first major church-wide explosion occurred when the missionaries – men such as Peter, Paul, and Barnabas – began reaching out to people who weren't Jewish. Gentile men who converted were uncircumcised. Gentile women served pork and shrimp. Sometimes they worked on Sabbath. But these Gentiles in Damascus, Caesarea, and elsewhere also had given their hearts to Jesus as Lord and Savior, and they had received the Holy Spirit.

So the early-church leaders gathered for a conference in Jerusalem to hash out these differences. Liberals and conservatives sat together, argued, and prayed.

James, the brother of Jesus, was among the conservatives. He listened as others in his camp insisted Christian converts obey essentials of Hebrew law. They warned: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1).

Then impetuous Peter stood up and gave testimony. He told how God, in a dream, sent him to the Roman centurion Cornelius. What Peter found was an entire Gentile household that had been converted and filled with the Holy Spirit. Realizing "that God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34), Peter told how he allowed his hosts to be baptized.

Paul and Barnabas, also considered on the left wing, told of their conversions in Antioch, and they spoke of all the miraculous "signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12).

How to solve the impasse? James declared, "We should not cause extra difficulty for those among the Gentiles who are turning to God." Then he laid down profound guidelines for compromise: Include the converts in full fellowship, but don't require circumcision or obedience to food laws. Demand they abandon fornication and adultery, worshipping pagan idols, and drinking blood in animal sacrifice (Acts 15:13-21).

The compromise brought clarity and communion to these early leaders. Today, it can offer guidance as the church wrestles with the conflict over homosexuality.

How would James have addressed the contentious issue? It seems likely he would condemn such scriptural sins as sexual promiscuity, rape, and prostitution.

But what of the two gay men who hold hands during prayer, serve as ushers, sing in the choir? Or the two lesbians who take communion together and lead the devotions for the women's circle?

Differences of opinion, as well as unity, can stand on a foundation of love and understanding. As Jesus said to the Father in the great prayer: "They may be one, as we are one" (John 17:22). – *Bishop Richard B. Wilke*

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

- Why was sexual behavior so pivotal to early Christians?
- How did the views on sexual intercourse held by Christian philosophers like Clement and Tertullian of Carthage influence their stance against same-sex relations?
- For several centuries after Christ's time, marriage had very little to do with love or compatibility. According to the citizenry and to Christian interpreters, what was the importance of marriage?
- How did political leaders use accusations of sodomy?
- What factors contributed to our modern understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- How much do you think masculine identity and a general discomfort with the issue of sex have played a role in the controversy over homosexuality and the church?
- How has your own congregation dealt with conflict on various issues, including homosexuality? How did you react to the way conflict was handled?
- How do you think a growing tolerance toward homosexuality among many groups has had an impact on the church and on society in general?

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LESSON FIVE

A Faithful Journey

Roberta Showalter Kreider

We all have our own stories to tell. Surely they are among our most valuable treasures. When we can share and listen without judgment and with compassion, we empower one another to claim who we are and to do the best that we can to live up to our Creator's desire for us.

The story I tell begins many years ago, at a time when homosexuality seemed quite distant from my own life. As the wife of a Mennonite pastor and mother of three, I seldom heard the word, though I was certain it was sin. The way I read my Bible assured me of that. I also had a clear idea of who homosexuals were – sexually depraved people who lived in the shadows, held captive by their own uncontrollable carnal desires. Homosexuality wasn't the sort of thing that happened among Christians, let alone my own family. That's what I thought for 58 years until the day, in 1984, that I visited my youngest brother, Ray, in the hospital.

Growing up in Kansas, Ray and I were as close as a brother and sister could be. Now a nurse in Chicago, he and his wife were the parents of four children. In June 1984, he was admitted to the hospital for tests, but his stay soon turned into weeks. My husband, Harold, and I never were told Ray's diagnosis or prognosis – until we learned he was dying and wanted to see us for a last time. We drove from our home in Pennsylvania to comfort him and tell him goodbye. That's when Ray finally told us what was wrong. He had AIDS. At first, I assumed he had somehow gotten it on the job. But then he said, "I have no one to blame but myself."

He added wistfully, as if wishing we could understand but knowing we couldn't, "My sexual fantasies have always been with men."

I could see the pain and shame written on his gaunt face, and my spirit just



Born in rural Kansas in 1926, Roberta Showalter Kreider spent most of her life believing homosexuality was a sin. But after a change of heart in 1995, she and her husband, Harold, a retired Mennonite pastor, have dedicated themselves to seeking justice in the Christian community on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

Mrs. Kreider is the editor of three books, all anthologies of true-life accounts: From Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People and Those Who Love Them; Together In Love: Faith Stories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Couples; and The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been.

Her "Fifteen Reasons Why I Have Changed My Mind" also has been widely distributed on Internet sites.

sank inside me. How I wished I were the kind of sister he could have confided in before this! I would have bent over backward to help him change.

Harold and I were allowed two brief visits with Ray that weekend before we had to return home. I left with so much I wanted to ask my brother, so much I needed to learn from him. As hard as I tried, I just couldn't reconcile my image of a homosexual with the person I knew as my brother. It seemed a cruel irony that I was losing him before he could help me understand.

The stigma of AIDS

After he died, I wallowed in my own pain and shame. I knew the stigma my church family attached to AIDS, and I struggled with how to talk about it. I didn't want people to mistake my love for my brother with any acceptance of homosexuality. Thankfully, I was able to find considerable comfort in a certainty that Ray had entered the kingdom of heaven. During a private conversation, he had assured Harold and me that he had made his peace with God, and I took this to mean he believed God had forgiven him for his sin of homosexuality. From everything I had ever been told, I knew this was his only path to eternal life.

As a little girl growing up during the Depression, I was taught in my Mennonite church that God loves me, and my mother often sang of grace. But there was also another song we children sang in Sunday school: "He sees what you do, He hears what you say, my God is writing all the time, time, time." Yes, the message of love reached me, but the message of judgment came through even louder. The way I learned to read my Bible left no room for other interpretations, and I felt a terrible need to bring other people to God's word, too, so that we could all enjoy heaven together. There were times when my church disappointed me and didn't have all the answers to satisfy my soul, but nothing mattered to me so much as pleasing God. Always, God's law came before God's love.

But Ray's death left me unsettled in a way I'd never felt before. I searched and prayed for answers. How could he have had such a strong homosexual desire that he would risk his family, his career, and even his life to fulfill it? I began to read what books I could find, to question people, and to try to determine what had happened to the sibling I thought I grew up with. A word, new to me in this context, drew my attention – gay! In my pain and loss, I couldn't see anything gay about homosexuality. Everything I read enforced the judgment that homosexuality is a perversion, as well as a learned and chosen experience. So, even though I still loved my brother, I became more and more vocal against homosexuality. Since I couldn't help my brother, I asked God to send me other homosexuals so I could help them change. But God didn't send even one.

As the years went by, the issue was causing increasing tensions among Christians, and I feared it was inevitable that homosexuals would someday want to become members of my own church body. Then what would I do? To be true to God, would I have to go to another church?

The day of reckoning arrived late in 1994 when some delegates to our regional church assembly raised objections about a Mennonite congregation in Germantown, a Philadelphia suburb about 30 miles from our home. It had just been discovered the church was flouting policy and extending membership to people living in same-sex relationships. At the next assembly, in spring 1995, church

leadership and lay delegates voted to put the congregation on probation for two years contingent on whether they could expunge the sinning in their midst. Though Harold and I were retired from leadership positions by then, we still took the action very seriously because Harold had a vote on issues that came before the assembly body.

No doubt we were firm in our conviction that homosexuality is a sin, but we both agreed it wouldn't be fair to vote on other people's lives when we had never even listened to their stories. So, 10 years after my brother's death, we stepped into the unknown and began seeking out resources that presented a different side. At first we took baby steps. My husband wrote a letter to a pastor we knew who was accepting of homosexuals, and he sent us a list of books we hadn't been aware of. Then we obtained a copy of a video produced by an organization of Mennonites working for a more inclusive church. Watching the video over dinner one night, Harold and I unexpectedly felt tears rolling down our cheeks as gay people with Mennonite backgrounds spoke about the pain of being rejected by their church. Many were in long-term, committed relationships; all seemed humble and sincere in their desire to be faithful Christians. Nothing about them brought to mind the sexual deviants I'd imagined them to be.

Our next tentative step was to contact a co-pastor at the Germantown church with whom I was acquainted. I asked if Harold and I could come visit her – not to condemn or judge, but just to learn. She invited us to attend a Sunday service, and there we recognized some of the people who had appeared on the video. I approached a young man named Doug, who had delivered the message that morning, and confided in him about my brother. He listened as I shared a bit about my 10 years of anguish and search for understanding. He gave me a big hug, and I soon found myself inviting him to our house for dinner.

Several days later, sitting across the table from Doug, I listened as he talked to me about growing up in a strict church, much like mine in my childhood, and how he had never felt at home. He talked about his family and about enduring the recent deaths of his sister-in-law and sister. He spoke of his meaningful work at a Philadelphia social service agency. He shared his hope that one day he would find a partner he could share his life with. And he shared his joy in finally finding a spiritual haven at the Germantown church, where he received the love and acceptance he'd longed for as a child.

Listening in a new way

Everything he told me – everything he was – challenged my stereotypes, and I felt myself listening in a new way. I also couldn't help but think of my brother Ray, and I wondered what his life would have been like if he had come to terms with his sexual orientation. Would he have married his wife? Would he have found a loving, monogamous partnership with another man? Might he still be alive today?

In the coming weeks and months, Harold and I sought out opportunities to get to know other gay people and their families. At one event, I was shocked to meet Mennonite ministers and other church leaders who were supportive of their gay sons and lesbian daughters. At another event, participants were randomly split up into groups to get to know one another, and I found myself in a sea of gay men. Yes, I wanted to learn – but this was really a stretch for me! The event turned out to be a great learning experience and a time of good fellowship with children of God who

were endeavoring to live in the way of Jesus.

Time and again, I encountered this same admirable faithfulness, and slowly, I was learning to listen with compassion to these Christians whom God was putting in my path. Though forsaken by the church, they were certain God had not forsaken them, and they expressed their conviction with enormous sincerity.

Still, that did not mean I could abandon my long-held beliefs quickly or easily. Often, I became fearful and started to draw back. How could I dismiss a lifetime of church teachings, not to mention the Bible passages whose meaning always seemed so obvious? Many times I cried out to God for affirmation, for guidance, and for the assurance that I was not going astray. Always I received the assurance I needed – sometimes in unexpected ways.

One night I was awakened at 3 a.m. with the words, “14 reasons, 14 reasons,” running through my mind. “Lord,” I asked, “do I really have 14 reasons to believe homosexuality isn’t a sin?” Then the reasons began to come swiftly, and I knew there would be no more sleep for me that night until I got up and wrote them down.

Later, as I put pencil to paper, I recalled the witness of my brother’s widow, Ann, who had every right to be bitter but instead sought out Ray’s gay friends and got acquainted with them. She became an advocate for gay people, working as the director of pastoral care for an organization that promotes understanding and caring for AIDS patients.

I reflected on the new insights I’d gathered from books and articles written by biblical scholars, as well as the testimonies Harold and I had heard from the parents of gays and lesbians. Heterosexual members at the Germantown church also had assured us they saw evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work in the lives of the gays and lesbians who worshipped with them. We ourselves had been inspired by the love and mutual respect we encountered among homosexuals in committed, monogamous partnerships. For me to fixate on their sexual lives now seemed as intrusive – and absurd – as fixating on the sexual lives of my heterosexual friends and family members.

As I made my list, I was reminded of Peter’s testimony to the circumcised believers in Jerusalem, who criticized him for breaking bread with uncircumcised Gentiles. Step by step, Peter recounted how God led him to act contrary to Hebrew tradition and teaching: “And as I began to speak [to the Gentiles], the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ... If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:15, 17).

I thought about the gays and lesbians I’d met who had sought help at “ex-gay” ministries. I’d heard many people say, “God can change them.” But the gay friends I knew earnestly prayed for God to help them change, and they found peace only by accepting themselves as people created by God to honor Him. In this acceptance, they came to a new realization of God’s love for them.

I also considered how the church has been wrong before. Growing up, I was taught it was a sin to cut my hair, a sin for a woman to preach, a sin to have insurance, a sin to wear a ring to symbolize marriage – all practices that are no longer considered sinful.

I knew, as well, what it felt like to be judged a sinner. When I spent years suffering from a chronic illness, a family member told me in several letters that my health would be restored if I just “quit my sinning.” But I knew then – as I know now

– that I am accepted and loved by God, for His own spirit affirms that truth to me. This experience helped me understand how painful and frustrating it is to be told, “God cannot accept you because you do not live the way I interpret the Bible.” I was sure I’d done my own share of making people feel rejected by God with my own interpretations.

By the end of my writing, my 14 reasons had become 15. Looking at them all, though, I knew which one is the most important reason of all: In the words of Jesus, my Lord and model, I can find no condemnation of homosexuals. Instead, Jesus set aside the taboos that were imposed by the law-bound religious leaders of his day. He was passionately concerned for everyone who was despised and treated unjustly, and he did what he could to make life better for them.

The power of our own stories

The incident that set me on my journey to acceptance – the controversy over the Germantown church – was finally resolved with a vote that expelled the congregation from the conference. In two years of debate, never once were gay and lesbian people or their families invited to share their faith stories. Instead the debate centered on language – “sexual perversion,” “the gay agenda,” “a promiscuous lifestyle” – that dehumanized these faithful church members. In my experience, what opens hearts more than anything else is encountering the lives of gays, lesbians, and their families through their stories. Confronting the reality of people’s integrity makes it difficult to judge or condemn.

I also want to listen to the experiences of Christians who believe homosexuality is a sin. But I find they always seem more interested in citing Scripture than reflecting on the faith experiences that have led them to their convictions.

We can all argue Scripture until we’re blue in the face, but we’ll never come out at the same place. What we can’t argue over, though, is our own stories. When we hear someone say, “This is what has happened to me to shape the person I am,” we can’t argue with that. Though I once felt differently, it now seems arrogant to turn around and say, “Well, yes, but I know better who you should be.”

Now, looking back, I see those 10 years of restless soul-searching after my brother’s death as the Holy Spirit nudging me toward a new understanding. Why else would the Germantown church’s situation have affected me so deeply?

If I had been able to tell my story back then, I know it would have been about my own fear. My whole concern was for people to toe the line so they could get to heaven. Now my concern is for people just to know how much God loves them, so they can experience a wonderful fellowship with God.

My definition of sin has changed, as well. Before, I believed the Bible was a rulebook that itemized right and wrong. Now, I believe anything that harms another person is sin – and I can find no harm in the loving, committed relationships I have encountered.

The Bible hasn’t changed. But my perception of it has. The truth never changes. But my understanding of it has. And my search for truth hasn’t ended. Discovering it is a lifelong process, and no matter how long we live, we can never reach the limits of God’s vast storehouse of wisdom.

Today, Harold and I both work for the full inclusion of homosexuals in our

faith community, and we rejoice that the Germantown church is thriving as it attracts families who want to raise their children in an inclusive environment. Along our journey, we have made many precious friends, but we also have lost some. A branch of our family is quite concerned for us, worried that we might not get to heaven. But we have never felt more at peace or more sure of what God is asking of us. When God's spirit is in control, we cannot predict the outcome. We cannot know the way God will lead us. We do know it will never violate God's compassionate, eternal love for all that God has created.

'AS I HAVE LOVED YOU'

A Scriptural Reflection

When Roberta Showalter Kreider discovered her brother was dying of AIDS, she responded with the compassion of Jesus Christ rather than the ostracism that her brother no doubt had feared.

Jesus deliberately focused his ministry on the marginalized. Time and again, he healed the crippled, the demon-possessed, and the infirm in the synagogue, although religious leaders scolded that the labor and healing violated the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6, Luke 4:31-39, Luke 6:10-17). A desperate woman, bleeding for years, had spent all her money on worthless treatments, but she touched the hem of Jesus' cloak and was healed (Mark 5:24-34). Our Lord forgave the prostitute who wept at his feet (Luke 7:36-50). He cured a Roman soldier's servant, though the Jews despised the oppressive Roman occupation (Luke 7:2-10).

Samaritans were even more detested than the Romans. If a Samaritan shadow fell on Jews, they took a bath. If they saw a Samaritan footprint in the mud, they would fill it with straw and set it on fire to cleanse it. Yet Jesus upended all convention when he cast a "good Samaritan" as the hero of his parable (Luke 10:25-37).

Hatred, enmity, condemnation of others – all seem antithetical to both the action and the teachings of Jesus. He laid the groundwork for the church to accept Gentiles when he said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold" (John 10:16). In his own hometown of Nazareth, townspeople tried to throw Jesus off a cliff when he reminded them in synagogue that the prophet Elijah had healed a foreign woman – a widow in Sidon – and the prophet Elisha had healed the leprous (and hated) Syrian general Naaman (Luke 4:16-30).

Over and over Jesus placed kindness and acceptance over custom and social norms. "Love one another," he commanded, "as I have loved you" (John 15:12). He also emphasized hospitality: "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed" (Luke 14:13-14a).

Today, many fathers and mothers, filled with the love of Jesus, are putting their arms around their gay sons and lesbian daughters. Many congregations of loving Christians are welcoming ostracized homosexuals who are lonely and yearning for Christian compassion.

Christ beckons: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (John 15:9). – *Bishop Richard B. Wilke*

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

- What were Roberta Showalter Kreider's early views on homosexuality?
- Mrs. Kreider went through several steps on her journey from condemnation to affirmation. How many can you identify?
- What were the influences that made Mrs. Kreider change her mind?
- What is Mrs. Kreider's new understanding of "sin" and "truth"?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- How was Mrs. Kreider able to resolve the conflict between Scripture and what she calls “our own stories”?
- What part do you think acceptance plays in what Richard Wilke calls “Christian compassion”?
- Mrs. Kreider felt the Holy Spirit work in her life. How have you felt the Holy Spirit work in yours?

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LESSON SIX

The Final Word

Marcus Borg

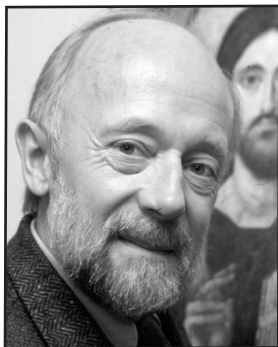
As Brian McLaren did in the first lesson, I begin by sharing memories of growing up Christian. Like him, we were not casual Christians. I grew up in a Lutheran family in a small town in North Dakota and then in a college town in Minnesota in the 1940s and 1950s. Church and Sunday school every week. Only serious sickness was an excuse for staying home. Frequent church suppers. Wednesday evening services during Lent. In my teens, confirmation classes twice a week, on Thursday afternoons and Saturday mornings, for two-and-a-half years. I don't remember this level of involvement as particularly oppressive – it was just what we did.

After confirmation and through high school, I continued to attend church and Sunday school. In the early 1960s I went to a Lutheran college that had chapel services every weekday, as well as six required religion courses. I took more.

I mention all of this to indicate the thoroughness of my Christian socialization and also to make a further point. Namely, in all that time, homosexuality was never mentioned – not in church, Sunday school, or my college classes. It just didn't come up. In this sense, it was a non-issue. It was invisible to us.

Not only in church, but also in school. In high school, I can't recall knowing or thinking that somebody was gay or lesbian. The epithet "fairy" was used, but I don't believe we thought that any particular person was a "fairy." Rather, boys who wore green on Thursdays or who carried their books clutched to their chests rather than at their sides risked being called "fairies." But the idea that some people might be attracted to their own sex crossed few of our minds.

All the way through college, four years of graduate study, and my first five years of teaching college, I wasn't aware of knowing anybody who was gay or



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Described by The New York Times as "a leading figure in his generation of Jesus scholars," Dr. Borg is a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar, and he has served as national chair of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, and co-chair of its International New Testament Program Committee. He also is past president of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars.

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lesbian. Only in my early 30s did I have my first conversation with a student who told me he was gay. It wasn't a shock, and I didn't think of him as a sinner who needed to repent. By that time, I no longer thought of the Bible's behavioral teachings to be the absolute will of God.

But what my own experience tells me is how deeply closeted gay and lesbian people felt they had to be not so long ago. Things have changed dramatically in the last thirty years. The rapidity of the change is a major reason that some Christians of my generation (and older and sometimes younger) have found it hard to believe what is now happening in mainline Protestant churches. Ordination of gay and lesbian people? Clergy in same-sex relationships? Blessing ceremonies – even weddings – for same-sex couples? A bishop publicly in a same-sex relationship? The change from the conventional Christianity of a generation or two ago is remarkable.

The lessons in this book help us to understand both the roots of the change and the resistance to it. Brian McLaren insightfully names fear as a major factor – not just homophobia, as if the issue is that heterosexuals are afraid of gay and lesbian people, but fear in a much more comprehensive sense. By exploring Christian attitudes toward slavery and the subordination of women not so long ago, Jack Rogers points out that most Christians have changed their minds about these issues, providing recent and compelling examples that can serve as precedents for the full acceptance of gay and lesbian people. For Christians, this may be the central civil rights issue of our time.

Victor Furnish's treatment of the relatively few biblical passages referring to homosexuality shows how they are grounded in ancient understandings that reflect the cultural attitudes of that time. Nancy Kruh's essay discloses the depth of hostility toward homosexuality among influential voices in the post-biblical tradition, a history of cruelty that calls for repentance. Roberta Showalter Kreider's story of her journey powerfully illustrates how change came to her relatively late in life through painful experience and intentional personal encounters.

The question of moral authority

Conflict among Christians about this change raises the larger question of *authority* in the Christian life, especially moral authority. How are Christians supposed to discern what is right and wrong?

Christians have answered that question differently. For Catholics, authority is grounded in the teaching of the church, which integrates Scripture, tradition and papal interpretation. Some Protestants have said that the Bible is the only authority for Christian life. For Martin Luther and other leaders of the Reformation, *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone – was a revolutionary principle that challenged the authority of the late medieval church. Yet the Reformers also appealed to reason. Recall Luther's stirring refusal to disavow his teachings: "Unless I am convinced by Scripture *and evident reason*, I will not recant." Some Protestants expand authority beyond Scripture and reason to include tradition and experience.

But for all Christians, the sources of moral discernment include the Bible and Jesus. For Christians, both are "the Word of God." The Bible is "the Word of God" in a book, Jesus "the Word of God" in a person. They are "normative" for Christians – that is, foundational and most important. Thus in this concluding essay, I focus on the Bible and Jesus as sources of moral authority for Christians.

The Bible as the Word of God

At the center of the conflict and confusion among Christians about homosexuality is the Bible. For those who see homosexuality as unacceptable, indeed as sinful, the most frequent reason cited is the Bible. For them, the relatively few biblical passages on the subject settle the question.

Their certainty is rooted in a particular but common way of seeing the Bible among American Protestants. About half belong to churches that teach that the Bible is not only the Word of God, but also inerrant and infallible. It follows that whatever the Bible says is absolutely true. If the Bible says something happened, it happened. If the Bible says something is wrong, it's wrong.

This way of seeing the Bible is at the center of the most publicly visible form of American Christianity. Shared by fundamentalist and most conservative-evangelical Christians, it dominates Christian television and radio, and the Christian political right.

Those who belong to churches that teach this not only oppose equal status for gay and lesbian people, but also commonly oppose evolution on the grounds that the Genesis stories of creation are to be understood as literally and factually true. Biblical inerrancy and biblical absolutism go together.

In a "softer" form, this view of the Bible is also found among many other Christians. The "softer" form operates in the minds of many who grew up Christian a generation or two ago in mainline Protestant and Catholic churches. To use my own experience as an example, my brand of Lutheranism did not affirm that the Bible was inerrant – we didn't have to oppose evolution, but instead we extended the days of creation into geological epochs.

But we did affirm that the Bible was "the Word of God" and "inspired by God," so we took it for granted that it came from God as no other book did. That was why it was the definitive source of faith and morals: on important matters, it told us what to believe and what was right and wrong.

This "softer" understanding is still quite common among mainline Christians. Most of us who grew up as Christians a generation or two ago absorbed a form of it.

Why didn't we ordain women? Because of passages in the Bible that forbid women to have authority over men.

Why did wedding vows specify that wives were to be obedient to husbands, but not vice-versa? Because that was what the Bible said.

Why did we have missionaries? For more than one reason in some cases, but mostly because the Bible says that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

The point: we took it for granted that the Bible tells us the way things are and should be.

Many mainline Christians have not been exposed to another understanding of the Bible. Thus, they take it for granted that what they learned growing up is the definitive Christian way of seeing the Bible. Some who have let go of this way of seeing it are less sure about a persuasive and compelling alternative. And so the Bible is often left to those Christians who see it as inerrant and as absolutely forbidding same-sex relationships.

Thus education – re-education – about the Bible as the Word of God is essential at the congregational level. This way of seeing the Bible is implicit throughout this study, and is sketched especially in the lessons by Jack Rogers and Victor Furnish. To build on and add to what they have said:

- The Bible is for Christians “the Word of God.” But to call it “the Word of God” does not mean that it is “the words of God,” as the notion of biblical inerrancy affirms. Biblical inerrancy is neither ancient nor traditional. First explicitly stated in the second half of the 1600s, it has become widespread among American Christians only in the last hundred years.
- To call the Bible “the Word of God” (note that Word is singular and capitalized) does not mean that all of its words (plural, lower case) come from God. The phrase does not refer to the Bible’s *origin*, as if its words were virtually or actually dictated by God. Rather, calling the Bible “the Word of God” refers to its *status* and *function* for Christians. Its *status*: for Christians, the Bible is sacred Scripture, our most important and essential collection of documents. Its *function* is both informative and sacramental. *Informative*: to be Christian means to be in an informative and formative conversation with the Bible as our “identity” document. *Sacramental*: the Bible is a “means of grace,” a means through which the Spirit of God continues to speak to us to this day.
- The Bible is not a divine product, but a human product – the product of two historical communities, ancient Israel and early Christianity. As such, it tells us how our spiritual ancestors in these communities saw things: their stories about God, their experiences of the sacred, their understandings of what life with God involved, their beliefs about behavior and ethics.
- Though a human product, it is also “inspired by God” – that is, the communities and individuals who produced the Bible were moved by the Spirit of God.
- Understanding – interpreting – the Bible involves setting its texts in their ancient historical contexts. Doing so illuminates and enriches the meanings of the texts. Of course, their meanings are not confined to their ancient settings. Many texts have “a surplus of meaning” that goes beyond their original settings. But to ignore the setting of these texts is to impoverish them and risks distorting them.

From the fact that the Bible is a human product that tells us how our spiritual ancestors saw things, it follows that the Bible is sometimes wrong. The boldness of this claim may be shocking to some, but it is important to be able to say so. A few examples:

- According to I Sam. 15:1-3, God ordered King Saul to kill all the men, women, children and infants of a neighboring people. Was this ever the will of God? Or is this the way people telling this story perceived the will of God?
- According to Leviticus, God forbids eating pork, rabbit, and shellfish (11:6-12), planting two kinds of seed in the same field, and wearing garments made of two kinds of cloth (19:19). Did God ever care about these matters? Or are these the understandings and rules of an ancient society?
- According to passages in the Gospels, Paul, and Revelation, some early

Christians clearly expected the imminent second coming of Jesus, maybe even in their lifetimes (see, for example, Mark 13:24-30; I Thessalonians 4:13-18; I Corinthians 15:51-52; Revelation 1:1, 3; 22:6, 7, 10, 12, 20). To say the obvious, they were wrong.

From the realization that the Bible can be wrong, it follows that its few passages about homosexuality might be wrong – just as Christians have decided that its teachings about slavery are wrong, and most have decided that its teachings about the subordination of women to men are not the will of God.

Recall Romans 1:26-27 from Lesson Three, where Paul mentions same-sex intercourse in a long list of vices indicting the Gentile world (1:19-32). Because the list is long, it is hard to know how strongly Paul felt about each item in the list. Did he think long and hard about each? Or was he piling up a long list for strong rhetorical effect?

But suppose for the sake of argument that Paul did feel strongly that same-sex intercourse was wrong. Might it nevertheless be okay to say that Paul was wrong about this? Many Christians in our time – in part because of our understanding of sexual orientation as given rather than chosen, as natural rather than decided upon – have concluded that Paul was.

To some, this will seem like “pick and choose” Christianity – “cafeteria Christianity,” as it is often called by its critics. But approaching the Bible as fallible is not just a matter of choosing what we like and rejecting the rest. We need to have reasons – not reasons in the sense of rationalizations, but thoughtful and reflective reasons grounded in Christian discernment.

Jesus as the Word of God and the norm of the Bible

None of the above demeans or dismisses the Bible as “the Word of God.” But for Christians, the Bible is not the ultimate Word of God, nor the ultimate moral authority. Rather, Jesus is, and the Bible is second in importance to him. From its very beginning, Christianity has affirmed that Jesus is “the Word of God” *become flesh, incarnate* in a human life (John 1). This, not biblical absolutism, is ancient and traditional Christianity.

To affirm that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate means that the Bible is to be read with Jesus as the decisive lens through which to see it. He, not an inerrant book, is the essential revelation for Christians. In colloquial language, Jesus trumps the Bible.

As God’s Word become flesh, Jesus reveals what can be seen of God in human life. In traditional Christian language, he reveals the nature and will of God – what may also be called God’s character and passion. God’s character: What is God like? God’s passion: What is God passionate about? How we see God’s character and passion, God’s nature and will, profoundly and pervasively affects what we think being Christian is about.

God’s character. According to Jesus, God is *compassionate* – that is God’s character, what God is like. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the father is an image of God. Twice we are told that the father was *moved with compassion* to accept his wastrel son. In Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, a verse summarizes the character of God and Christian ethics in a sentence: “Be

merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:36). Jesus not only taught this, but also embodied it. A later document in the New Testament affirms, “God is love” – and does so because that is what early Christians saw in Jesus.

Though compassion and love in the Bible are synonyms, the former has particularly rich associations. In Hebrew and Aramaic, it is related to the word for “womb.” To say that God is compassionate is to say God is “like a womb” – life-giving, nourishing. It also means that God feels for us, loves us, as a mother feels for and loves the children of her womb. And just as a mother is protective and can even become fierce in defending the children of her womb, so does God – for we are all children of God’s womb.

Compassion was central to Jesus’ public activity. One of its most prominent features was his acceptance of “tax collectors and sinners.” In his time, the phrase referred to a social class – marginalized people, some of whom were outcasts, virtual “untouchables.” He ate with them. In that culture, sharing a table implied acceptance – and some of the religious people of his time strenuously objected.

The outcasts were those who were beyond the social boundaries established by “the righteous.” Though Jesus sometimes called them to change their lives (for example, Zacchaeus in Luke 19), it is also clear that he accepted many of them as they were – viewing their status as outcasts as a cultural category rather than a moral failing. Culturally conferred social and religious categories did not matter to Jesus. Indeed, he regularly challenged them. He did so because God’s compassion transcended those categories.

If we take this seriously, it is difficult to imagine that Jesus would say that gay and lesbian people are sinful and that they need to change their sexual orientation and behavior. Would the one who in his time accepted “tax collectors and sinners” consign gay and lesbian people in our time to the perpetually unredeemed?

God’s passion: According to Jesus, God’s passion is *the kingdom of God*. In Mark, our earliest gospel, Jesus’ first words announce the coming of “the kingdom of God” (Mark 1:15). It is Mark’s advance summary of Jesus’ message: the gospel, the good news of Jesus, is the kingdom of God.

Importantly, the kingdom is *for the earth*, as the Lord’s Prayer makes clear: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth*, as it already is in heaven.” For Jesus, the kingdom of God is what life would be like on earth if God were king and the lords of this world were not. The kingdom is not primarily about personal righteousness. Rather, it is about the transformation of this world – from a world of systemic injustice, domination, and chronic violence to a world of justice and peace and what the contemporary New Testament scholar Walter Wink calls God’s “domination-free order.” The kingdom of God is God’s dream for the earth.

This – and not human sexual behavior – is the passion of God as seen in Jesus. Does personal sexual behavior matter? Of course. Sexual coercion, exploitation, and violence are always wrong. But Jesus said little about sexual behavior. He did equate lust with adultery. He forbade re-marriage after divorce – and this may have been specifically directed at Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, who married his brother’s wife after divorcing his own. But that’s it. Instead, his message, mission, and life were primarily about God’s character as compassion and God’s passion as the kingdom of God – the transformation of this world.

Jesus died for his and God’s passion. More precisely, he was killed because

of his vision and advocacy of a different kind of world. The political and religious authorities executed him because he challenged the enculturated domination system of his time – a system of economic exploitation, political oppression, and conventional expectation. He was killed because of his passion for “the least of these” – who were most of the people of his time. Jesus is for Christians the decisive disclosure of God’s character and passion. What we see in him is the decisive moral authority for Christian life.

Conclusion

This series of lessons began with Brian McLaren’s identification of fear as a primary reason for resistance to change. Faith and love involve letting go of fear. One of the opposites of faith is fear. “Fear not” and “Do not be afraid” are among the most frequent exhortations in the Bible. So also, perfect love casts out fear.

Learning how not to fear and how to love, learning how to participate in God’s passion for a different kind of world, is a journey of mind and heart. Sometimes the mind leads, sometimes the heart does. A contemporary Episcopal bishop opposed to the ordination of women as priests refused to attend his daughter’s ordination and for many years refused to receive communion from her. Then, when she became a bishop herself, he did attend the service and for the first time received the eucharist from her. When asked what happened to change his mind, he said, “My heart changed.”

Both heart and mind matter. In the Bible, “the heart” as a metaphor is not primarily about emotion and feeling, as it commonly is in modern America. Rather, it is an image for a level of the self deeper than both mind and emotion. Though we might sometimes say, “I changed my mind,” we seldom if ever say, “I changed my heart.” Rather, the changing of our hearts happens through the working of God’s Spirit in our lives, in all its manifold ways – through Scripture, thought, experience, and Christian community.

Sometimes a change of heart through the Spirit of God is so sudden and dramatic that it seems we play no part in it. But more often we do play a part. Our part, our role in our relationship with God, is to seek to be open to what the Spirit of God is saying today.

God is still speaking. This is the unanimous testimony of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament alike. To use Jesus as an example, his followers experienced the Spirit of God in him during his historical lifetime and continued to do so after his death. This is the central meaning of Pentecost and the reason that the New Testament can use “the Holy Spirit” and “the Spirit of Christ” as synonyms. God’s Spirit is the Spirit of Christ – and still speaking.

THE COUNSELOR WITHIN US

A Scriptural Reflection

As Christians, who or what is our absolute and final authority? The church? No. The church changes its rules periodically. The Bible? No. The Bible is written by humans inspired by God across two millennia, and sometimes it has been wrong. No, as Dr. Marcus Borg states, our final authority is Jesus Christ.

But this mandate seems to be accompanied with its own paradox: Yes, our final authority is Christ – but how, besides Scripture itself, can we come to know “the Word [that] became flesh” (John 1:14)? Indeed, if the Bible is the authoritative guide to Jesus’ life, then how can Jesus’ authority be separated from the words in the Bible? Just as vexing, what are we to do when faced with a problem or issue that Jesus’ words don’t address directly?

Jesus himself offers a marvelous response to these questions: “If you love me, you will obey my commandments. Then I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it does not see him or know him. But you know him, because he resides with you and will be in you” (John 14:15-17).

Here Jesus presents us with the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the Living Christ that can be found residing in each of us. It is that “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12 KJV) that speaks to us when we not only have opened our minds to God’s authority but also opened our hearts to God’s all-encompassing wisdoms.

In Lesson 5 of this study, Roberta Showalter Kreider describes an instant of God-given clarity when she was jolted awake in the night with words, “14 reasons, 14 reasons.” She got out of bed, and quickly jotted down more than a dozen reasons to believe homosexuality is not a sin.

To Mrs. Kreider, this was most certainly a moment when the Holy Spirit was speaking to her. Yet this moment of crystalline realization was actually a culmination of months of thoughtful discernment. Mrs. Kreider had studied Scripture and read commentary, and she also had reached out to gay and lesbian people in keeping with Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). She also had gone to her knees in prayer.

Moments of realization may not come in a bolt like Mrs. Kreider’s, but as Dr. Borg attests, “God is still speaking.” It’s our task to learn how to listen – with all our minds and all our hearts. – *Bishop Richard B. Wilke*

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

- What are the different ways Marcus Borg describes that Christians have discerned what is right and wrong?
- According to Borg, what is the Bible’s importance and its limitations in Christian faith?
- What reasons does Borg outline for why the Bible isn’t infallible?
- Borg considers Jesus Christ as “the ultimate moral authority.” In what ways does Christ reveal the nature and will of God?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- What are the ideas or insights in the film, the readings, and the discussions that have stuck with you most?
- Has your opinion about the issue of homosexuality and the church changed because of the study? If it has, how?
- How do you hear God speaking to you today?

FOR FURTHER READING

Borg, Marcus J., *The Heart of Christianity* (HarperOne, 2004)

Borg, Marcus J., *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (HarperOne, 1995)

Borg, Marcus J., *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002)

Borg, Marcus J., *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (HarperOne, 2008)

Robinson, Gene, *In the Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God* (Seabury Books, 2008)

Wink, Walter (ed.), *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1999)

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