

THE BIBLE AND HOMOSEXUALITY: THE LAST PREJUDICE



AMONG religious people who wish to take the Bible seriously there is no more vexed topic today than that of homosexuality. The current debates recall the passion with which the topic of slavery was once debated within the context of American Christianity, but since the debate about homosexuality is very much alive and well with no immediate prospect of a moral or social consensus in sight, we have more than a historical or even anecdotal exhibition of the conflicts of values and interpretations, the hard texts and changing times we have been discussing in this section of the book. We have a contemporary, existential, deeply felt struggle that shows no sign of going away, that grows increasingly less civil, and upon which everyone has an opinion and a text upon which to base it.

The Hottest of the Issues

Theologians and biblical scholars have generated an enormous literature on the subject of the Bible and homosexuality, but the topic is so electric, and so much seems to be at stake, that few are willing to concede to the experts their personal conviction on this topic. Thus, perhaps more than any other social or theological issue of our day, this one engages us at our most fundamental level of existence and raises disturbing questions about our own sense of identity, of morality, and of the nature of settled truth. Now that the Cold War and the struggles against "godless communism" have receded into the background—and for the time being we have become convinced that we are likely neither to blow up our world in a nuclear holocaust, nor to destroy the envi-

ronment by our immoderate use of aerosol deodorant—we can no longer be diverted from these issues of sexuality and religion, the very discussion of which violates all our conventional taboos.

Homosexuality is one of the issues in the current culture wars. One's position on homosexuality determines where one stands in the politically charged debates about virtue and values, and what was once called the "love that dare not speak its name" is now the topic that simply won't be quiet. Unlike the topics of other moral debates, homosexuality is seen not only as a social practice or condition upon which good hearts and minds may differ but as an issue so central to right conduct and belief that compromise or sweet reasonableness is thought to be capitulation to error, and therefore unacceptable. Thus, the debate is almost undebatable.

Our subject, however, is not homosexuality in general, but homosexuality and the Bible and the religious basis for the prejudice against homosexuality so often expressed by people of religious conviction. Nearly every such person who acknowledges an aversion to homosexuality does so on the basis of what he or she believes the Bible to say, and in their minds there is no doubt whatsoever about what the Bible says, and what the Bible means. The argument goes something like this: Homosexuality is an abomination, and the homosexual is a sinner. At Sodom and Gomorrah God punished the cities for the sin of homosexuality. Saint Paul and the early Christians were equally opposed to homosexuality, and homosexual practices are condemned in the New Testament church. Therefore, if we are to be faithful to the "clear teachings of scripture," we too must condemn homosexuality; it is the last moral absolute, and we compromise it at our own peril. The sufferings and persecutions homosexuals have endured over the centuries are signs of God's extreme displeasure with who they are and with what they do, and their behavior, as Saint Paul points out, is contrary to nature; and this then invites a terrible retribution. The AIDS epidemic is a terrible visitation, but it is the consequence, and only the latest one, of the sexual perversion of homosexuality. All of this can be summarized in the hate slogan of the notoriously homophobic Baptist preacher Fred Phelps,

who pickets the funerals of gay men dead of AIDS with the sign GOD HATES FAGS. The source of that conviction and of its more subtle variations, we are told, is the Bible.

A Climate for Prejudice

In preparing for her novel *The Drowning of Stephen Jones*, based upon the true story of a young gay man tossed from a bridge to his death by a group of young gay-bashers, author Bette Greene interviewed more than four hundred young men in jail for various forms of gay-bashing. Few of the men, she noted, showed any remorse for their crimes. Few saw anything morally wrong with their crimes, and more than a few of them told her that they were justified in their opinions and in their actions by the religious traditions from which they came. Homosexuality was wrong, and against the Bible. One of those interviewed told her that the pastor of his church had said that homosexuals represented Satan and the Devil. The implication of his logic was clear: Who could possibly do wrong in destroying Satan and all of his works? The legitimization of violence against homosexuals and Jews and women and blacks, as we have seen, comes from the view that the Bible stigmatizes these people, thereby making them fair game. If the Bible expresses such a prejudice, then it certainly cannot be wrong to act on that prejudice. This, of course, is the argument every anti-Semite and racist has used with demonstrably devastating consequences, as our social history all too vividly shows.

Although most contemporary Christians who have moral reservations about homosexuality, and who find affirmation for those reservations in the Bible, do not resort to physical violence and intimidation, they nevertheless contribute to the maintenance of a cultural environment in which less scrupulous opponents of homosexuality are given the sanction of the Bible to feed their prejudice and, in certain cases, cultural "permission" to act with violence upon those prejudices. This is the devastating theme of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's 1996 book, *Hitler's*

Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, published to much dismay in Germany. Goldhagen argues that it was the cultural permission of Germany's Christian anti-Semitism, based of course upon a reading of the Bible, that allowed the nasty work of the Holocaust to be done not only by military specialists but by people whose attitudes were based upon centuries of Christian teaching. The unforgiving indictment of Goldhagen's thesis is not reserved solely for those who were "simply following orders," but extends now to all branches of a society whose moral obtuseness made it impossible for most of them to see anything wrong with those orders, or with their terrible consequences.

In the case of the Bible and homosexuality in contemporary American culture, the tragic dimensions of this biblically sanctioned prejudice among the most devout and sincere people of religious conviction are all the greater because no credible case against homosexuality or homosexuals can be made from the Bible unless one chooses to read scripture in a way that simply sustains the existing prejudice against homosexuality and homosexuals. The combination of ignorance and prejudice under the guise of morality makes the religious community, and its abuse of scripture in this regard, itself morally culpable.

A good deal of significant scholarship in recent years has been devoted to those verses in the Bible that are adduced as definitive in determining the Bible's view of homosexuals and homosexuality. We will look at these verses in light of some of this scholarship and with one continuing question in mind: When the Bible speaks of homosexuality, does it mean what we mean when we speak of homosexuality?

Given the appeal to the Bible in the case against homosexuality, one would assume that the Bible has much to say on the subject. It has not. The subject of homosexuality is not mentioned in the Ten Commandments, nor in the Summary of the Law. No prophet discourses on the subject. Jesus himself makes no mention of it, and homosexuality does not appear to be of much concern to those early churches with which Saint Paul and his successors were involved. One has to look rather hard, and with a user-friendly concordance, to find any mention of homosexuality at all. This should come as no surprise, because the word

homosexuality itself is an invention of the late nineteenth century and does not occur in any of the original manuscripts from which the English Bible is descended. As historian John Boswell has pointed out in his magisterial 1980 study, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*:¹

In spite of misleading English translations which may imply the contrary, the word "homosexual" does not occur in the Bible; no extant text or manuscript, Hebrew, Greek, Syrian or Aramaic, contains such a word. In fact none of these languages ever contained a word corresponding to the English "homosexual," nor did any language have such a term before the late nineteenth century.

Victor Paul Furnish, in his 1985 book *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, informs us that the term *homosexuality* was not coined until the latter half of the nineteenth century when it was used by a Hungarian writer commenting on the Prussian legal code. Furnish goes on to remind us that the King James Version of 1611 makes no mention of *homosexuality* or of any of its cognates, and that the first use of the term in an English Bible is to be found in the Revised Standard Version of 1946. More recent translations apply the word *homosexuality* to biblical situations that the translators assume correspond to the meaning of the word, and thus today, depending upon your translation of choice, you may or may not see *homosexuality* in the Bible. There is no doubt, however, that you would not have found the word in any Bible in any language before 1946. The significance of this process whereby contemporary meanings associated with the term *homosexuality* and its cognates are applied to biblical situations from which the contemporary understanding may well be absent is one we will discuss in reviewing the texts in question.

What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?

The traditional sets of texts from the Old and New Testaments to which people appeal in seeking the Bible's teaching on homosexuality are these:

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| 1. Genesis 1-2 | The Creation Story |
| 2. Genesis 19:1-9 | Sodom and Gomorrah, with the parallel passages of Judges 19 and Ezekiel 16:46-56 |
| 3. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 | The Holiness Code |
| 4. Romans 1:26-27 | Regarded as the most significant of Saint Paul's views |
| 5. I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1-10 | Pauline lists of vices |

As Jeffrey S. Siker² has pointed out in the July 1994 issue of *Theology Today*, to argue that the creation story privileges a heterosexual view of the relations between humankind is to make one of the weakest arguments possible, the argument from silence. The Genesis story is indeed about Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,³ as the critics of homosexuality delight in admonishing. "Heterosexuality may be the dominant form of sexuality, but it does not follow that it is the only form of appropriate sexuality." What the story does do is reflect the world experience of those human beings who wrote it. Of course they would privilege the only way available to perpetuate the race, and they would do so with the aid of their own cultural lenses.

Despite the efforts of modern "creationists" to cast Genesis in the mold of nineteenth-century science, the authors of Genesis were intent upon answering the question "Where do we come from?" Then, as now, the only plausible answer is from the union of a man and a woman. That biological fact is attended by the cultural assumptions of the world

in which the writers lived. Woman, for example, was subordinate to man. The creation story in Genesis does not pretend to be a history of anthropology or of every social relationship. It does not mention friendship, for example, and yet we do not assume that friendship is condemned or abnormal. It does not mention the single state, and yet we know that singleness is not condemned, and that in certain religious circumstances it is held in very high esteem. The creation story is not, after all, a paradigm about marriage, but rather about the establishment of human society. John Boswell describes early Christian attitudes toward marriage as a "compromise with the material world," and for at least one half of its first thousand years, the church valued lifestyles other than family units, preferring priestly celibacy, voluntary virginity even in marriage, and monastic community life. The creation story is the basis and not the end of human diversity, and thus to regard it as excluding everything it does not mention is to place too great a burden on the text and its writers, and too little responsibility upon the intelligence of the readers, and on the varieties of human experience.

Sodom and Gomorrah

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-9 is perhaps the most famous instance in scripture where homosexuality is seen to be condemned, and from the name of the destroyed city of Sodom came the term *sodomy*. According to Boswell, "Throughout the Middle Ages the closest word to 'homosexual' in Latin or in any vernacular, was '*sodomita*.'" In an extensive etymological note, he points out that the term *sodomy* "has connoted in various times and places everything from ordinary heterosexual intercourse in an atypical position to oral sexual contact with animals. At some points in history it has referred almost exclusively to male homosexuality and at other times almost exclusively to heterosexual excess." On the term *sodomite*, Victor Paul Furnish in *The Moral Teaching of Paul* notes, "In every instance in the King James Version where the term 'sodomite' is used, the reference is to male

prostitutes associated with places of worship." The sodomites in this context, he points out, are condemned not because they have sexual relations with other men, but because they serve the alien gods of the Canaanite and Babylonian fertility cults.

We do not know what the grave wickedness of the city of Sodom was, but it was grave enough for God to send two angels to warn Abraham's nephew Lot of impending doom. It was God's intention to destroy the city before the arrival of the angels, and so the punishment that befell the city had to do with its previous and notorious state of wickedness and not with the menacing treatment accorded the angels while they were partaking of Lot's hospitality. It may well be that the men of Sodom knew that their fate was sealed when they saw the arrival of Lot's guests, and perhaps it was for that reason that they wished to "know" them, either carnally, as a further expression of their wickedness, or perhaps, if merely socially, to reassure themselves that these were not the angels of doom. The temptation here is to assume the use of "know" in this instance to be carnal knowledge, and that the wicked men of Sodom further justified their reputation for wickedness by attempting to violate the laws of hospitality with the rape of these strangers. Lot, of course, refused their demands, and in a perverse gesture of hospitality of his own, offered his daughters to the lusting mob. They wanted the strangers, not the daughters. The angels gave their protection to Lot's household, and struck blind the Sodomites at the door. The next day Lot and his family, with the exception of his wife, who disobeyed and looked back at the city, were spared the destruction of fire and brimstone.

The conventional wisdom is that the city of Sodom was destroyed because its inhabitants practiced homosexuality. That was its great wickedness. Even if we credit the Hebrew word "know" in the demands of the Sodomites, however—"that we might know" the strangers—in a carnal sense, we should not neglect the fact that the fate of the city was determined well before the ugly incident at Lot's door. It was in behalf of that errand of doom, in fact, that the angels came at all. Boswell informs us that this particular form of the Hebrew verb "to know" is rarely used in a sexual sense. It occurs nine hundred and forty-three

times in the Old Testament, and in only ten of these does it have the sense of carnal knowledge. More to the point, the passage in Genesis 19 is the only place in the Old Testament where it is generally believed to refer to homosexual relations. Sodom is referred to throughout the Old Testament as a place of wickedness and is synonymous with it, but nowhere does it state that homosexuality was the wickedness in question. Among the sins attributed to Sodom in other books of the Old Testament are pride—in the books of Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom in the Apocrypha—and in Ezekiel, in addition to pride, “Fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hands of the poor and the needy.” (Ezekiel 16:48–49) In the New Testament, Jesus himself is under the impression that Sodom was destroyed because it was a place lacking hospitality; we find him saying as much in Matthew 10:14–15, and in Luke 10:10–12.

What is revealing about all this is that nowhere in the Old or New Testaments is the sin of Sodom, the cause of its sudden and terrible destruction, equated with homosexuals or with homosexuality. The attempted homosexual rape of the angels at Lot’s door, while vivid and distasteful, is hardly the subject of the story or the cause of the punishment, and no one in scripture suggests that it was. Homosexual rape is never to be condoned; it is indeed, like heterosexual rape, an abomination before God. This instance of attempted homosexual rape, however, does not invalidate all homosexuals or all homosexual activity. Jeffrey S. Siker makes an excellent point when he says in his article in *Theology Today* that “David’s sin of adultery with Bathsheba does not make all heterosexual expressions sinful!” In the matter of Genesis 19 and the “obvious” conclusion that God here enunciates in fire and brimstone his condemnation of homosexuals and homosexuality, there is less than meets the eye.

The Law of Leviticus

Leviticus 18:22 reads, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination,” and Leviticus 20:13 reads, “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.” The statements are clear, but the context and application are not. It is clear that this so-called Holiness Code is designed to provide a standard of moral behavior that will distinguish the Jews from the Canaanites, whose land they have been given by God. The price of the land, as it were, is a new standard of behavior. The Jews are not to worship the Canaanite god Molech, nor to adopt any of the practices of the people who do. The sentence to be carried out when this Holiness Code is violated is death. Children who curse their parents are to be put to death. The sentence for adultery for both parties is death. The punishment for incest is death. The punishment for bestiality is death. “You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and do them; that the land where I am bringing you to dwell may not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation which I am casting out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I abhorred them. But I have said to you, ‘You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.’” (Leviticus 20:22–24)

These rules are designed for a very particular purpose and in a very particular setting. Their purpose is nation building; their setting is the entry into a promised but very foreign land. These are fundamental laws for the formation of a frontier community. In addition to honoring one’s parents and keeping the Sabbath, showing appropriate hospitality and abstaining from idol worship, the people are forbidden to permit cattle inbreeding, or to sow fields with two kinds of seed, or to wear garments made of two different kinds of materials. Fruit trees may not be harvested until the fifth year, and the kosher laws must be kept. Round haircuts are forbidden, as are tattoos, and consultations with mediums and wiz-

ards. A man may not have sexual relations with his wife while she menstruates. These and many other actions are condemned because they defy purity and weaken the cultural identification of the children of Israel; and so great is the principle of ritual and ethnic purity that to violate it is in most cases to warrant the sentence of death.

We can understand the context: cultural identity, protection, and procreation. In this context homosexual conduct is a risk to all three of these necessary frontier ambitions. We have, however, long since ceased to live as God's frontier folk in the promised land. Not only is the cultural context markedly different, but so for Christians is the theological context. Indeed, to what extent can Christians be said to be bound by these rules of the Holiness Code when even Saint Paul, himself a Jew and an heir of this very code, says that the Gentiles, that is, the non-Jewish Christians, have the gift of the Holy Spirit without the necessity of the Law of Israel? In Acts 10:47, of these non-Jewish Christians, the Apostle Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

For Jesus and Saint Paul, the ritual purity of which Leviticus speaks with such passionate detail is plainly irrelevant; they are both concerned with purity of heart. Boswell argues that a distinction is made between what is ritually impure and what is intrinsically wrong. Homosexuality in Leviticus is condemned as ritually impure, the key to this conclusion being the fact that the word *abomination* does not usually describe something intrinsically evil, such as rape or theft, but something that is ritually impure, like eating pork or engaging in intercourse during menstruation. An abomination is by definition what the Gentiles do, but that in and of itself is not necessarily evil or a violation of the Commandments. Thus homosexuality is an abomination in Leviticus not because it is inherently evil but because the Gentiles do it, and it is therefore ritually impure.

When Christians ignore most of the Holiness Code and regard its precepts as irrelevant to a New Testament understanding of purity of heart, and yet cite the Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality as the basis of their own moral position on that subject, one is led to

wonder what is behind the adoption of this prohibition and the casting away of the others. Once again the "clear meaning" of scripture in the matter of homosexuality seems more expedient than compelling.

What Saint Paul Says and Means

We turn now to the New Testament and the writings by and attributed to Paul, in Romans, I Corinthians, and I Timothy.

Paul's most significant comments on what we call homosexuality occur in Romans 1:26–27. "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error." The first thing to be remembered here is that Paul is not writing about homosexuality in Romans—neither about homosexuality as he would have understood it nor about homosexuality as we now understand it. He is writing about the fallen nature of humankind. It is this fallen nature, this "corrupted will" to use a favorite phrase of Saint Augustine, that has caused both Gentile and Jew to suppress the truth by their wickedness. They are able to know what is knowable about God: his invisible nature, his eternal power and deity. The creation itself bears witness to this. The nature, power, and goodness of God are not hidden. There is therefore no excuse for this ignorance of God. The people knew God but did not honor God. They were not grateful to God. They substituted their own minds and their own thinking in place of God. As Paul says in Romans 1:21, "They became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were clouded." In other words, the creatures ignored the Creator, and they themselves became the objects of their own worship and veneration. They became worshipers of self, caught up in their own egos, and they gave to created things the glory and dignity that belong to the Creator. This is what he means when he says that in the fallen state of total self-absorption and self-deception,

human beings, “claiming to be wise . . . became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.” This is the golden calf of the Old Testament all over again, the worship of the Canaanite and Babylonian fertility gods, and, in Greco-Roman civilization, the worship of worldly wisdom and philosophy.

We become what we worship. It is this sophisticated psychological insight that Paul applies to those who worship a lie rather than the truth, who submit themselves to images rather than to the divine reality. Such people are disordered, that is, they have their priorities wrong; they have lost their perspective. God’s judgment is that they will reap the consequences of these lesser, inferior gods. This is what is meant at verses 24–25: “Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever!” As a consequence of this, in the jargon of contemporary psychology, God let them “bottom out.” As H. Darrell Lance points out in his 1989 article entitled “The Bible and Homosexuality,” in *The American Baptist Quarterly*, “As a result, God let his creatures follow their own corrupt ways.”

These corrupt ways include intellectual self-deception and the sexual practices of the pagan world. These fallen ones are described as “filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” (Romans 1:29–31) This is the context in which Paul, at verses 26 and 27, discusses what we call homosexuality, and he never takes up that subject in Romans again, for it was merely one of the many consequences of the fallen state.

When modern readers scrutinize Romans 1:26, with its discussion of “dishonorable passions,” “unnatural relations,” and “shameless acts,” conditioned as we are by the characterization of homosexual behavior prevalent among us since the late nineteenth century, which in the current cultural debate is described both loosely and pejoratively as the

“gay lifestyle” and the “homosexual agenda,” we are tempted to give a content to those words and a profile, largely negative, to those behaviors, and are persuaded by our own infallible opinions that Saint Paul is “obviously” talking about the same thing as we are. The hard question we must persuade ourselves to ask is, is this so?

In their discussions in a statement on “Issues in Human Sexuality,” members of the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England write: “Passions are more than emotions; they are emotions out of control. Dishonorable passions are a disordering of God’s purpose.” They go on to say, “Paul takes for granted an ordering of things in which the body and its sexual desires have their place and their proper honor; but the sexual acts of which he is now speaking dishonor the body.” Paul is speaking here of passions out of control, that become an end in and of themselves, that are in fact idolatrous. Dishonorable passions refer to the worship of sexual pleasure, an excess to be condemned with all other excesses.

The “natural relations exchanged for unnatural” among women, at verse 26, and among men, at verse 27, who “likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another,” does not describe the conduct of homosexuals, but rather of heterosexual people who performed homosexual acts. As Boswell reminds us, the whole point of Romans 1 is a discussion of people who know what is right but who, because of their arrogant willfulness in their fallen state, choose to act contrary to that knowledge. In other words, “Paul did not discuss gay persons but only homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons.” It is not clear that Saint Paul distinguished, as we must, between homosexual persons and heterosexual persons who behave like homosexuals, but what is clear is that what is “unnatural” is the one behaving after the manner of the other.

We must further point out, as has nearly all contemporary scholarship on this point, that “nature,” as Paul here utilizes the concept, has nothing to do with a theory of Natural Law, which comes into the picture some centuries later, nor is he referring to the “order created in Genesis by God,” as H. Darrell Lance reminds us, “but to a common idea taken

from pagan culture." "Nature," for Paul, is something more akin to "customary" or "characteristic"; it is not to be confused with that which is innate, inherent, or immutable. Among the Jews, homosexual behavior was not customary. It was in fact uncommon, "unnatural," compared with the customs of the Greco-Roman world. As Boswell puts it, "For Paul, 'nature' was not a question of universal law or truth, but rather a matter of the character of some person or group of persons, a character which was largely ethnic and entirely human." Nature is not, in the thinking of Paul, a moral force.

The "shameless acts" of which Paul speaks may well refer to the assumption that homosexual acts, whether experienced by heterosexuals or homosexuals, always involved lust and avarice, an act of will, and an unavoidable degree of exploitation where the stronger took advantage of the weaker. In these same-sex relationships the passive partner, the female role, was taken advantage of by the active partner, the male role; and in the most disagreeable form of homosexual activity known to Paul and his contemporaries, pederasty, the adult male exploited for sexual purposes the younger male.

The homosexuality Paul would have known and to which he makes reference in his letters, particularly to the Romans, has to do with pederasty and male prostitution, and he particularly condemns those heterosexual men and women who assume homosexual practices. What is patently unknown to Paul is the concept of a homosexual nature, that is, using Paul's sense of the word "nature," something that is beyond choice, that is not necessarily characterized by lust, avarice, idolatry, or exploitation, and that aspires to a life under the jurisdiction of the Holy Spirit. All Paul knew of homosexuality was the debauched pagan expression of it. He cannot be condemned for that ignorance, but neither should his ignorance be an excuse for our own. To base the church's principled objections to homosexuality and homosexuals on the basis of Paul's imperfect knowledge is itself unprincipled, and indeed quite beside all of the heroic points that Paul intends to make in Romans 1.

In I Corinthians 6:9, the reference to homosexuals among the list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of God actually has as its context

in Chapter 5 a startling case of heterosexual immorality, and of a kind not even found among the pagans: "For a man is living with his father's wife." (I Corinthians 5:1) Paul is so horrified by this that he demands that the man be expelled from the community, and it is this violation of the accepted standard of Christian behavior that leads Paul into another discussion about how Christians ought to live, and how they ought to put their old lives behind them. This passage is not about homosexuality; there is no reason to believe that the Corinthian church was troubled on that topic. We must remind ourselves that when Paul speaks of what we call homosexuality, he is speaking again of what can be called the "Gentile sin," whose characteristics are those of which we have already spoken: willful, lustful, exploitive, avaricious, self-deceiving, self-absorbed, and thus idolatrous. Of course someone who fits this profile is unfit for the kingdom of heaven. Victor Paul Furnish reminds us that in these examples of wickedness, such as I Corinthians 6:9-10, the vices listed are "understood by Paul to be symptomatic of sin, not as its roots and essence." In other words, because one is sinful one behaves in these ways. In I Timothy 1:10, "sodomites" are to be found on the list of the lawless and the disobedient for whom the law is laid down. "Sodomite," as we now know, refers almost exclusively to a male prostitute, and is not a Pauline synonym for "homosexual," as we understand that term.

The Silent Text and Doctrinaire Prejudice

In his study *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, John Boswell concluded his chapter on the New Testament texts having to do with homosexuality with these words:

The New Testament takes no demonstrable position on homosexuality. To suggest that Paul's references to excesses of sexual indulgence involving homosexual behavior are indicative of a general position in opposition to same-sex eroticism is as unfounded as

arguing that his condemnation of drunkenness implies opposition to the drinking of wine.

Jeffrey S. Siker, in the July 1994 issue of *Theology Today*, concludes his study of the biblical texts with these words:

Thus the Bible has relatively little to say that directly informs us about how to address the issue of homosexual Christians today. The Bible certainly does not positively condone homosexuality as a legitimate expression of human sexuality, but neither does it expressly exclude loving monogamous homosexual adult Christian relationships from being within the realm of God's intentions for humanity.

Victor Paul Furnish, in the conclusion of his chapter on homosexuality in his 1979 book, *The Moral Teaching of Paul*, writes:

Since Paul offered no direct teaching to his own churches on the subject of homosexual conduct, his letters certainly cannot yield any specific answers to the questions being faced in the modern church. . . . It is a mistake to invoke Paul's name in support of any specific position in these matters.

As early as in 1964, German theologian Helmut Thielicke, in the volume of his *Theological Ethics* dealing with sex and homosexuality, after a thoroughgoing discussion of all of the relevant biblical passages, wrote, "There is not the slightest excuse for maligning the constitutional homosexual morally or theologically." He went on to observe, however, that the continuing willingness to do so on the part of the Christian churches has nothing to do with the biblical texts, and very much to do with what he calls "doctrinaire prejudices."

Doctrinaire prejudices, which at the same time distort the theological problem presented by homosexuality, manifest themselves also

in the fact that the value-judgment, "homosexuality is sinful," is not isolated from an objective assessment of the phenomenon but is rather projected into it, and the result is that one arrives at an *a priori* defamation of those who are afflicted with this anomaly.

Yet the matter remains unsettled. In an article in *Christianity Today*, "Why Is This Important?" Stanton L. Jones⁴ gives three reasons. "First, the church's historically high view of the authority of scripture is threatened by efforts at revising the church's position on homosexuality." His second reason is that if homosexuals are defined primarily by their sexual inclinations, this definition is contrary to the fundamental definition of Christian identity. The third and most critical reason, however, is this: "We can only change our position on homosexuality by changing our fundamental stance on biblical authority, by changing our core view of sexuality, and by changing the meaning and character of Christ's call on our lives."

The first of Jones's objections, that the authority of scripture is challenged by a revision of the church's position on homosexuality, does not take account of the fact that the authority of scripture seems not to have been challenged by the revision of the church's position on women, Jews, and slavery. Nor does he appear to take into account the fact that, high view or not, the scripture has so little to say about homosexuality that it cannot be called upon to resolve the contemporary church's debates about homosexuality or address itself to the modern complexity of human sexuality. It should also be noted that it is not homosexuals who define themselves by their sexual desires, but it is invariably the case that persons opposed to homosexuality define it and homosexuals exclusively in sexual terms. Finally, of course, what Jones sees as a "problem" is in fact the only intellectually and spiritually responsible way forward. We must change our position on homosexuality if that position is based upon a prejudicial and uninformed reading of scripture. Our fundamental stance on biblical authority ought by no means to be an absolute; that is a form of Protestant idolatry. Indeed, our core view of sexuality

ought to change, and must, and the “meaning and character of Christ’s call on our lives” thus is not merely changed but enlarged to reflect a dynamic and inclusive gospel.

What is at stake is not simply the authority of scripture, as conservative opponents to homosexual legitimization like to say, but the authority of the culture of interpretation by which these people read scripture in such a way as to lend legitimacy to their doctrinaire prejudices. Thus the battle for the Bible, of which homosexuality is the last front, is really the battle for the prevailing culture, of which the Bible itself is a mere trophy and icon. Such a cadre of cultural conservatives would rather defend their ideology in the name of the authority of scripture than concede that their self-serving reading of that scripture might just be wrong, and that both the Bible and the God who inspires it may be more gracious, just, and inclusive than they can presently afford to be.

The biblical writers never contemplated a form of homosexuality in which loving, monogamous, and faithful persons sought to live out the implications of the gospel with as much fidelity to it as any heterosexual believer. All they knew of homosexuality was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness, and exploitation. These vices, as we know, are not unknown among heterosexuals, and to define contemporary homosexuals only in these terms is a cultural slander of the highest order, reflecting not so much prejudice, which it surely does, but what the Roman Catholic Church calls “invincible ignorance,” which all of the Christian piety and charity in the world can do little to conceal. The “problem,” of course, is not the Bible, it is the Christians who read it.

Testimony in the Yard

This is where I come in.

A few years ago I found myself speaking at a rally in Harvard Yard, at the request of an organization of gay and lesbian undergraduates who had found themselves the objects of an attack against them on religious grounds by a conservative undergraduate periodical. The articles in the

periodical, all written by undergraduates, most of whom were conservative Roman Catholics, argued that homosexuality was bad for the individual, bad for society, and should be condemned on religious and biblical grounds as well as on the empirical evidence of the unhappy lives of homosexuals. The purported purpose of this periodical was pastoral, no malice was intended, and while it was meant to be provocative and to attract attention, it was also meant to persuade, by the power of its arguments from Christian tradition and contemporary social analysis, that homosexuality was an unsound position and an unsafe and destructive lifestyle.

In its efforts to attract attention and to provoke, the periodical was a roaring success, and the response was outrage on the part of the Harvard homosexual community. It should be pointed out that this community was a diverse and secular one, and that while many of its members were doubtless devout practitioners of a number of religious faiths, it would be less than accurate to call the community as a whole particularly visibly religious, and the rally itself was hardly a churchy affair. It was arranged to be located in the traditional gathering place for protest and demonstration in Harvard Yard, on the large platform that forms the south porch of The Memorial Church, the scene not only of hundreds of rallies over the years but of the annual Commencement exercises. When the Harvard community has something on its mind, it gathers on these steps to express it.

In the days after publication of these articles and before the rally itself, the college community was ablaze with debate and controversy, and many felt that a line in college civility had been crossed. Rarely in the memory of many had one group of students taken to print to castigate its fellow students, and quickly the issue of homosexuality and religion fell second to questions of fairness, fair play, and civil discourse. At Harvard, where tolerance and diversity had long assumed the status of sacred cow and secular icon, the challenge to these virtues assumed in the minds of many a form of blasphemy. Some homosexual students said that they no longer felt safe from physical attack if they could be subjected in print to such an aggressive assault. What may have been

genuine desire on the part of the young authors to present their strongly argued positions as a way of opening a vigorous debate on an issue of enormous moral significance had the effect of most polemics. Fears and anxieties were raised where few had been before, discourse was inhibited rather than stimulated, and the moral climate of the community was poisoned. What was meant to be robust debate was perceived to be theological thuggery, and the situation could not continue unaddressed.

It was to this situation that I, and a number of other members of the faculty and administration, were invited to speak. I accepted the invitation both because I recognized the precariousness of the situation and because I believed I had something to say that would not necessarily be said by my secular colleagues on the platform. I fully appreciated the fact that I was not asked to speak because of any radical credentials that I may have had: I had none and was not thought to have any. After all, I was the man who had prayed for Ronald Reagan at his second inaugural and preached for George Bush at his first. Some knew I was a Republican, and others knew I had been consistently on the "wrong" side of the divestment issue in the debates on South Africa. I was opposed to divestment. I knew that I was invited to speak as a representative of the establishment and, together with certain of my colleagues, was expected to lend a patina of respectability to an occasion that otherwise might be easily written off as homosexual hysteria. I also knew that no one wanted me to be "religious." Religion, in fact, was part of the problem here and not part of the solution, or so it was thought by my secular friends.

I knew all that, and yet I also knew that the only ground on which I could stand in this particular instance was religious ground, and so rather than a pious elegiac on civility, or an exercise in political outrage, I determined that I would make my best effort to represent my understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith as it applied to the heart of the present discontents. As the university's pastor and preacher, as a Christian, and as a homosexual, I decided to reclaim by proclaiming a vision of the gospel that was inclusive rather than exclusive, and to do so as a Christian who was more than the sum of the parts of which I was made. I did so. I did so because I wanted all and sundry, but par-

ticularly these young homosexuals and their polemic antagonists, to see that there was more than one way to read the Bible and to understand the imperatives of the Christian faith. Certainly I wanted to contribute to the cooling down of local passions, but admittedly I also wanted to win minds and hearts, or at least to awaken them, to a view of the Christian faith which in dispute valued charity and humility over mean-spiritedness and arrogance. I thought of Edwin Markham's poem about the circle:

*He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.*

I warned of the dangers of Christian absolutism, with the appropriate references to the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem witch trials⁶; and I dismissed the easy references to scripture and the rather glib social analysis as unworthy of thinking or charitable Christian debate. I gave my speech, and naively thought that my disclosure of my own homosexuality would serve to substantiate the Christian message of reconciliation in diversity and equality in Christ. I, however, rather than my message, became the subject of attention.

The ensuing tempest drove me to an ever more intense study of both the relevant passages of scripture and the theories of interpretation, hermeneutics, as we call it in the trade, by which they are to be explained and understood. Despite some student calls for my resignation or dismissal, and threatening noises from clergy in my increasingly edgy denomination of American Baptist, I nevertheless found this experience to be one of the most formative and rewarding of my ministry. I prayed a lot, and was prayed for, and the support of friends who were secular and could not understand the problem, and of religious friends who did, and did not, and of strangers who heard not me but what I had said, served to sustain me in the difficult times. I got much mail, most of it a pleasure to receive. All that was not a delight to read, however, had to do

with the Bible. Many of my critics, chiefly from within the religious community, asked if I read the same Bible they did, and if I did, how then could I possibly reconcile my position with that of scripture? When arguments failed, anathemas were hurled and damnations promised. The whole incident confirmed what had long been my suspicion. Fear was at the heart of homophobia, as it was at the heart of racism, and as with racism, religion—particularly the Protestant evangelical kind that had nourished me—was the moral fig leaf that covered naked prejudice. I further concluded that more rather than less attention must be given to how we read the scriptures, what we bring to the text, what we find in the text, and what we take from the text. This transaction has brought me to the present moment, and I am grateful for that.

It Seems to Be All About Sex

It is all well and good to discuss what the Bible says or doesn't say about homosexuality, and it has been the purpose of this chapter to do just that. But when it comes down to cases, homosexuality is not about the Bible or texts. It is all about sex, and that is what tends to make it rather difficult to talk about in polite society, particularly in the religiously saturated culture of the United States that is still squeamish about the subject of sex. This squeamishness doesn't deny the hedonistic basis of much of our popular culture; entertainment and advertising, perhaps our two chief "art forms," are suffused with sex. Calvin Klein makes a sexual statement with every promotion of his underwear. The soap operas glide on a film of sexual frisson, and the substance, if we can call it that, of television situation comedies and nightclub stand-up comics is laced with sexual innuendo, and often with considerably more than innuendo.

The paradox of our culture is that while we are hardly averse to sex and its all too prominent place in our public consciousness, we are still awkward in talking about it. Perhaps this is not surprising in a sophisticated civilization that persists in all sorts of childish euphemisms for

body parts and functions and refers to what other cultures call simply the toilet as the "rest room." This reticence in speech is explained by many as a result of modesty. In honest discussions about homosexuality, however, this reticence gets in the way. When we ask just what is wrong with homosexuality, we are forced to ask what for many is the far more difficult question, what is the purpose or function of sex?

Taking its cues from much of its inherited Jewish morality of sex, the early Christian church had little doubt that the chief function of sex was to procreate. When the Hebrew Bible commanded that humankind be fruitful and multiply, as is recorded in Genesis 1:28, the Hebrew writer meant that from the posterity of Adam would come the Messiah. Fecundity was not simply to replicate the race, but to provide the means for the Messiah to enter into the world. Every male child was in fact a potential Messiah, as King Herod, in Matthew's gospel, knew only too well. Thus, for the Jews, any sexual activity that interfered with the possible birth of the Messiah was forbidden. The wasting of seed through nonprocreative sex was destructive not only to the survival of the race but to the redemption of the race through the Messiah. Masturbation, coitus interruptus, and, understandably, sex without the possibility of issue, that is, homosexual activity, was proscribed.

Not only did the early Christians have this moral inheritance as a part of their identity, they also had the negative examples of pagan sexual practices, which to them upheld private pleasure and satisfaction, together with aspects of exploitation and degradation, at the expense of the best interests of society. For Paul and his contemporaries, the end of the world would soon be at hand, and for them the Messiah had come in the form of Jesus Christ. Paul, interestingly enough, does not endorse the procreative aspects of sex, and in fact seems to prefer celibacy as the higher vocation. For those for whom the call of celibacy was too high, he issued his famous edict that it was "better to marry than to burn"—not in hell but with desire for the satisfactions of sex. In I Corinthians 7 he discusses the conjugal relations that ought to obtain between Christian husbands and wives. Nowhere does he mention that the sole purpose of such conjugality is the procreation of chil-

dren. That emphasis would come later with the Church Fathers, who, seeing that the end of the world was not yet at hand and that the church needed to be replenished, grudgingly gave the mandate of sex for procreation. They were grudging in that they, like Paul, held celibacy to be a higher vocation than marriage. And as such Church Fathers as Jerome, Augustine, Origen, and Tertullian all knew either by experience, as was certainly the case with Augustine, or by keen observation, the pagan pleasures of sex, which they themselves had renounced upon their conversion to Christianity, they wished to separate “Christian sex” from “pagan sex” by imposing a strictly moral purpose on it.

Augustine and the Invention of Shame

To minimize carnal pleasure, Augustine and his colleagues endowed the act of intercourse with the burden of shame. Lust was the sinful desire that could only be mitigated by purposeful, procreative, and unpleasurable sex. The very organs of sex, the genitals, were called by Augustine pudena, from the Latin *pudere*, “to be ashamed.” Thus the genitals were instruments of shame because what they facilitated was itself a shameful, disgusting, but necessary act. Augustine reconstructs, “resituates,” as modern biblical critics would call it, the Eden story and transforms it from a story of creation and disobedience to a tale of the discovery of sexual shame, making sex, and not disobedience, the original sin by which all of the subsequent race was tainted at birth. It is in this way that he reads Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” As Reay Tannahill points out in her eminently readable *Sex in History*, for Augustine and the moral theology he was developing, “The body was no more than a flawed vessel for the mind and spirit, and it was now up to the Church to propagate Christian morality in these terms.”⁵

He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, if the austere Augustine may be credited with wild dreams. Celibacy became the badge of moral

authority. Marriage was a concession to human weakness and the need for companionship, children, and sex. And sex within marriage was tolerated not for pleasure but for the morally worthy purpose of producing more Christians—but even children were described as a “bitter pleasure,” of which the pangs of childbirth were both sign and punishment. Somewhere in the twelfth or thirteenth century, marriage was made a sacrament, which meant that like all sacraments it could not be dissolved. Jesus’ judgment on divorce, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mark 10:11–12), confirms Paul’s textually older prohibition on divorce in I Corinthians 7:10–15. According to Tannahill, “One marriage . . . should supply enough companionship for any man; second marriages were adultery, third fornication, and fourth nothing short of ‘swinish.’ ”

Given these strictures and the intrinsic sense of sin attached to sex, it is no wonder that sexual activity outside of marriage that gave only pleasure or sensation because it was incapable of performing its moral duty of producing issue was held in deep revulsion. The Bible, we may say, was utilized to reinforce this position, but as we have seen, the Bible was evidence for the prohibitions rather than the basis for them. Homosexuality was thus by definition, together with masturbation and other forms of nonprocreative sexual activity, deviant, and the degree to which these deviations gave pleasure only compounded the sin of lust.

What the homosexual did was different, and hence the homosexual was different, and in a religious world that increasingly prized conformity in all things, but particularly in sexual matters, the difference branded the homosexual a threat to the moral order, the equivalent of a heretic in the church or a traitor to the state. This is the position when Saint Thomas Aquinas arrives, whose teaching formed a basis of moral philosophy for the treatment of homosexuality up to the present. Until fairly recent times, homosexuality was regarded first as sin, then as crime, and then as illness. These cultural identities all stem from what homosexuals do or cannot do sexually, and the source again is not the Bible but

the moral assumptions of the Church Fathers with which they then read the Bible and interpreted it as part of the teaching tradition of the church.

What the Homosexual "Does"

Andrew Sullivan,⁶ the Roman Catholic and openly gay former editor of *The New Republic*, tells of an encounter with Patrick J. Buchanan on *Crossfire*, Buchanan's television talk show. The subject was same-sex marriage, with Sullivan in favor of it and Buchanan opposed. Thundered Buchanan, "Andrew, it's not what you are. It is what you do!" A good Roman Catholic knows that what homosexuals "do" is to have sex in which the possibility of procreation is excluded. Since the only purpose of sex is to procreate, when that is by definition not possible, the sexual activity is also by definition "unnatural" and proscribed by church teaching. Sullivan points out in his *New Republic* essay, however, that the Roman Catholic Church permits the marriage of infertile couples in church and allows them sex. Couples in which the wife is past child-bearing are also allowed to marry in church and to have sex although the procreation options are closed. By a miracle a childless couple could have a child, but as Sullivan points out, if we appeal to the miraculous, why are God's miracles necessarily limited to heterosexual couples? If homosexuality is an objective disorder, then what is infertility? Sullivan's argument is that the church has accommodated itself to nonprocreative sex in marriage. By what logic other than circular does it oppose homosexual nonprocreative sex in a marriage that also in every other way conforms to the church's definition of the marriage state?

In his recently published essay "By Their Fruits" in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*, Boston College Professor of Theology Charles C. Hefling, Jr.,⁷ raises this timely discussion to a new level of clarity. Writing firmly within the tradition of Anglican moral theology, Hefling argues that to say that homosexual conduct is wrong because the Bible says it is "is not to answer but to dismiss the question."

He puts the question in the way he thinks it should be asked: "Are there sound reasons for revising the traditional account of what the wrongness of homosexuality consists in? Is the idea that physical intimacy between men or between women can only be unnatural an idea that the best available understanding of the relevant facts will no longer support?" In other words, are we able to advance beyond the moral hypothesis of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas that the sole natural function of sex is procreation?

Beyond Procreation

The answer is yes. There is a widely shared consensus developed over time that "sex is good in more ways than one." He cites the 1958 resolution of the Ninth Lambeth Conference, the decennial meeting of the bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion, which on the subject of intercourse said, "Sexual intercourse is not by any means the only language of earthly love, but it is, in its full and right use, the most revealing. . . . It is a giving and receiving in the unity of two free spirits which is in itself good. . . . Therefore it is utterly wrong to say that . . . such intercourse ought not to be engaged in except with the willing intention of children." The Roman Church teaches that the sexual act must have two core elements: the procreative, which means an openness to the possibility of new life, and the unitive, which means a commitment to faithfulness. The Lambeth ruling makes it clear that the procreative does not take precedence over the unitive, and in fact the unitive is an equally valid context in which the sexual act may take place. Fruitfulness in marriage, as Hefling argues, can be real without being visibly obvious. Or, as he neatly summarizes it, "Sex can be productive without being reproductive." On this basis Hefling argues that "homosexual intercourse is not, in and of itself, the unnatural vice that tradition condemns."

Sex Redeemed

Hefling has not devoted this careful and constructive analysis merely to the advocacy of what is called "gay marriage," which is of course a civil affair and very much before the public in the congressional debates on the so-called Defense of Marriage Act. Hefling is suggesting that the church, his own Anglican Communion and by implication all other churches, advance the conversation to the point where the relevant question is what are the appropriate Christian expectations placed upon those permanent, monogamous, faithful, intimate relationships within which the sexual act takes place, whether the relationship be heterosexual or homosexual. "Have same-sex relationships the same potential for sacramental meaning and power" as heterosexual relationships? He believes they have because "they can, and do signify a natural good." Sex thus understood is not only redeemed, it is also redemptive.