

**A Bible-based argument for being a welcoming church: An on-line debate from 2003**  
Ted Grimsrud

*Back in the mid-1990s, several dozen Mennonites and fellow travelers took part in a freewheeling and wide-ranging on-line discussion group known as Mennolink. Mennolink was created and operated by Jon Harder in Mountain Lake, MN. During those early years, Mennolink hosted numerous lively conversations, at times acrimonious, about various issues. These discussions at times got pretty interesting.*

*I am not sure when I joined Mennolink, nor how long the conversations had been going on before I joined. I would guess that it was in the Spring of 1994 that I joined. I think that was when my family got our first internet-capable computer. I do know that my friend Paul Keim gave me his old modem and that he introduced me to Mennolink.*

*At regular intervals, the conversation would turn to whether the churches should be more welcoming of gay and lesbian Christians. Typically, these would be some of the most intense and acrimonious conversations on the Link. We were blessed with the presence of people holding various viewpoints. That made for lively debate where differences received a thorough airing. It was interesting how the issues would come up, sparks would fly for awhile, then settle down for a time. Typically, after a few months where the subject had not come up, something would trigger a new round. Many of the same people would participate, but usually some new voices would enter.*

*I had a lot of energy for those debates and often would be an active participant. I saved many of the conversations. I have a file now, titled “Mennolink 1995–2003,” that includes quite a bit of what I wrote (I generally edited out what the others wrote, thinking if I ever used this materials it would just be to rework my own writing—but I regret now not having the entire conversations) and runs to 139 single-spaced pages (about 73,000 words). The file ends rather abruptly without any explanation. I don’t remember any more why it ends when it did. I do vaguely remember that probably a few years later I decided to leave MennoLink. As far as I know, it no longer exists and I expect that archives no longer exist either.*

*What is of interest to me with the particular document I am introducing here is the last, quite long, bit of writing that is included in the “Mennolink 1995–2003” file. After a number of extensive debates with various people (one especially, “John”), I decided that I would try to strike a bit more of an irenic tone and present a fairly thoroughgoing case for my position based on a careful treatment of the biblical materials. As it happened, for the first (and only) time, I actually seem to have changed somebody’s mind (though other conversation partners were not persuaded).*

*I decided to reproduce my side of this conversation here in order to make this part of the file available to the wider world. What follows is a lightly edited account of my side of the conversation (with occasional quotes from my conversation partners). My editing has been only for clarity; I have tried to give a record of the words I wrote back in 2003—reflecting language in use at that time. I developed these ideas further and published them in various forms later:*

*“Does the Bible Condemn Same-Sex Intimacy as Sin? A Thought Exercise.” In Ruth Conrad Liechty, ed. Welcome to the Dialogue Series, Booklet #7. Goshen, IN: The Welcome Committee (April 2004), 5-26.*

*“Toward a Theology of Welcome: Developing a Perspective on the ‘Homosexuality’ Issue.” In Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation. Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008. 129-66.*

*“Does the Bible Condemn Same-Sex Intimacy as Sin?” In Ted Grimsrud, Mennonites and “Homosexuality”: The Struggle to Become a Welcoming Church. Harrisonburg, VA: Peace Theology Books, 2016. 36-54.*

*Ted Grimsrud—July 29, 2017*

### **New info on the Bible and “homosexuality”? (1)**

2 Jan 2003

*[The conversation was set off by a question from “Harold” asking about whether there were new perspectives on interpreting the Bible in relation to the sexuality issues we had been discussing off and on for years (in my file, the first encounter I have record of with “Harold” happened May 20, 1997).]*

I have decided to respond on the level you seem to be asking for in the hopes that you (and anyone else) will devote some time to giving me some feedback. I am not writing in hopes of changing your mind. But you do ask some legitimate questions I think, and I would value your further questions and criticisms because I genuinely am trying to pursue the truth on these issues.

My initial thought was that the best thing to do would be simply to back off on my statement that you have quoted twice, “the best readings of the biblical statements do not support the restrictive view concerning same-sex relationships.” You referred to Robert Gagnon and “John” referred to Richard Hays as two heavyweight biblical scholars who with great care have argued that the biblical statements do indeed support the restrictive view. At least as tellingly, you both also referred to people such as Walter Wink and Victor Paul Furnish who are firmly on the inclusive side who nonetheless also argue (with less care, in my view) that the biblical statements support the restrictive view (they, unlike Hays and Gagnon, do not take those statements as normative).

In light of that evidence, my statement is revealed to be pretty audacious. I wish I hadn’t written it the way I did and would now like to rewrite it. What I want to say now is something more qualified: “As I have studied the core texts used to support the view that the Bible condemns same-sex relationships, I have not found the conclusion that those texts do condemn same-sex relationships to be warranted.”

I want to admit that I should not be so arrogant to assume that “my readings” are “the best readings” given the contrary conclusions of at least two people, Hays and Wink, who I respect greatly and who I know know way more about the Bible than I do.

Nonetheless, I still come to the conclusions I have come to because, Hays and Wink notwithstanding, these conclusions seem the best to me—and I think, even with my new qualifications, your questions apply, and my accountability as a Mennonite scholar should make me willing to defend my conclusions. And, as I said, in sharing my reflections I greatly desire your responses and those of any others who may have some to offer.

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## PART ONE: Hermeneutics

I believe that we best approach the issues of the place of gays and lesbians in our churches as a puzzle to be solved more than as an argument to win. If we take this approach we understand those with different points of view as people to learn from and work together with more than as opponents to defeat or hindrances to truth who must be silenced.

When we consider how different people within the church approach the Bible in relation to sexuality issues, we can identify four general tendencies. I would characterize them as follows:

- (1) Restrictive (meaning we should restrict the involvement in the church of people in same-sex relationships) with a stronger view of biblical authority. Focus on direct references: “Bible is opposed to homosexuality and so should we be.”
- (2) Restrictive with a weaker view of biblical authority. Focus on natural law: “Bible is not central; homosexuality is unnatural.”
- (3) Inclusive (meaning we should be inclusive without restriction of people in same-sex relationships) with a stronger view of biblical authority. Focus on biblical themes: “Bible is not opposed to homosexuality and since it supports inclusion of vulnerable people so should we.”
- (4) Inclusive with a weaker view of biblical authority. Focus on liberative texts and dismiss anti-gay texts as inapplicable: “Bible is opposed to homosexuality but we need not be because of the priority we place on liberation.”

We notice here that people on the “restrictive” side can have either a stronger or weaker view of biblical authority. This is also true of people on the “inclusive” side. It is crucial to note that the dividing line is not actually the issue of biblical authority. The dividing line is to be found elsewhere.

I believe ultimately that the issue might best be boiled down to the question of our starting assumptions about where the burden of proof lies.

Do we start with the assumption that the burden of proof lies with those who would be inclusive—that is, inclusive people must prove why it is okay to be inclusive because it is our assumption that it probably is not? In this view, we could say, gay and lesbian Christians start outside the church and must find a basis for getting in.

Or, do we start with the assumption that the burden of proof lies with those who would be restrictive—that is, restrictive people must prove why it is okay to be restrictive because it is our assumption that it probably is not? In this view, we could say, gays and lesbian Christians start inside the church and the church must find a basis for getting them out.

Which benefit of the doubt we choose does not, of course, in itself resolve the issue. It is always possible to overcome the benefit of the doubt—but the kind of argument that must be made will be determined on whether one is trying to prove that our default inclusiveness must be overridden or our default restrictiveness must be overridden.

The starting point we take then becomes crucial. Hence, this is probably where we need first to focus our attention. Our starting point should not be arbitrary or accidental. We should examine and evaluate where we start. This is the first big piece of the puzzle in terms of biblical hermeneutics as it relates to the church's relationship to sexual minorities.

Very briefly, I will mention several important reasons for putting the burden of proof on those who would be inclusive (that is, saying that the church's default position should be restrictive). (1) The Christian tradition has pretty much always operated with a restrictive consensus. Restrictiveness is the historic position of the church. (2) The Christian community is called on to seek for purity, to exclude sin. Especially in our modern world where moral standards are deteriorating, it is important that the church take a stand against sexual permissiveness. (3) A straightforward, commonsense reading of the Bible makes it clear that the Bible is against homosexuality. Believers and non-believers alike all seem to assume that the Bible takes this stance.

These are some reasons for putting the burden of proof on the other side—to say that the church's default position should be inclusive. (1) Jesus modeled inclusiveness. His treatment of people labeled as “sinners” in his world parallels how the church should related to vulnerable and ostracized people in our day. (2) Going back further, the Old Testament clearly teaches that the community of faith has a special responsibility to care for vulnerable and marginalized people—in that setting, the people most often mentioned were widows, orphans, and other people without access to wealth and power. (3) Paul taught that the only thing that matters in terms of one's standing before God is one's faith. Christians are those who trust in Christ, period. Not, trust in Christ plus this or that requirement.

To solve our puzzle, we need carefully to examine these various points that determine our starting point. These are the convictions that will likely determine how we read and apply the biblical teaching—regardless of whether we have a stronger or weaker view of biblical authority.

My own approach began to be clarified for me back in the late 1970s. At that time, my newly established but very thorough-going pacifist convictions (and perhaps my genetic “grace-filled” Lutheran make-up) moved me toward making the assumption in favor of inclusiveness as the default assumption once I faced the issues in a concrete way. But I recognized that this assumption is only the starting point and is not a conclusion.

With the assumption that restrictiveness should be proven as my starting point, my basic hermeneutical question in relation to the Bible is this: What do we find if we examine the biblical teaching asking if it provides clear and persuasive bases for the restrictive position? We need to establish clear criteria for what would constitute strong evidence to override our default inclusive position. Then we look at the texts.

Do the “core texts” that explicitly mention homosexuality provide a clear basis for overriding the default position? We must look at each text carefully. This is not an overwhelming task, given the small number of texts in this “core.” My next two posts will focus in this task in an abbreviated way and I will argue those texts do not provide such a clear basis.

Another question is, does the argument from creation (i.e., that the complementarity of male/female sexuality proscribes same sex relationships) provide a clear, strong basis for overriding the default position? If we emphasize the need to provide a strong and clear argument, it seems difficult to conclude that evidence from creation could, standing on its own, provide such a basis. This is an argument that requires several deductive steps in order to apply it to same-gender sex. That is, since Genesis 1–2 and Matthew 19:3-9 are not directly addressing the issue of same-sex relationships they can scarcely on their own provide decisive evidence. Perhaps they could serve as supporting evidence along with additional strong bases, but if the “core texts” don’t actually provide such bases, we would have to doubt that the argument from creation on its own does either.

A third question is, does the biblical teaching on holiness provide a clear basis for overriding the default position? In considering this argument, we must be careful in discerning what the “biblical teaching” actually tells Christians about holiness. First of all, at the core of the “Holiness Code,” Leviticus 19, holiness is characterized most centrally as concern for vulnerable people in Israel (i.e., widows, orphans, strangers). When God tells Israel to be “holy as I am holy” (19:2), God goes on in the rest of the chapter to outline what implications for Israel’s common life this has. We read here that God wants them to provide care for vulnerable and marginalized people as an integral part of the moral life outlined in Lev. 19.

Jesus certainly understood himself in the tradition of Leviticus 19 (he cites the key verse, 19:17, “love your neighbor as yourself”). He turned common attitudes toward “holiness” on their head when he ate with “unclean” people and in many other ways reached out to vulnerable and marginalized people—as an expression of the holiness of God. Biblical holiness as presented in Leviticus 19 and in Jesus’s life and teaching would seem not to provide a basis for overriding our default position. Other portrayals of holiness in the Bible may be cited, but it is hard to see them taking precedence over the center of the OT “Holiness Code” or Jesus himself.

So, in conclusion, the position I have come to can be summarized in this way. Gay and lesbian Christians in our day are prime examples of vulnerable and marginalized people. The Bible teaches (1) that God has special concern for vulnerable and marginalized people and (2) that the central element of God’s calling of people is mercy and acceptance for all who trust in God. These two themes indicate that our starting assumption should be that the church is called to be inclusive unless we can find clear and persuasive reasons not to be. One of the main sources where we might expect to find such clear and persuasive reasons is the Bible. That is why we

need to look carefully at the texts assumed by some of those on the restrictive side to provide such clear and persuasive reasons.

In the posts to follow I will focus on the question of whether the Bible does provide a clear basis for overriding the default position of inclusion that I have presented. That is, does the Bible clearly condemn what many today are calling same-sex covenanted relationships?

## **New info on the Bible and homosexuality? (2)**

02 Jan 2003

### **PART TWO: Old Testament**

#### **Introduction**

I want carefully to consider one question: “Does the Bible condemn ‘homosexuality’ as sin?”

First, I need briefly to state how I intend to use the terms “homosexuality,” “condemn,” and “sin.” By “homosexuality” I mean sexual intimacy between two people of the same sex whose primary affectional orientation is toward people of their same sex. This term by definition refers to people of both sexes (that is, statements about “homosexuality” and “homosexuals” must be statements that apply to both men and women).

By “condemn” I mean something along the lines of “to explicitly and consistently reject as a morally acceptable behavior or practice.” That is, to say the Bible “condemns” something is to say that it gives an explicit, clear, and consistent message that the specified behavior and practice is always wrong. For example, I would say that the Bible clearly condemns murder—murder in the Bible is consistently portrayed as morally unacceptable for people of faith. On the other hand, I would not say “the Bible condemns participation in warfare.” I happen to believe that participation in warfare is always morally unacceptable for Christians, but the basis for my belief cannot be that the Bible clearly, consistently, and explicitly condemns such participation—too many times the Old Testament blesses warfare.

Using the terms “condemn” and “sin” together is a bit redundant, in that we can assume that whatever is condemned in the Bible is by definition “sin.” The nuance that the term “sin” adds in our formulation is that “sin” refers to behavior and practices that go overtly against God's will. “Sin” adds the sense that the problem is violating what God wants and does not want from God's people.

I will investigate in what follows this question: Does the Bible clearly and explicitly affirm that all sexual relations between two people of the same sex are always in violation of God's will for people of faith?

I want to be clear that this question is only one part of the larger question of how the church today should respond to gay and lesbian Christians who are in committed, intimate relationships. I will not directly speak to this larger question. It is possible that one could conclude that the

Bible does not condemn a certain behavior or practice as sin but nonetheless, based on a series of other criteria, still conclude that said behavior or practice is not acceptable for Christians.

I believe the Bible is the normative source for Christian faith and practice. I intend here to take a fairly unsophisticated, direct approach to the Bible. I am interested in the issue of if, following a reading strategy compatible with a quite conservative doctrine of scripture, one finds clear evidence for asserting that the Bible condemns “homosexuality” as sin.

To answer this question, we need to ascertain whether the “condemnation” is overtly and explicitly expressed. That is, I think this question can be answered only by considering the texts that have been cited as directly speaking to the issue. I am assuming that indirect or implicit statements cannot be the deciding evidence for overt, direct, explicit biblical condemnation. This is not to say that indirect and implicit materials are not essential for our discernment of what we ultimately decide on the stance of today’s churches but rather simply that the statement “the Bible condemns homosexuality as sin” in itself must be evaluated in terms of direct and overt statements.

I, then, will focus on the six passages seen to speak directly of same-sex sexual activities. These include, to be covered in this post, three from the Old Testament: (1) the story of Abraham and Lot, Sodom and Gomorrah, in Genesis 18–19; (2) a similar story in Judges 19; and (3) Leviticus 18–20, the Holiness Code of legislation for Israel's practice. In future posts, I will look at three from the New Testament: (1) Romans 1:18-32, with its well-known connection between idolatry and sexuality; (2) the list of sins that often is understood to contain reference to same-sex sex in 1 Corinthians 6:9; and (3) a similar list in 1 Timothy 1:10.

I will approach these texts first of all in their broader context within the books they are part of. I believe the literary units within which these scattered references to same-sex sex fall are the most important elements of interpreting those references.

### **Genesis 18:1–19:29**

Genesis 18 and 19 contain two contrasting accounts of hospitality. In juxtaposing these two accounts—one being Abraham’s hosting of the visitors from God in the first part of the chapter 18, the other being the men of Sodom's attempt to gang-rape the visitors—the text focuses on the called-outness of Abraham as God's channel of salvation for all the families of the earth. If we consider the connection between chapters 18 and 19, we see that the main point of the story of Sodom is to highlight by contrast the exemplary characteristics of Abraham, not to underscore as an end in itself the point of the sinfulness of the heathen.

We still need to ask what precisely were the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 18:20-22, God reports to Abraham that God has heard the outcry concerning the gravity of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. This “outcry” evokes echoes of other cases where the outcry of oppressed people reaches God (for example, the outcry of Abel's blood, Genesis 4:10, and the outcry of the enslaved Israelites in Egypt, Exodus 2:23). The “outcry” implies social injustice (as later on alluded to in Jeremiah 23:14).

The injustice of the Sodomites the story portrays is their brutal inhospitality. Hospitality had great significance in the desert culture of the Bible. Abraham, in the first part of Genesis 18, shows how hospitality was supposed to be practiced. The moral corruption of the Sodomite community comes through clearly in their refusal to care for Lot's visitors with generosity; responding instead with exploitative violence.

The inhospitality of the Sodomites is described here in terms of every single man in the city (19:4) seeking to have sex with the visitors—indicating the intent to gang rape the visitors. The sin here clearly is a social sin (not individual), characterizing the entire city. Several of the men of Sodom were Lot's prospective sons-in-law (19:12-14), implying that while “every man” might have been intent on raping the visitors, not “every man” was “homosexual.” The issue clearly seems to be domination over vulnerable outsiders, not same-sex sexuality.

Genesis 18-19 tells us nothing about same sex affectional orientation, same-sex loving relationships, or even about alleged ancient Near Eastern revulsion regarding a condition modern people call “homosexuality.” This passage is about hospitality—contrasting Abraham's welcome of strangers and intercession with God over the fate of sinful people with the brutal inhospitality of the Sodomites, paradigmatically expressed in the effort to subject Lot's visitors to gang rape as a means of humiliating and subjugating them.

### **Judges 19:1-22**

The above interpretation of Genesis 18–19 finds background support from Judges 19:1-22. Close parallels between these two passages include in each case the visitors offering to stay outside and strongly being urged by their hosts not to, the city being utterly inhospitable with the exception in each case of a single resident alien, the host's house is surrounded by a mob from the city who want to “womanize” (humiliate through gang-rape) the guest(s), the offer by the host of virgin daughters to the mob.

A crucial difference between the two stories, though, supports interpreting the concern in these stories as gang rape, not same-sex sexuality. In the Judges story, the mob relents when they are given the guest's concubine to rape. To ravage the man's woman had a similar effect of emasculating the male guest, the concern being domination, not same-sex sex.

These two passages, Genesis 18–19 and Judges 19, are the only two stories in the Old Testament that mention particular men seeking to have sex with other men. In both cases, though, the desire for sexual intercourse was an expression of the desire to dominate strangers through gang rape, not an example of general “homosexuality.” So these stories provide no evidence that “the Bible condemns ‘homosexuality’ as sin.”

### **Leviticus 18–20**

The Book of Leviticus centers on the need for Israelites to maintain clear distinctiveness from surrounding cultures. The book places itself in the time of Moses, following the exodus and prior to the entry into the promised land. Leviticus challenges the Israelites to live faithfully in this land God gives them. Following God's law is absolutely crucial to the survival of the faith community. An inevitable consequence of faithfulness to God's law will be living as a contrast



culture in relation to surrounding cultures. How can Israel live as a distinct, separated people in the context of a surrounding culture that is not friendly to their faith?

Leviticus 17–26 gives what is called the “Holiness Code.” This section sketches the characteristics that should distinguish Israel as God’s holy nation. Within the Holiness Code, chapters 18–20 provide the core teaching, and within that smaller section, chapter 19 plays the especially crucial role of defining “holiness.” The concept of biblical “holiness” must be understood relationally. Holiness in Israel characterizes God as a relational God. Holy people are people who live in right relationship with God and with other people. The community of faith actualizes its holiness as it fosters interpersonal relationships characterized by justice.

In Leviticus 19, Israel’s calling to be holy nation is given concrete shape. The people are called to be holy—just as God is holy (v.3). In the following verses this is discussed in relational terms. Among the commands: revere your parents; do not harvest the corners of your fields or strip your vineyards bare in order to provide for the “poor and the alien” (vv.9-10); do not lie or steal (v.11); do not withhold the laborer’s wages (v.13); treat the deaf and blind kindly (v.14); do not slander (v.16); respect the elderly (v.32); and be inclusive of aliens (v.33-4). We may sum the teaching up (as Jesus did) with 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.”

To be a holy nation means to imitate God, to love the neighbor, to care for vulnerable ones, and to love even the alien “as yourself.” The core identity of Israel as a distinctive people of God centers on concern for all members of the community; especially concern for vulnerable ones, that they may function as community members. The legislation concerning sexual practices must be understood within this context of care for vulnerable ones that lay at the heart of the definition of holiness in Israel.

Two underlying issues motivate legislation concerning sexual practices here. The first is the need to differentiate Israel’s way of life from that of the “Canaanites.” The second is concern about procreation, continuity over successive generations. In Leviticus 18, the focus on differentiating Israelite culture from surrounding cultures is apparent. The chapter begins by asserting that the Israelites “shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan” (18:3). It concludes with “do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves” (18:24). The practices forbidden in Leviticus 18 and 20 are forbidden because they are seen as characteristic of the peoples the Israelites are being commanded to differentiate themselves from. These practices are not necessarily intrinsically evil.

The second concern is the need for Israelites to “be fruitful and multiply” in order to continue as a distinct community. Each of the prohibitions in 18:19-23 has to do with “wasted seed.” These are almost all sexual practices that cannot produce children within a socially approved family context, including sex during menstruation, adultery, male/male sexual relations, and bestiality. The one exception, the reference to child sacrifice, is certainly also a form of “wasted seed,” or counter to the need for children.

We still must consider why specifically the command that the Israelite male “shall not live with a male as with a woman” is included here and what this command might possibly be referring to. This is an obscure reference. We are given no explanation as to what is in mind beyond what we

can glean from the context, i.e., the concern about “wasted seed” and the need to be different from the “Canaanites.” There are no other references in the law codes of Exodus through Deuteronomy to male/male sex.

A number of scholars argue that we should assume that behind these prohibitions of male/male sex is the worldview of the Hebrews that simply understood “homosexuality” as inherently wrong. Hence, there was no need to say why. However, if we do not start with an assumption that this is the case and instead ask for evidence, we will find little to indicate that the Hebrews viewed “homosexuality” as inherently wrong. There simply is no mention whatsoever of male/male or female/female sexual relations elsewhere in the Old Testament. If such were seen as inherently wrong, no one apparently ever said so. If we are trying to make a positive case for the Bible condemning “homosexuality,” such silence speaks volumes.

From the immediate context in Leviticus 18 and 20, we may with some confidence say that the problem with male/male sex here is in large part based on the problem of “wasted seed.” This may be part of the reason why we see only male/male sex mentioned and see nothing about female/female sex. Since we are given no details about what the context for these forbidden practices were, we may at best speculate. The tiny bit of evidence we have does seem to point toward some sort of cultic sexual practices (note especially the reference to child sacrifice in this passage as well as the general concern about “Canaanite” religious practices). We have little basis here for generalizing about the Bible's overall view of “homosexuality.” Leviticus 18–20 contains numerous other prohibitions that are rarely if ever understood by Christians to be determinative of the Bible's overall position.

For example, in the immediate context of the above two commands, we also find prohibitions of male/female sexual intercourse during menstruation (18:19), of wearing clothes made with more than one kind of fiber (19:19), of wearing tattoos (19:28), and of planting more than one type of grain in a single field (19:19). None of these are cited in the present as proof that the Bible “condemns” these practices once and for all.

The main reasons for the prohibition of male/male sex in Leviticus 18–20 that we have any evidence for at all are clearly context specific. Though numerous writers who argue that the Bible indeed condemns “homosexuality” claim that the Leviticus prohibition is based on more fundamental theological assumptions, they are unable to marshal direct evidence from Leviticus itself (or from elsewhere in the Old Testament).

Certainly Leviticus 18–20 clearly condemns some sort of male/male sex. But in the absence of a clear universalizable basis for such a condemnation, we do not have enough evidence to generalize from these two rather cryptic references. These two verses are not sufficient in themselves to conclude that the Bible condemns “homosexuality.” The most we can say for sure is that these verses give us a basis for saying that the Bible condemns male/male sex in the context of concern for wasting seed (just as it condemns masturbation and sexual intercourse during menstruation) and for reflecting Canaanite religious practices. Nothing about female/female sex is inferred here. In fact, these two reasons for concern do not apply to women. So, whatever the concerns in Leviticus might be, they do not appear to be in-principle condemnation of all same-sex sex.

Finally, the obscurity of the prohibition of male/male sex counts against using it as strong evidence that “the Bible condemns homosexuality as sin.” If it is not clear to what and why Leviticus is referring when it speaks of male/male sex, we certainly cannot use it as strong evidence for drawing a conclusion about the biblical stance as a whole.

Numerous scholars argue that Leviticus provides the grounding the New Testament condemnation of “homosexuality.” However, these arguments are not based on clear evidence of a direct link so much as on assumptions that since the Leviticus text is the one clear anti-“homosexuality” text in the Old Testament, it must serve as the basis for what are “obviously” anti-“homosexuality” texts in the New Testament. As we shall see, none of the small handful of New Testament texts that allegedly assert a condemnation of “homosexuality” actually do so clearly when they are scrutinized closely. We do not actually have any clear bases for making such a broader application of the Leviticus prohibitions.

### **Re: new info on the Bible and homosexuality? (3)**

02 Jan 2003

#### **PART THREE: New Testament (Romans 1)**

##### **Romans 1:18–3:31**

In treating Paul’s discussion of same-sex sex in Romans one, I will take a three-step approach. First, I will discuss the broader argument of Romans 1–3. Second, I will discuss the place that 1:18–32 plays in that broader argument. And, third, I will discuss what significance the reference to same-sex sex has for Paul’s discussion. Why does Paul use this particular example here and what might that have to say to us?

Debates over the meaning of Romans 1 dominate biblically oriented discussions of our topic. Richard Hays asserts, “the most crucial text for Christian ethics concerning homosexuality remains Romans 1” (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 383). Arguing for the opposite conclusion from Hays’s restrictive view of “homosexuality,” Victor Paul Furnish also pays close attention to Romans 1 in his chapter, “Homosexuality,” in *The Moral Teaching of Paul*.

What renders these discussions deeply unsatisfactory, from my perspective, is how writers on all sides of the issue seem to lose sight of the forest in their focus on the trees. That is, they argue as if the meaning and relevance of Romans 1 for the Bible’s stance on “homosexuality” relies on the meaning of specific words—assuming that in some sense the main point of Romans 1:18–32 is to address the issue of ‘homosexuality.’ As I try to show below, with a more contextual reading of these verses much of this narrow debate loses most of its relevance.

(1) ***The argument of 1:18–3:31.*** The problem the section 1:18–3:20 as a whole addresses is mentioned in 1:18—human injustice (and the solution, presented beginning in 3:21, is the revelation of the justice of God). The Greek word translated “injustice” (*adika*) is often misleadingly translated “wickedness” or “unrighteousness.” Both of those translations reflect later Christian theological developments that presented the alienation between God and human beings in impersonal, legalistic terms.

Paul has in mind here a deeply personal problem. The alienation human beings have from God is relational, more than legal. Human beings have violated their relationship with God. The central manifestation of this alienated relationship is alienation in human-to-human relationships. Human beings acting unjustly toward their fellow human beings is a consequence of the lack of justice (wholeness) in their relationship with God.

Beginning with 1:18 and continuing through the end of chapter three, Paul's argument proceeds as follows: Human beings outside the covenant live lives of deep-seated injustice, deserving of God's wrath (1:18-32). However, those people of the covenant who vigorously condemn the injustices of the outsiders while ignoring their own also deserve God's wrath (2:1-3:8). The truth of these two statements leads to the inevitable conclusion, all people fall equally short of God's justice (3:9-20). Paul's punch line, though, comes beginning in 3:21. God's mercy prevails—mercy revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This mercy is revealed outside the religious structures based on works of the law (though witnessed to by the authentic message of Israel's scriptures). Paul aims his primary critique in these three chapters toward the religiously smug people of the covenant who need to be convinced that they are alienated from God due to their over-confidence concerning their standing. Paul indicts Gentile sin (1:18-32) in order to make his central point—the religious people too are just as much under the power of sin.

Throughout Romans two, Paul makes it clear what his deepest concern is in this passage. In 2:5-6 he speaks of the hard hearts of those who, in passing judgment on others, assumed that God's judgment toward them would be favorable. This is a false assumption: "You, the judge, are doing the very same thing" (2:1). Paul sees this false assumption as indicating that these religious people were in as much need of repentance as those he described in 1:18-32. They are equally alienated from God and do not even know it.

Paul strongly believes that keeping the authentic law genuinely counts in God's eyes; the law is defined later on in Romans in terms of loving one's neighbor (13:8-10). So he states in 2:26 that Gentiles who keep the true requirements of the law will be considered part of the covenant even if they have not been circumcised.

In chapter three, Paul concludes his critique by stringing together a litany of Old Testament passages underscoring that both types of people he has described are alienated from God and living under the power of sin. This includes both the ungodly pagan living in blatant bondage to lust and the religious self-seeker living in self-deceived bondage to works of the law as the basis of their standing before God. That Paul has an ultimately redemptive intent with his critique becomes clear beginning in 3:21. He underscores the sinfulness of both types of people to clear the ground for a new appreciation of the mercy of God. The justice (i.e., right-making or healing power) of God has been shown in an unprecedented way in Jesus.

In 1:18-3:31 Paul challenges his readers to take seriously their own sinfulness, to recognize that the blatant sins of the pagans are not the most dangerous; rather the sins that arise with religiosity are much more dangerous. Sinful religiosity attempts to construct bases for righteousness that focus on external boundary markers ("works of the law") and not on trust in God's mercy that empowers people to live lovingly and justly toward their neighbors.

(2) ***The role of 1:18-32 in the larger argument.*** In the context of Romans 1–3, the discussion of wrongdoing in 1:18-32 serves Paul's case by making two points. First, readers are set up for what follows in Romans 2—the critique of religiosity. Second, this critique leads to Paul's punch line: God's unconditional mercy is revealed in Jesus apart from such religiosity.

In 1:18-32, Paul uses images that likely would have been familiar to his readers. He assumes here that human beings are inherently creatures oriented toward worship. We all serve something outside ourselves—if not God then idols, trusting in things. Should we take the route of trusting in things, we will find ourselves on a downward spiral toward ever-increasing injustice and slavery to our lusts rendering us less than human. The language Paul uses of this process is to say that human beings are “handed over” to their injustice—as if God withdraws God's providential care for these people and simply allows them to reap the consequences of their idolatry.

These consequences find expression in extraordinary injustice, degrading passions and sexual obsessiveness. Idolaters lose self-control—even to the point of women giving up “natural” self-control for unbridled lust and men being consumed by passion for other men (1:26-27). The injustice finds a variety of expressions beyond oppressive sexuality; 1:29-31 lists twenty examples of unjust behavior characteristic of people who choose ungodliness over genuine worship in the God of creation.

We need to notice that this passage does not have as its rhetorical intent negatively analyzing pagan sexuality in order to provide regulations for Christian sexuality. Rather, Paul sets his readers up for what follows in chapter two. When you pass judgment of such terrible sinners, “you condemn yourself, because you the judge are doing the very same things.”

(3) ***Why does Paul focus on same-sex sex?*** Even if Paul is not centering on same-sex sexuality, he does clearly seem to see it as in some sense characteristic of the worst of pagan injustice. However, we are limited in our quest to understand why Paul chose this particular expression of sinfulness by the lack of other passages elsewhere in the New Testament that could help us out. Perhaps Paul reflects widespread Christian assumptions about the inherently sinful nature of all possible forms of same-sex sexual relations; however, we simply do not have any concrete evidence for to that support that assumption in the New Testament (the only possible evidence will be discussed below, the lists of vices in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10).

We do have some clues in the Romans one passage itself, though, that hint at what Paul may have had in mind in using the example he does, especially when combined with some of our extra-biblical historical knowledge. The entire section, 1:18-32, is concerned with injustice. The type of sexuality to which Paul refers here has to be understood as oppressive and hurtful (“unjust”). The “degrading passions” (1:26) are linked with offenses such as murder, envy, strife, and slander (among many other expressions of injustice listed in 1:29-31). The references to sexuality should be seen in the context of the broader elaboration of injustice that is associated with trusting in things rather than in God.

One of the puzzles in the passage is what Paul means with his reference to women in 1:26. Too easily, interpreters assume this is a reference to female/female sexual relations. However, the text itself is not at all clear about this. Literally, we are told that the women exchange “natural sexual

desire” for “unnatural.” Then we are told in 1:27 that the men, in a similar way give up “natural sexual desire in relation to women” for unbridled lust for other men. It is altogether possible that the connection between what the women do and what the men do has to do with their passion and lust, not that the women are necessarily involved with other women. Basically, all we are told for certain about them is that they are in bondage to extreme passion. It is possible that the underlying concern for Paul here is to hold up extreme passion or lust as the stereotypical fruit of idolatry. This would be consistent with other uses of the Greek word *kresin* (translated “intercourse” in the NRSV) in Greek writings of Paul’s time and would also be consistent with Paul’s thought elsewhere where he warns about the dangers of unbridled lust.

It is not self-evident why Paul would offer same-sex sex per se as his paradigmatic case of the consequences of pagan idolatry. Same-sex sex is peripheral to the Bible. It makes more sense that Paul had something else in mind that he thought would touch his readers’ antipathy. Thinking about Paul’s historical setting provides intriguing clues about what Paul may have had in mind in 1:18-32. At the time Paul wrote, the sexual outrages of recent Roman emperors had scandalized practically everyone in Rome. He would likely have seen these as reflecting the worst of pagan culture. His readers, living in Rome, could easily have been expected to connect Paul’s general comments in Romans one with what they knew about Caligula and Nero.

It is reported that among those who assassinated Emperor Caligula was an officer he had sexually humiliated. This person stabbed Caligula several times in the genitals. Could this event be echoed in Paul’s words: “Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their persons the due penalty of their error” (1:27)? Following Caligula’s death, Claudius’s reign ushered in a brief period of relative moral gravity. However, Claudius was succeeded by another tyrant, Nero. Paul wrote Romans during the reign of Nero, whose rapes of Roman wives and sons, incest with his mother, brothel-keeping, and sexual submission to various men and boys prompted his tutor, the philosopher Seneca, to conclude that Nero was “another Caligula.”

It seems feasible to suppose, against this context, that by juxtaposing the senselessness of pagan idolatry with a lurid depiction of sexual perversion Paul sought to evoke for his readers the moral bankruptcy of the imperial house itself. The list of vices in 1:29-31 greatly exaggerate conventional gentile morality. Not all Gentiles did these kinds of things; in fact, few did. However, the vice list is not exaggerated if it is a description of the horrors of the imperial house. We may be confident that Paul did not have pagan morality as a whole in mind in chapter one, because in chapter two he makes it clear the some people outside the covenant (“uncircumcised”) are indeed fully capable of authentically keeping the law (2:27).

In considering 1:18-32 in its broader context we discover a number of reasons why we may conclude that it does not provide direct evidence that “the Bible condemns homosexuality as sin.” It is not written as direct ethical teaching prescribing Christian behavior. We twist this passage from its context if we apply it as if it is directly telling Christians what not to do. Beyond applying these verses in ways they were not intended, to use this passage as a basis for judging the behavior of Christians in same-sex loving relationships is turning on its head the role they play in Paul’s overall argument. Paul’s concern in 1:18–3:20 is to critique judgmentalism, not to foster it.

Even when we look at the discussion of same-sex sex within the 1:18-32 passage, we do not find material that applies to all possible same-sex relationships among Christians. The example Paul gives of the consequences of pagan is concerned with injustice, people hurting other people. Paul's concern centers on injustice, not on covenanted, loving, mutual partnerships. Also, it is not likely that Paul has in mind female/female sex in general. The male/male sex he had in mind most likely was the kind of unbridled excess characteristic of the worst of the Roman emperors, even if he was not necessarily specifically referring to the emperors. The reference to females in 1:26 quite likely refers to female participation in such sex, whether with men or women. That is, the type of sexual activity associated with injustice and with obsessive lust seems clearly to be what Paul had in mind—not “condemning ‘homosexuality’ (in and of itself) as sin.”

#### **Re: new info on the Bible and homosexuality? (4)**

2 Jan 2003

#### **PART FOUR - New Testament (1 Cor. 6; 1 Tim. 1)**

##### **1 Corinthians 6:1-11**

Chapter six of 1 Corinthians begins with mention that some people in the Corinthian church are taking legal action toward others in the church. In 6:7-8 Paul writes of defrauding, indicating that perhaps the conflicts had to do with economic issues. Paul's anger stems from the church not taking care of its own business. Paul speaks harshly of the Corinthian Christians relying upon “unbelievers” to settle their internal disputes. Earlier in chapter six Paul refers to the courts of the unbelievers as unjust (6:1). When the Corinthian Christians take one another to court, they could be seen as declaring primary allegiance to the pagan culture of Corinth rather than to their faith community. Systemically, the court system in the Roman Empire favored the wealthy over the poor. Quite likely the Corinthian Christians initiating the court actions were wealthy and the suits were aimed at poorer members. Paul writes in 6:9 that the unjust (often translated “wrongdoers”) will not inherit the kingdom of God. The Corinthian Christians are putting themselves in jeopardy because they are acting unjustly in similar ways to those in the world (6:8).

So, when Paul comes to the list of characteristics of the unjust people who will not inherit the kingdom of God he does not have sexuality on his mind. Rather, he chastises the Corinthian Christians when they take each other to “secular” courts and use unjust nonbelievers to buttress their own injustice. His point in 6:9-10 is essentially rhetorical, intending to drive home the point that Christians should not trust their disputes to unjust outsiders.

The items in the list of 6:9-10 merely illustrate what the Corinthians used to be prior to their coming into the church. They have changed due to Christ (6:11). In light of this transformation, they ought to stop acting like *adikoi* [unjust] using the courts to settle their property disputes in favor the powerful within the church. Justice is central to Paul's point here. Because of their being made members of God's family (“justification”), believers are called upon to cease acting “unjustly” toward one another (6:8) by going to court before the “unjust” (6:1).

As with Romans one, then, the central concern of 1 Corinthians 6 has to do with justice and injustice. Paul uses the example of the injustice of “pagans” to challenge his Christian readers to

faithfulness. He simply is not intending in either place to focus on constructive ethical guidelines for sexuality, and even less is he centering his concern on “condemning ‘homosexuality’ as sin” for Christians.

Among those who have written about this text, though, as with Romans 1, debates concerning the application of 1 Corinthians 6 to “homosexuality” focus on the meaning of specific words without paying much attention to the wider context. Following the common English translations that use “homosexuals” and “sodomites,” some scholars have concluded that Paul has in mind here a general condemnation of “homosexuality.” I will argue below that these are not adequate translations, but my point here is that regardless of what the Greek words *malakos* and *arsenokoites* mean, if read in the context of the message of 1 Corinthians 6, they clearly are not being used to make a point about Christian sexual ethics. They are being used to make a more general point about pagan injustice and Paul's calling Christians to justice.

Still, we do have these references in 1 Corinthians 6:9. The NRSV translates the Greek words *malakos* and *arsenokoites* as “male prostitutes” and “sodomites” respectively. However, the meanings of these words are far from clear. Paul is simply, in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, giving a list of examples of injustices characteristic of pagan judges. He does not describe how any of these different examples are problematic. Since the general context here is injustice. Even if *malakos* and *arsenokoites* have sexual connotations (which is not certain), most likely it is sex of an economically unjust and exploitative type that is in mind.

*Malakos* is a fairly common term, meaning literally “soft” with no intrinsic sexual connotations (see Matthew 11:8—“soft clothing”). It is often used in a negative moral sense such as “laziness, decadence, or lack of courage.” Most often, perhaps, it is used, with negative connotations, of femininity. By itself, *malakos* could easily in 1 Corinthians 6:9 simply be a general term for “morally lax,” linking with some of the other terms in the list such as “thieves, the greedy, and robbers.” It *could* have sexual connotations—a man allowing himself to be used like a woman (probably for economic gain). But there is nothing to require this meaning, so the use of *malakos* here is scarcely clear evidence that Paul is condemning “homosexuality” in general.

Our second term, *arsenokoites*, is, on the one hand, even more obscure than *malakos*. On the other hand, it would seem likely to have more overtly sexual connotations. Outside of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and the obviously derivative use in 1 Timothy 1:10, the word is never used in Paul's writings, never in the rest of the New Testament, and never in other first century Greek writings that we know of. Its extreme obscurity itself means we should be careful about making this single word carry very much weight in defining the New Testament view of “homosexuality.”

Numerous scholars suggest that Paul himself may well have coined this term, combining two words from the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 20:13. Paul is said to have pulled together two terms used in the Leviticus text: *arseno-* (“male”) and *-koitai* (“sexual intercourse”). In this view, Paul creates this compound word in order accurately to capture the meaning he sought—the active partner in the homosexual act. Certainly, Paul may have coined this word. We have no basis to say he did not—or that he did. However, to see in this word the meaning of “the active partner in the homosexual act” surely exceeds the evidence. There is no parallel use anywhere in any extant first-century Greek literature. Neither 1 Corinthians 6:9 nor 1 Timothy 1:10 hint in



any other way that Paul's concern was with “homosexuality.” All we have is this single word. *Arsenokoites* was quite likely a compound of words that originally meant “male” and “sex act.” However, many compound words have different meanings than simply the sum of their two parts. We have no basis for assuming that this was not the case for *arsenokoites*.

We do know of a few scattered uses of *arsenokoites* in the second century where it tends to be used in vice lists in the contexts of other terms generally dealing with economic injustice or exploitation. Such usage fits 1 Corinthians 6. Thus, *arsenokoites* may have referred to some kind of economic exploitation by means of sex, perhaps but not necessarily homosexual sex. *Sibylline Oracle* 2.70-77 (dating perhaps from the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) probably provides an independent use of the word. It occurs in a section listing acts of economic injustice and exploitation. “Do not steal seeds. Do not *arsenokoitein*. Do not betray information. Do not murder.”

### **1 Timothy 1:10**

The use of *arsenokoites* in 1 Timothy 1:10 follows from 1 Corinthians 6:9. Here, too, we find a list of vices with no further explanation. Whatever the term means in 1 Corinthians, it has a similar meaning in 1 Timothy. But the latter usage offers no clues as to what that precise meaning might be. In both cases, the vices listed tend toward violations of justice, not violations of rules governing sexual conduct for those otherwise living just lives. If the lists refer to sex at all, it is likely that what is being condemned is exploitative sex used for economic purposes—as an expression of injustice.

Neither the vice list in 1 Corinthians 6 or in 1 Timothy 1 is being used as direct ethical guidance for Christian sexual practices. They are in the context of challenges for just living. Especially in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul does not argue about sexuality. Rather, he says, in effect, don’t trust your disputes to unjust people. 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 do not show that “the Bible condemns ‘homosexuality’ as sin.” Neither speaks in a clear and direct way about “homosexuality” at all.

### **Re: new info on the Bible and homosexuality? (5)**

02 Jan 2003

### **Conclusion**

Our central question has been whether these few texts speak clearly enough to support concluding “the Bible condemns ‘homosexuality’ as sin.” In looking at each of the key texts, we have found reasons to doubt that they support such a conclusion.

The story of Sodom underscores the importance of hospitality toward people in need on the part of people of faith. The problem with the Sodomites’ action lies in their inhospitality, expressed through their brutal intent to gang rape their city’s guests. This sin has nothing to do with being “homosexual.” This interpretation is supported by a similar story in Judges 19.

Leviticus 18–20 contains the Bible’s only direct prohibition of male/male sex. However, the fact that we are told only that males “should not lie” with males means that the prohibition here cannot be understood as a universal condemnation of all same-sex sexual expression. This text does not speak to female/female sexual expression. When we ask why Leviticus contains such

prohibitions, we must speculate. Perhaps: (1) This prohibition reflects a concern with “wasting male seed,” given the premium ancient peoples placed on population growth in an environment where life was fragile. (2) A concern that Israelites remain distinct from “Canaanite” (or Babylonian) religious practices. It makes the most sense to understand Leviticus to address some contextual issues rather than to be issuing some general condemnation of “homosexuality.”

Romans 1:18-32, in the larger context of Paul’s argument in the first three chapters of Romans, speaks of problematic behavior among non-Christians as a means of making the point to Christians that they, too, are sinners when they are judgmental toward others. The male/male sex Paul had in mind most likely was the kind of excess characteristic of the worst of the Roman emperors, even if he was not necessarily specifically referring to the emperors. It makes sense to see the reference to females in Romans 1:26 as in some sense referring to female participation in such wild sex, whether with men or women. The type of sexual activity associated with injustice and with obsessive lust seems clearly to be what Paul had in mind—not all possible types of same-sex loving relationships.

Like Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, does not present overt Christian ethical directives, but rather gives a description of problematic behavior characteristic of non-Christians—for the sake of making a rhetorical point about Christian behavior in the area of relating to one another justly. Paul critiques Corinthian Christians for relying on secular courts to resolve their conflicts. He tells them not to go to courts run by unjust unbelievers. He gives a list of vices characteristic of these unjust unbelievers. This list tends toward exploitative behavior, especially economic. The vice list includes two obscure words that may have sexual connotations. The context makes it quite likely that if they do, Paul had in mind exploitative sex, not “homosexuality” in general.

In the end, the evidence we have examined points strongly to the conclusion that the Bible does not in fact “condemn ‘homosexuality’ as sin.” Perhaps on other grounds, a case may be made for churches “condemning ‘homosexuality’.” But that case should be articulated in terms other than simply assuming what the Bible “clearly teaches.”

### **Excursus: The Biblical Perspective on Marriage**

Many writers representing the “restrictive” perspective argue that part of their basis for arguing that “the Bible condemns ‘homosexuality’ as sin” is their understanding of the Bible’s normative portrayal of male and female marriage. I explained above why an indirect or implicit argument such as this can not on its own be the basis for concluding that “the Bible condemns ‘homosexuality’ as sin.” In this brief excursus, I will reflect on this argument a bit more.

Stanley Grenz in his book *Welcoming But Not Affirming*, along with numerous others, asserts that the importance of marriage is built into creation itself according to the Genesis one and two accounts. This is God’s means of populating the earth (“be fruitful and multiply”) and of providing for human companionship. Departure from this norm, thus, threatens the very fabric of human community. It is at this point that Jesus’ teaching is understood to speak most directly to sexuality issues. Jesus directly quotes from Genesis in asserting the centrality of opposite-sex marriage to God’s will for human life. Jesus did not actually need to say more than simply that God requires sexuality to be expressed in the context of opposite-sex marriage relationships.

This point about the normativity of opposite-sex marriage lays as the heart of many restrictive writings on our topic. However, the importance of this point must be challenged for several reasons.

(1) Using the creation account and other allusions to opposite-sex marriage as a basis for condemning all same-sex sexual expression is making a point that the texts themselves do not make. That is, none of the biblical allusions to marriage or male/female sexuality say that therefore same-sex sexuality is wrong. And none of the texts that allegedly reject same-sex sexuality directly refer to the creation account. Admittedly several of the restrictive writers see allusions to the creation account's portrayal of marriage both in Leviticus and in Romans one, but such allusions are quite oblique—if they exist at all. So, the restrictive writers are using texts that are making particular points to speak authoritatively about altogether different points. It seems permissible to use texts indirectly as secondary evidence for a case; however, such indirect use does not seem strong enough to by itself make a case.

(2) Logically, to assert that the biblical norm is procreative sex between males and females in the context of monogamous marriage does not necessarily force one to conclude that other expressions of sexuality are wrong or are threats to the norm. Our faith communities now, either explicitly or implicitly, accept as morally legitimate some forms of non-procreative sexual expression (e.g., sex between infertile married partners, sex when the partners are using birth control, masturbation) without understanding them to threaten the biblical norm. So, there would seem to be no reason why faith communities would have to assume that another form of non-procreative sex (between two people of the same gender) is inherently threatening to the norm.

(3) Restrictive writers, in drawing upon what they see as a normative biblical view of marriage, ignore the fact that the Bible portrays marriage in quite varied ways. An obvious example is the biblical portrayal of polygamy. The Bible notoriously portrays polygamy as a norm for marriage throughout the Old Testament—and never overtly rejects that relationship pattern in the New Testament. The Bible also notoriously seems to assume a strongly patriarchal notion of marriage, in which wives are essentially thought of as their husband's property. So, the restrictive writers' understanding of marriage (one man and one woman, relating as equals) would appear to be a construct and not clearly the only biblical position. Such an understanding of marriage cannot be seen as inherent from the beginning of creation. It is an understanding that has evolved over time. If this is the case, it cannot be a rejection of biblical authority or the order of creation to question whether same-sex committed relationships are inherently wrong because they violate "the biblical view of marriage" as only between one male and one female.

(4) The restrictive position seems to assume a static, timeless notion of normativity in relation to marriage—as if one ancient text sets the once-and-for all standard. I have pointed out above that the Bible does not actually have just one view of marriage. As well, human history reflects a dynamic of understandings of marriage as evolving human constructs. Understandings of marriage are thoroughly culturally embedded and not based on a clear "order of creation." So, we have no clear, absolute, once-for-all standard for marriage that provides an essential criterion for judging same-sex committed relations as inherently contrary to God's will.

Our understandings of marriage in the churches (assumed by the restrictive position and read back into the Bible as the one biblical view) surely are drawing upon many biblical themes. However, as we consider such values as companionship, fidelity, mutuality, friendship, building block for community, child-rearing, and procreation, we see that these attributes may just as easily characterize same-sex committed relationships as opposite-sex marriages. The one possible exception, procreation, is only a partial exception. Modern reproductive technology now makes it possible for artificially inseminated women to give birth—so, involvement in committed same-sex relations need no longer prohibit people from producing children.

*[After posting that long exposition on the Bible and sexuality, I had conversations with several people who wrote responses. What follows are edited version of my responses to some of these. Occasionally I include quote from my conversation partners.]*

### **What's the role of the Holy Spirit**

04 Jan 2003

I agree, “Martin,” that the Holy Spirit plays a major role in guiding Christian discernment on these issues. However, I still think scripture plays an important role. For one thing, as Norman Kraus suggests in his book *God Our Savior*, Christians confess that the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ—and we rely on Scripture for what we know historically about Jesus. Also, scripture provides us with at least some common language across our various diversities in the church, tenuous as this must seem sometimes. And, legalisms and problematic literalisms aside, I find great spiritual nourishment in the study and discussion of scripture (as I know you do, too).

I think there is some hope that various ones in the current discussions might possibly find a meeting place in biblical discussion that we are unable otherwise to find. There are those of us who find in the Bible the authoritative direction we believe is necessary for Christian faithfulness; others of us find in the Bible more general, instructive and inspirational stories and general themes that provide spiritual encouragement and fascination; yet others of us are motivating by wanting to meet biblicists on their own ground as a means of functioning communally.

For all of these people, careful consideration of biblical materials should be very useful and might provide some bridging opportunities. Of course, scripture can be exploited as a very divisive agent. But I would suggest that in those cases, people have lost their commitment to seeking genuinely to understand the Bible. If we are seeking genuinely to understand we will welcome differences because they are stimulants to further understanding.

So I am not offering my posts on the Bible so much in the hope of trying to convince restrictivists to change their minds. In some ways, I would anticipate that I would learn a lot more from them sharing differences of interpretation than them simply agreeing with me. My hope is to (1) foster more fruitful conversation by getting more cards on the table and (2) grow in my own understanding, which is why I have undertaken to study this issue more and more and is why I write what I just wrote.

## **What about “justice”?**

07 Jan 2003

I don't have hard and clear evidence for my assertion that *adikia* in Romans one is always better translated “injustice” than “unrighteousness” or “wickedness.” I have to confess that I have not yet done serious, detailed exegetical study concerning the best translations of *adikia* and *dikaïos* in the NT—so what I have said should be best understood as a hypothesis more than the result of detailed study.

My basis at this point is more theological than lexicographical. I assume that the basic biblical theological categories are relational more than legal. The Bible's big concerns are actions that hurt other people more than actions that violate rules. So I deduce when we see words in Paul such as *adikia* and *dikaïos* whose Hebrew equivalents in the OT seem clearly to have relational connotations, we should assume the same in Paul (unless we have strong evidence otherwise). I think the more legalistic or moralistic concepts of “wickedness” and “unrighteousness” in the Christian tradition owe more to post-biblical influences.

I will admit that part of my argument concerning “homosexuality” is based a bit on this set of assumptions about biblical assumptions concerning sin/holiness/justice being relational categories. I think these assumptions are not far-fetched, but I also think one probably could just as persuasively argue for adding other less-relational concepts to the mix as you seem to imply. I want to test a reading of the NT where we think of *dikaïos* and related terms pretty much in line with the OT words *mishpat* and *tsedeqa* that are seen in the OT primarily as relational terms.

All this said, I don't think my arguments concerning Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 depend upon my being totally correct in my assumptions about justice/righteousness. Whether Paul in either place is as centrally concerned with justice/injustice as I am arguing does not change (I don't think) my basic argument that in both places he is using “Gentiles” as negative examples to challenge Christians in areas other than sexual ethics (in the case of Romans, it being a self-righteousness vis-a-vis “Gentiles” that blinded insiders to their own sinfulness; in the case of 1 Cor., it being the problem of taking fellow Christians to court).

## **Challenge from a person with a restrictive view**

04 Mar 2003 1

“Dave,” you wrote: “Don't these pieces of Scripture state pretty clearly that homosexuality is ‘inherently sinful’?” and then add that I seem to be “trying to show that this elephant is not an elephant.” That is, I understand you to suggest that I am trying to show that what the Bible clearing calls sin is not really sin. I would say, to the contrary, that I am simply trying to look carefully at those passages and ascertain what they do indeed say. Let's read the texts on their own terms, without the certainty that they are saying what we want them to say. You may try to dismiss my efforts with your generalization, but I think if you are truly trying to follow the Bible you have the responsibility to take what I am doing a little more seriously.

For example, none of the passages I discuss speak of “homosexuality.” How could they, since the term “homosexuality” was first invented only in the late 1800s. At the most, those passages are talking about *actions* taken by two *men*. So how could they be saying “homosexuality” (which includes more than men and, in some sense, in our modern usage includes identity and not just action) is “inherently sinful”?

For a second example, none of the passages I discuss use the term “sinful” in the sense of providing direct instructions for Christian behavior. The only one that speaks to practice within the community of faith is Leviticus, which most Christians do not understand to be speaking directly to *Christian* behavior (there are too many other rules from Leviticus that are disregarded to make applying it to same-sex intimacy anything but arbitrary).

You add: “You [Ted] dismiss a very clear prohibition in Leviticus based on your own ‘speculations.’ But your own theories are incomplete. You stated elsewhere that you take a ‘high’ view of the Bible. If it is the Word of God, meant for all time, then your contextual argument is void. If you are maintaining, as many secular scholars do, that it is just a collection of fables, myths, and rules for specific people at a specific time, then fine. We might disagree on the importance of Scripture but we know your worldview.”

Maybe, “Dave,” we need to define what we mean by “high” view of scripture. I would define it as taking the Bible at face value and doing everything we can to understand it in its own context, since that was when it was written, and then applying it to our day. It seems to me that to deny the importance of the Bible’s context actually reflects a “low” view of scripture where you are imposing your assumptions about the Bible being some kind of document produced outside of history onto the actual collection of writings itself.

Dave wrote: “I think it is a stretch to say that, when we find homosexuality tucked into a list of other sinful people that we would not immediately see that it is what it is, namely wrong.”

Dave, part of my point is to say that the directive force of a list of “sins” describing non-Christians is a bit different than a direct statement giving ethical commands to Christians. And Paul nowhere does the latter in relation to “homosexuality.” You don’t seem to recognize the weakness of your argument concerning “homosexuality” when you have to rely almost completely on a list of isolated words that is being used to make a point very different than telling Christians how they should behave sexually. The so-called “anti-homosexual statements” in 1 Corinthians 6:9 would surely carry more weight if there were other more detailed statements in Paul’s writings (or elsewhere in the NT) giving some kind of sense that this was something overtly forbidden for Christians.

You may have noticed as well that part of my discussion of this text was to point out how unclear the meaning is of the two words that have sometimes translated as “homosexual,” et al. One word is an ambiguous word that literally means “soft” and need not have a sexual connotation at all. The other word is apparently a word Paul coined, the meaning of which is by thus uncertain because there was no history of its use to draw a sense of its meaning from. Nor are there any illuminating parallel uses by anyone else in the first century of which we know.

Plus, all that we have from Paul is a single word with no accompanying explanation or illustration of what the word might mean.

I did point out that there is quite likely some sort of sexual connotation in mind in I Corinthians 6 in Paul's use of this word. I suggest, though, that it most likely is linked with injustice and exploitation, not "homosexuality" per se. On top of that, whatever sexual issue is in Paul's mind obviously only applies to men, since the word's two parts are literally "male" and "lying with (likely, sexually)." So Paul's word cannot be seen as applying to something inherent in "homosexuals" since many are not men.

Dave concludes: "So, all that said, how then are we to treat them, knowing that they are sinners and unsaved? There is where the compassion Jesus has for the vulnerable comes to play. They are the lost sheep, not lepers, and not Brothers. To make them anything else would either be boastful, or diminish the integrity of the church."

Perhaps this is our most fundamental disagreement, Dave. I understand the NT to teach that all people who trust in Jesus and seek to follow him in life are saved people. I know too many gay and lesbian Christians who manifest tremendous fruit as people who trust in Jesus and are seeking to follow him in life to give any credence to your judgmental statement.

### **First interaction with "Harold"**

03 Mar 2003

"Harold," I think you misrepresent my intentions in my hermeneutics discussion. I am not trying to *argue* that the rationale I cite for the inclusive starting point concerning people in same-sex relationships is obviously more weighty than what the restrictivist would give for contrary assumptions. I am not even assuming that based on those two sets of three reasons one should be more attracted to one than the other. I am simply trying to represent those two perspectives and show how important the beginning assumptions are. You seem to grant the importance of the starting point. That's all I'm trying to *argue* for.

If we accept that our starting point (whatever it might be) is crucial, we have one arena of focus for further discussion. We need to examine our respective starting points carefully, plus we are also now able better to understand why particular arguments from scripture are not necessarily persuasive to those with different starting points. Rather than arguing that my starting point is self-evidently the right one, I meant to show that *neither* one is self-evidently right. My intent in mentioning how my own starting point became clarified was in no sense to offer "pacifism" and a Lutheran view of grace as self-evident reasons meant to persuade others to agree with my starting point. I just meant to allude to my own process.

You also don't think my three reasons for the inclusive starting point are very strong. That could be, but I think you misunderstand the two that you discuss.

Regarding the first reason, I argue that Jesus welcomed at least some people into his community of faith without restrictions who would have been "sinners" by religious folk of his time. I

suggest that Jesus himself did not consider these people actually to be “sinners.” So he is not contradicting himself when he teaches what he did in Matthew 18 concerning “church discipline.” In using the term “sinners” he actually has in mind two very different types of people: (1) people who were *incorrectly* labeled “sinners” by the guardians of the boundaries between religious insiders and outsiders and (2) people who genuinely did violate authentic behavioral norms who need to change their ways to remain in fellowship in the authentic community of faith. Only the second type is in mind in Matthew 18.

I further argue that given Jesus’s own practice of inclusivity, we should feel the need to provide strong reasons why people in same-sex should be seen as analogous to people in category #2 rather than category #1. That is, since Jesus *was* inclusive without restrictions of at least some people falsely labeled as “sinners,” the burden of proof should be on restrictivists to find clear evidence in the Bible to show why the church should consider people in same-sex relationships to be “sinners-who-need-to-change-their-ways” rather than “‘sinners’-who-are-falsely-labeled-as-such-by-overly-strict-boundary-maintainers.” You will notice that I do not assert here that people in same-sex relationships could not properly be understood as best fitting in category #2—all I am asserting is that restrictivists should be required to provide strong evidence if they do make a case for using category #2.

Concerning the second reason, about trust in Christ alone as the sole Pauline basis for right-standing before God: My point was that some inclusivists may say that making the sex of one’s intimate partner the watershed issue that many restrictivists do is elevating moral rules to too central of a place in one’s definition of faith. Notice that this comment is *not* addressing the issue of “works” in the sense that the book of James uses that term. I don’t think that James had in mind the implementing of strict moral rules as an example of his concept of “works.” In the context of his statement about “faith without works” James clearly has in mind actively doing good—including, significantly for this discussion, showing love and generosity toward vulnerable people.

Then you discuss the statements in Genesis 1-2 and Matthew 19 about God creating humanity as male and female. You want to use these texts as additional crucial support for your advocacy of the restrictivist starting point, and you add on the basis of these texts that it seems “probable that the biblical writers were seeing homosexual sex as unnatural and contrary to God’s design.” In trying to establish whether the Bible clearly condemns same-sex intimacy as sinful, I suggest that we need to start with texts that directly address that issue. As you admit in your post, these two passages do not “directly address the issue of same-sex relations.” Hence, they at most speak *indirectly* to our issue and cannot be used as *direct* evidence.

As well, I do not see any basis for thinking it seems “probable that the biblical writers were seeing homosexual sex as unnatural and contrary to God’s design.” This assumption of yours seems to me to be a classic sense of projecting one’s biases onto the Bible. One could say (as I would) that Genesis 1-2 and Matthew 19 reflect a perspective on what is normal. This need not imply a condemnation of the “abnormal” any more than the “norm” of right-handedness provides a basis for condemning the “abnormality” of left-handedness.



“Harold,” you state that my “goal is to raise doubts that biblical passages ‘overtly and explicitly’ condemn homosexual sex. And that only has impact if the ‘burden of proof’ lies with the traditional view.” I disagree with your portrayal; my goal is not to “raise doubts” about the biblical passages but simply to seek to try to understand what they mean. I am disappointed that you don’t spend much energy speaking to my discussion of the specific texts. Regardless of where the benefit of the doubt lays, I do not think one is ever absolved from the task of seeking better to understand the texts (to me, that is what a “high” view of Scripture lays upon us).

It would seem to me that even if one grants the restrictive view the benefit of the doubt, that view is in pretty big trouble if it cannot show *clearly* how the Bible condemns same-sex relationships as being inherently sinful. So much seems to rest on the assumption that it does. And it seems to me that anyone with a “high” view of scripture should welcome the opportunity to engage this issue—because if scripture truly is our authority then we should be open to adjusting our views to make them more in harmony with the actual content of the Bible.

## **Second interaction with “Harold”**

06 Mar 2003

“Harold” wrote: “So, Ted, you (in your paper) were not saying ‘Jesus *always* demonstrated inclusiveness.’ You acknowledge (from Matt 18) that Jesus taught that some persons need to ‘change their ways to remain in fellowship in the authentic community of faith.’ Is this a better summary of what you were saying: ‘Jesus *usually* demonstrated inclusiveness’ and ‘therefore we should, like Jesus, have that be our default mode’? Perhaps I’m still missing some of your nuances, because I picture Jesus not only welcoming and personally accepting sinners (so much so that they invited him to their parties) but also doing what he can to move them away from their sin. ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and leave your life of sin.’ I don’t believe that is the type of inclusivism you are working toward—at least it’s different than what Brethren-Mennonite Council or Supportive Congregations Network wants.”

Let me restate the distinction I am making, “Harold.” I am saying there we may think in terms of two categories here. Category #1 would be people who were considered to be “sinners” by religious leaders in Jesus’s context but were not seen as being “sinners” by Jesus. Perhaps in this category we could include people who were too poor to pay their religious taxes, people suffering from skin diseases, disciples of Jesus who gathered grain on the Sabbath when they were very hungry, and the like. I suggest that inclusivists should argue that present-day gay Christians fit in a parallel category—those who are labeled as “sinners” but would not be seen as sinners by Jesus. Category #2 would be people who to whom Matthew 18 would apply, those who do need to change their ways.

In other words, the “sinners” with whom Jesus ate were not necessarily people he would have told to “leave their lives of sin”; he would not have agreed that they were living such lives.

“Harold” does agree that Genesis 1–2 and Matthew 19 cannot be used as direct evidence. However, by also agreeing that we should start with asking where the burden of proof lies, he sees great relevance in those two passages that talk about marriage as between male and female.

“The fact that Jesus and Genesis talk about heterosexual sex as God's design or intent makes it a bit more probable that Jesus and Genesis also view homosexual sex as contrary to God's design or intent. I'm not saying it's proof. Just something that tips the scales 'a bit' in that direction.”

I think, “Harold” that we still have a key issue you have not spoken to. Does talk about opposite sex marriage being “normal” necessarily imply anything about same-sex intimacy? The places that speak of marriage as male/female do not say that that implies that any exception is unacceptable. “Normal” does not mean that exceptions to the norm are wrong.

If the issue is (as I am trying to frame it) whether or not the Bible “condemns same-sex intimacy as inherently sinful,” then we do need to start with the direct evidence. I think, “Harold,” that since your assumption concerning the implications of Gen 1-2 and Matt 19 cannot count as direct evidence (as you admit), we would need to start with examining the alleged direct evidence first. So maybe we would have to see if we can suspend our “burden of proof” assumptions and see what we come up with in looking at the direct evidence. It seems clear to me that the application of Gen 1-2 and Matt 19 to the issue of same-sex intimacy would only arise for people who for other reasons tend to believe such intimacy is sinful. So perhaps if we consider first those other reasons only then we could make some progress in considering the question at hand concerning same-sex intimacy.

“Harold” asks: “Wouldn't you agree that early Judaism (Palestinian and Diaspora) uniformly and thoroughly had an abhorrence for homosexual sex? I read that no other culture in the ancient Near East or in the Greco-Roman world stood more unequivocally opposed towards same-sex intercourse. Where did they get that from, if not from their Scripture?”

Actually, I would disagree that “early Judaism uniformly and thoroughly had an abhorrence for homosexual sex.” I do so for several reasons. One is that the category “homosexual sex” is anachronistic. They could have had no abhorrence for something they had no conception of existing. I will admit that this point is somewhat semantic. You presumably mean that they had an abhorrence to the notion of two men having sex together. But I do think it is important to point both out that that notion is different than the modern concept of “homosexual sex” (in the sense that “homosexual” has some element of orientational identity as part of its meaning, a thoroughly modern concept) and that it is problematic to generalize from male practices to “homosexuality” in general. This latter is not simply a semantic point. Any rejections of same-sex intimacy as a category have to apply fully to both sexes if we are to accept that the problem is with same-sex intimacy in and of itself.

On another level, I am skeptical whether we have any basis for making the kind of global claim you make in saying early Judaism as a category “uniformly and thoroughly” believed anything. There were then, as now, *many* Judaisms. We have relatively little record of Jewish thought in the several hundred years before and after Jesus's life. The vast majority of Jews were illiterate, so we have at most written materials representing only a tiny minority. I would be willing to grant that there may be some evidence of hostility toward male/male sex. But if this “evidence” is anything like the alleged evidence in the Bible, I think we must look at it very closely before making the kind of global assertions you do here.

“Harold” suggests that his brief comments on 1 Corinthians 6 are decisive and cut to the heart of things for that passage.” I disagree. This is what you wrote: “You, Ted, say this about the key Greek word in 1 Corinthians 6:9: ‘*Arsenokoites* was quite likely a compound of words that originally meant “male” and “sex act.” However, many compound words have different meanings than simply the sum of their two parts.’ Keep in mind, though, [“Harold” continued] the implications of the fact that this is a rare word. As you say, it occurs nowhere prior to the New Testament and does not occur again for at least 100 years, and may even have been coined by Paul. A word that is that rare could not have, through use, acquired a meaning other than the simple and obvious one.”

On a picky level, “Harold,” I don't think the point that compound words can have different meanings than simply the sum of their parts is based on the idea that such meanings are the result of usage over time. That is, someone can coin a word that *immediately* has a different meaning than the sum of the two parts. A case in point would be Gandhi's famous term “satyagraha” that he himself coined from two tradition Hindu words to convey a *new* meaning somewhat analogous to our concept of non-violent action and clearly different than just the sum of “truth” and “force.”

More significantly, I grant that *arsenokoites* does likely have some connotation related to sexual acts some males engage in. But the word itself does not tell us anything about those acts, and we get no help from other literature of the time because of the utter uniqueness of Paul's usage. The best we can do is guess from the context of where the word is used in 1 Cor 6:9. The general theme in the immediate context is “injustice”—that since those outside the church are typically unjust, it is foolishness for Christians to take their disputes to secular courts for resolution. The idea that *arsenokoites* refers to unjust and exploitative sexual practices makes sense in this context since Paul's idea seems to be to illustrate injustice. Your point is basically irrelevant.