Mennonites and "Homosexuality"

BOOKS BY TED GRIMSRUD

Triumph of the Lamb: A Self-Study Guide to the Book of Revelation (Herald Press, 1987; reprinted by Wipf and Stock, 1998)

Peace and Justice Shall Embrace: Power and Theopolitics in the Bible (Cascadia Publishing House, 1999) [co-edited with Loren Johns]

God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Bible (Cascadia Publishing House, 2000; 2nd edition, 2011)

Transforming the Powers: Peace, Justice, and the Domination System (Fortress Press, 2006) [co-edited with Ray Gingerich]

Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the Twenty-First Century (Wipf and Stock, 2007)

Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality (Herald Press, 2008) [co-authored with Mark Thiessen Nation]

Theology as if Jesus Matters: An Introduction to Christianity's Main Convictions (Cascadia Publishing House, 2009)

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THE STRUGGLE TO BECOME A WELCOMING CHURCH

TED GRIMSRUD

PEACE THEOLOGY BOOKS

Harrisonburg, Virginia

MENNONITES AND "HOMOSEXUALITY": The Struggle to Become a Welcoming Church

Peace Theology Books

1150 Lincolnshire Drive

Harrisonburg, VA 22802

Peacetheology.net/books

ISBN: 1511473975

ISBN-13: 978-1511473972

To my LGTBQ friends, all of whom have taught me much—
especially Amos and Janalee.

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INTRODUCTION

This book, *Mennonites and "Homosexuality": The Struggle to be a Welcoming Church*, gathers materials I have generated over the past 15 years. What the book is about, in a nutshell, is heterosexist Mennonite resistance to being more welcoming to sexual minorities. These articles, lectures, and sermons were my contribution to discernment processes happening in Mennonite settings. It's been an interesting time, quite a bit of tension and stress, along with some joy and some sense of accomplishment. I decided to pull them together in this volume when I looked back and realized that I had produced quite a bit of material. I'm not sure what kind of whole these various pieces create, but it seemed worth the trouble to find out. As far as I know, I am about done contributing to this conversation, so this can stand as a kind of final statement.

A CULTURE OF FEAR

I began my twenty years as a faculty member at Eastern Mennonite University in the fall of 1996. From the beginning I felt a bit of a tension. I did want very much to get along with the institution and willingly expected to work within the confines of stated expectations for faculty members (for example, during those early months I willingly refrained from drinking any alcoholic beverages, as per the Community Lifestyle Commitment document I signed).

On the other hand, I have always understood my deepest accountability to be to the gospel message. By 1996, I had come to some pretty solid conclusions regarding the tensions swirling in Mennonite communities over how the churches and broader structures should respond to their gay and lesbian members. I did not come to EMU with the intent to lead a reform movement on campus or in the wider denomination, but I was ready to play a role if opportunities arose—and I expected they would; it seemed that the movement of history was going to require that.

However, early in my time on campus, I remained quiet and did not anticipate engaging these issues for some time. As it turned out, in my second year I was interviewed for an article in the student newspaper. I can't remember the details except that my comments were brief and general. However, they did hint at a welcoming stance. Toward the end of the semester on a Friday afternoon, I was visited by Sam Weaver, a senior fundraiser on campus who I had not met before. I was surprised to see him until he started to tell me that I needed to be very careful about

what I said publically; that it wouldn't do to be seen as going against "the church's position" of non-acceptance of "homosexuals."

That visited frightened me. It turned out that all the top administrators were off campus that day, so I had to wait until the following Monday to contact Bill Hawk, the academic dean. I called Bill as soon as I could and asked him if I had anything to be frightened of. He emphatically said no, that Sam had no standing in relation to the academic wing of campus and had no business trying to intimidate me. A few days later, I ran into Daryl Peifer, the vice-president for advancement and Sam's boss. He apologized profusely, said that Sam was out of line and would never do that again.

So, I felt reassured. I realize now that I even felt a bit emboldened. Maybe I didn't have to worry so much about expressing myself. There still was a strong sense on campus, though, that one needed to be very quiet if one did not accept that "official" condemnation of "homosexuals." It seems a little remarkable for me now to remember the feeling on campus at that time. There surely were a large percentage of people who did desire EMU and the churches to move in a more welcoming direction, but we had little way of knowing who each other were because of the fear of speaking up. One prominent member of the campus community decided to leave EMU and privately cited EMU's "culture of fear" as one reason for this decision.

THE WELCOME LETTER AND BEYOND

An important catalyst for challenging this fearfulness was a one-page advertisement in *The Mennonite Weekly Review*, February 17, 2000—nearly 1,000 members of Mennonite congregations in North America signed the ad.[1] It included a short statement advocating for inclusion of LGBTQ people in the churches and the affirmation of same-sex marriage.

This ad was written and signatures solicited by a committee that had formed two years prior to the placement of the ad. Titus Bender, longtime EMU professor of social work and a rare faculty member who had taken a public stand, was one of the original members of the Welcome Committee. He recruited me to go with him to an organizing retreat of the committee a few months after its work had begun.

I helped organize a gathering at EMU of supportive faculty and staff to discern whether to sign the ad. It was an empowering moment when

[1] The content of the ad and the list of signees may be found at the Welcome Committee's website: www.welcome-committee.org. This site also contains the materials that the committee published over the next few years, including eight booklets.

we held our first meeting at EMU, not knowing who would attend. As people kept wandering in, all of us felt a boost. As it turned out, 20 or so faculty and staff signed the letter. We did so anxiously, amid rumors that EMU's board of trustees would not approve contracts of faculty who signed the letter and that staff signees would also be putting their jobs at risk. These rumors turned out largely to be unfounded.

Though I didn't realize it, I was the only ordained person in Virginia Mennonite Conference to sign the letter. This fact led to some rather intense interactions with conference leaders over a number of years. I faced pressure to resign my ordination and threats that it would be taken away. As it turned out, after a year long series of meetings with three conference overseers (Myron Augsburger, George Brunk III, and Wayne North), I was "approved" as theologically sound and continued to be a minister in good standing. However, not long after that approval was issued, my congregation (Shalom Mennonite Congregation) switched its membership from Virginia Mennonite Conference to Central District Conference. As a consequence, my ordination credentials were also shifted to Central District.[2]

I think we may see the Welcome Letter process as an important moment in the ending of the "culture of fear" at EMU related to discussion of these issues. Many of the people who came together for the initial discernment process concerning the Welcome Letter continued associating, and when a longtime and beloved EMU staff person was fired due to her partnered relationship with another woman, a new group on campus emerged, informally called "the Friday group." These people organized opposition to the action against our friend. We did not manage to get that action overturned, but we did signal that silence would no longer be necessary.

Another group emerged, originally called the Open Door and in time renamed Safe Spaces. The Open Door was started as a support group without formal EMU affiliation, but meant to provide encouragement for LGBTQ students and their friends. After a few years, Safe Spaces formed as an approved student group. It's participation level for some time ebbed and flowed, but eventually it became a firmly established part of the campus community.

At the very beginning of President Loren Swartzendruber's tenure in 2004, a visible protest of EMU's discriminatory dynamics led to Swartzendruber's commitment to a study and discernment process on issues of welcome and discrimination. A committee was formed as part of

[2] See the appendix below for an account of these ordination dynamics that focuses mainly on the experience of my wife, Kathleen Temple, but also briefly touches on my story.

this process and asked Mark Thiessen Nation, theology professor at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and me to engage in a series of public debates. One of these happened in 2005 as part of a chapel service before approximately 600 members of the campus community. In that service, I explicitly advocated a welcoming approach, including support for same-sex marriage. I felt some anxiety about taking such a public stance, especially as a member of the Bible and Religion department. I was assured, though, that since this was an "academic exercise" of point/counterpoint, and I wasn't doing stand alone advocacy, I would be fine.

These events led to a book Mark and I published with the Mennonite Publishing House.[3] I learned only after the book came out that the head of MPH cleared publication with President Swartzendruber—who again approved of this as an important part of the university's role as a place of discernment and debate about important issues facing the churches. I think it is quite significant that in the 12 years that Loren and I shared employment at EMU, he never once even hinted to me that my advocacy for welcome through writing, teaching, and speaking needed to be constrained or posed a threat to my standing on campus.

From this time on, open advocacy of welcome became a safe activity on campus. I no longer felt fear about articulating my views. Then, EMU hired new administrators who supported doing away with the school's discriminatory hiring practices that excluded people in same-sex intimate relationships (including the termination of several more faculty and staff members in addition to the case I mentioned above). The school began a discernment process that gained a good deal of attention. This "Listening Process" concluded with the formal decision in 2015 that EMU would no longer discriminate. Though the process drew a lot of negative attention for a time, the decision appears to be on solid footing.

MY CONTRIBUTIONS

This book, then, collects a number of my contributions over these past fifteen years to the discernment processes at EMU and in the broader Mennonite world. With each piece, I give information about its context. I have organized the essays into four sections. The first, and briefest section, contains two short pieces that explain a bit of my own journey, how I have come to the positions I argue for in the rest of the book. The second section contains various pieces that make the case for how the Bible may be read in support of a welcoming stance. I have spoken and

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[3] Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation, *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008).

written on numerous occasions on these topics. What I have included here is a representative sample.

The third section presents some of my analyses of the dynamics among Mennonites over these years. These pieces are pretty negative in tone, reflecting my own experiences with the institutional Mennonite church and, probably even more, my awareness of even more negative experiences that many others have had. I realize, though, that this negative emphasis reflects only one part of the big picture.

I could write in a positive way about values from the 16th-century Anabaptists that have been partially been embodied in this tradition. In fact, I have done so.[4] Certainly, these values provide much of the sensibility that leads me and others to be critical of how Mennonites have responded in such hurtful ways these past thirty years as the presence of LGBTQ Mennonites has become more apparent. That is, it is because of appreciation for the ideals of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition that many of us have sought to challenge the churches to change.

I could also write more, in a positive way, about the history of resistance by LGBTQ Mennonites and their friends. This is a story that needs to be told, and hopefully will in the near future. Here, I will simply point readers to three now older volumes edited by Roberta Showalter Kreider that have made an excellent contribution to providing access to those who have so courageously been part of the resistance movement.[5] However, I have decided it would be best simply to go ahead with what I have in my discussion of Mennonites, recognizing that the context for these several essays is a place in the middle of a contested struggle in which I have been a partisan—though I like to think that my contributions here still are accurate and fair-minded.

The final section of the book contains numerous pieces where I respond to others' writings that are a part of the voluminous literature on Christians engaging sexuality issues. This is not meant as a comprehensive selection, rather simply an essentially random collection of critical reviews, both favorable and unfavorable, of a wide selection of writings on our themes.

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[4] Ted Grimsrud, *Embodying the Way of Jesus: Anabaptist Convictions for the 21st Century* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007).

[5] Roberta Showalter Kreider, ed., *From Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People and Those Who Love Them*, 2nd edition (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2003); Roberta Showalter Kreider, *Together in Love: Faith Stories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Couples* (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2002); Roberta Showalter Kreider, *The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been* (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2004).

To conclude the book, I am including a fascinating research paper by my friend Kelly Miller. Kelly wrote this paper for her senior history thesis at Goshen College. She tells the story of how Virginia Mennonite Conference defrocked my wife, Kathleen Temple, due to Kathleen's welcoming convictions. While I am motivated in part by having Kathleen's story told, I also believe this paper gives us a clear and sobering case study of how Mennonites have failed to respond graciously to the presence of sexual minorities in their midst.

THE USE OF THE TERM "HOMOSEXUALITY"

I have to confess that I have not been especially skilled at keeping up with the rapidly evolving set of terms that are used in discussions about the issues this book addresses. I have tried to use words carefully and in editing these essays have sought to update the usage where possible. I have settled on the acronym "LGBTQ" (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) as it seems to be the most widely used term to talk about the class of people who self-identify as sexual minorities.

I am not totally comfortable with that term; it seems a bit impersonal and alludes to some elements of the broader set of themes that I don't speak to in my writing. However, "gay" doesn't seem always to work, perhaps in large part because it also has been used (probably most commonly) to refer only to males. "Queer" seems like a good term, and it is increasingly popular. Some people I respect greatly, though, are not happy with it—perhaps at least in part because of the extremely negative connotations it used to have. I think we should do the best we can and be patient with one another as our language evolves.

One term that I do feel fairly clear about, though, is "homosexuality" (and "homosexual"). These are terms that clearly now do have negative connotations and are imposed on sexual minorities in hurtful ways. So I will not intentionally use either word without scare quotes (though it is possible such a use may have slipped through my editing efforts in some older essay that I wrote before having such clarity).

However, I can think of a useful way that "homosexuality" (with the scare quotes) might be used. That is to refer to the way the heterosexist forces think of LGBTQ people. In this sense "homosexuality" refers to a construct or stereotype or dynamic of "othering" sexual minorities. And it refers to the actions of the heterosexist forces to try to exert control over these minorities and their friends.

So, when I title this book *Mennonites and "Homosexuality"* I have in mind how heterosexist forces have resisted churches moving in welcoming directions. Speaking against this resistance to welcome actually is the

main theme of this book I now realize as I look at the collection in its final form. Not all of the essays directly allude to the resistance, but it is because of the resistance that everything here was written.

What I offer, then, is a collection of responses to the ways Mennonites have dealt with the presence of LGBTQ people in their midst. Some of my responses directly address Mennonite activities and some are focused more generally on theology. To say this book is about "homosexuality" then is actually to say that it has a pretty narrow focus. What the book is about is heterosexist Mennonite resistance to being more welcoming to sexual minorities.

I am not trying to speak on behalf of anyone else here, but simply gather my own rather personal reflections that have sought to challenge Mennonite's exclusionary thought and practice.

IN GRATITUDE

For years I have wished that I could speak to a wider audience than I seemed able to and to have a more profound influence than I seemed able to. Even so, I am grateful for the audience I have had and the influence I have had. In particular, I am grateful for the various settings where I have been allowed to speak and to publish. Thanks to those congregations, classes, journals, and websites.

I am grateful to my various conversation partners over the years, both those I have agreed with and those I have disagreed with. I think of one such "partner" in particular (who I will not name) who argued with me vociferously for years in an online forum. At one point I decided to try to be much more patient and simply lay out my arguments in a careful and non-confrontive way. Lo and behold, in this one instance, my conversation partner actually changed his mind, rather decisively. As far as I know, this is my only "convert." I am glad to know that such an outcome is possible, but even more I am reminded that this conversation is hardly ever a debate that can be "won."

As with all my thinking, my best, favorite, and longest standing conversation partner is my wife, Kathleen Temple. She also has paid a price for her convictions on these issues, but we have both only grown more convinced that the gospel that we pledged to serve as Mennonite pastors is a gospel of welcome. At all times, for each of us, having the other's presence as co-conspirator *and* as soul mate meant more than we could ever say.

Finally, I want to offer a special word of gratitude for my LGBTQ friends over these many years who have helped me see the human face of my theological and ethical convictions. I am in awe of the courage, the

self-knowledge, and the clarity of conviction I have seen in them over and over that has guided and encouraged me.

I don't want to attempt anything approaching a comprehensive list, but I feel the need to mention a few special people. It starts with two old friends, Amos and Janalee, who each in their own unique journey allowed Kathleen and me to be present in holy ways. It's hard to imagine this book existing without those two friendships.

Out time in the San Francisco Bay Area was crucial. We met Wendy and Ellen when they babysat our toddler, Johan, at a Pacific School of Religion new student orientation event. We became close friends and gained so many insights from our many conversations. We weren't very faithful attenders at First Mennonite Church in San Francisco, but we greatly valued our time with such a non-self-consciously inclusive congregation.

Along with Amos and Janalee, Lamar was a terrific friend during our years in Eugene. Since we moved to Virginia, we have learned to know some wonderful students in process of finding clarity about their sexual identity. Pretty much everything I have written and said in these past 20 years on the themes of this book has in its background a sense of how will this relate to the work that these young people are doing to clarify their own sense of identity and to find their way (or not) in the churches.

Finally, I want to mention a crucial mentor, conversation partner, and inspiration, Lin Garber, the Mennonite sage of Boston. Lin is legendary for many things; for me, he has been a great source of information and confirmation. As well, he has been a wonderful model of a gay man who has embodied an extraordinarily positive spirit and sense of patience in his witness to Jesus's message of peace and its application to the arena of "Mennonites and 'homosexuality.'"

I'll conclude by expressing my gratitude to the work of the Brethren and Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Interests. BMC has been a beacon of hope and empowerment for countless Brethren and Mennonites for over 30 years now. Whatever progress the churches have made in their struggle to be welcoming is in large part due to BMC. I have not been closely connected with BMC, but I have always drawn courage and guidance from their witness.

Ted Grimsrud
Harrisonburg, Virginia
July 17, 2016

SECTION ONE: Background

1. The evolution of my views

[Adapted from a lecture presented at Portland (Oregon) Mennonite Church, February 5, 2010]

I grew up out in the country about 150 miles south of Portland in the little town of Elkton. I knew absolutely nothing about "homosexuality" until I went away to college in the early 1970s—and even then it was scarcely a front-burner issue. Back in the early 1990s, my wife Kathleen Temple and I moved to a tiny town in the Midwest to pastor. Someone said, what about the gay issue there. Another friend said, well, it will probably be like the Martian issue…, that is, not something people have much experience with. That's kind of what it was like growing up in Elkton.

The most important aspect of my growing up years was the fundamental orientation toward life I received from my parents—what matters most is love, and this love involves trying to respect everyone. I especially remember my mother as a fourth-grade teacher and her special care for the most vulnerable kids.

CHRISTIAN INFLUENCES

When I was 17, I had a conversion experience and met Jesus. I joined the local fundamentalist Baptist congregation in town. One of the core teachings I heard constantly, and embraced, was the Bible is *central*. Many (actually, most) of my views on just about every theological theme have changed since then. However, the changes in my theology have *always* been because of my understanding of the Bible's message. This one lesson—the Bible is central—did take hold. I changed my views of the end times, my beliefs about Jesus' substitutionary atonement, my understanding of evangelism, all in order to be *closer* to the Bible's message as I grew to understand it.

The biggest change in my beliefs came around my 22nd birthday, at the end of my senior year of college at the University of Oregon in Eugene. I intuited that God wanted me to be a pacifist. That *Jesus's* way

was consistently the way of peace. This conviction confirmed the lessons on life I learned at home and has guided everything ever since. I believed pacifism was the Bible's view, and have more or less devoted my life since then to testing and deepening this conviction.

A few years later (ca. 1979), we were living in Eugene when it became one of the early scenes of a political skirmish over gay rights. The city council had passed gay rights legislation and citizens rose up with a referendum to overturn it. I still had thought next to nothing about "homosexuality"; until this point it simply had never come up. So I accepted the default view of evangelical Christianity—"homosexuality" is sinful. However, in this skirmish I was deeply troubled by the tone of the evangelicals' campaign against gay rights. I ended up leaving that spot blank on my ballot (I couldn't abide with the hostility against gays I'd observed but I also believed the Bible clearly taught against homosexuality and concluded from that that I shouldn't affirm gay rights).

Now, though, my interest was piqued. As with other issues, I wanted to understand if the default view I had inherited would withstand scrutiny. I was helped immediately by a special issue of *The Other Side* magazine on homosexuality (June 1978). I found editor John Alexander's fairly lengthy article on the Bible especially helpful. He showed (in a way that I found persuasive—and still do—this is my basic argument) that the Bible teaches love and compassion toward all. He also challenged the standard use of texts such as Genesis 19; Leviticus 18 and 20; and 1 Corinthians 6. He still (reluctantly, it seemed) found Romans 1 persuasively supporting a restrictive stance.

However, simply by raising the possibility that the Bible's teaching on homosexuality was not as obviously anti-gay as I had assumed, Alexander opened the door for me to see things differently. I now felt free to ask if the Bible in relation to this issue might be read in ways that would be more consistent with how I was now reading the Bible in relation to war and peace—centering on the message of love and compassion.

At that point, I was in the middle. I was not sure I could be inclusive, but I was deeply troubled by the anti-gay attitudes I was aware of. My peace concerns certainly pushed me to try to find a way to be inclusive. But this remained pretty much a back-burner issue for me for a while longer. I did not confront it in my day-to-day life. We attended the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in 1980-1 for a marvelous and faith-expanding year, and I don't remember the homosexuality issue ever coming up that year. [Things had changed—both for me and for the seminary—by the time we returned for a semester in 1992. At that point the gay issue was indeed on the front burner.]

After our first stint at AMBS we returned for a couple of years in Eugene and a year pastoring in Phoenix (I don't remember the issue coming up in those contexts either). We moved to Berkeley, California, for grad school in 1984. I guess things had been percolating in our minds a little, because one of the reasons we looked forward to Berkeley was knowing that we would encounter the gay issue directly. We knew the city of Berkeley in the San Francisco Bay area was welcoming of gays—and that our school, the Graduate Theological Union would be too.

In the summer before going to Berkeley, I represented our Phoenix congregation at the Conference annual meeting—and the issue of the presence of gay people in the San Francisco Mennonite congregation came up. I met several of those San Francisco people and was looking forward to learning more from them.

TURNING TOWARD AN INCLUSIVE STANCE

As we knew that the Graduate Theological Union campus was fully accepting of gay people, we planned to focus on learning to know people more than dealing with arguments and issues. Right away, I took a work-study job in the library and met a fellow-worker who, it turned out, lived in our apartment building in married-student housing. I asked what his wife did and he laughed and said his "wife" was a guy. I became good friends with Michael, a gentle-spirited, deeply committed Christian whose partner, John, was in the Old Testament doctoral program, in part in hopes of doing serious biblical scholarship on this issue. Sadly, John contracted AIDs and died just a few years later.

Kathleen and I left our toddler with some seminary babysitters during new student orientation. It turned out these babysitters were a lesbian couple, Ellen and Wendy. We became close friends with them, and celebrated with Wendy several years later when she became one of the first out-gay people to be hired as a congregational pastor in the United Church of Christ. We also began attending First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, and learned to know a number of gay Mennonites who were clearly people of strong faith. In that congregation, there was no "gay issue." That was settled, and so the congregation just moved ahead with gay people as full, active members and congregational leaders.

We discovered that many of our new gay friends were terrific and normal people, some quite pious and evangelical in their theology. It was eye opening. We became close friends especially with Ellen and Wendy (who have now been together over 30 years—as has a gay couple we learned to know in the San Francisco church). Both couples seemed to have normal, stable relationships.

The final step in clarifying my views came during my first pastorate in Eugene. We moved there in 1987. After we arrived we learned that the congregation was in the middle of coming to terms with the presence in its midst of a gay couple. We learned that they had had several rather intense "educational" experiences where people from different sides presented their viewpoints on the Bible and other issues. It was rather a challenging context for a new pastor, but I felt ready to work at things.

Shortly after I began the pastorate, these two guys requested membership. The congregation ultimately chose not to affirm the couple as members, but to consider them "active participants." A strong majority of the congregation supported full membership. However, a significant minority made the case that the full membership option would alienate us from the Pacific Coast Conference. The majority reluctantly agreed (with the gay men present and part of the discussion) that the best compromise at the moment would be to affirm the guys as fully a part of the congregation but without official membership.

Working through the membership issue in the Eugene congregation immersed me in the content of the gay issue. I faced challenges both to develop my own theology in relation to gays in the church and to negotiate very treacherous church political waters. It happened that I was first considered for ordination about the time our congregation finished its membership process.

I was pushed hard by the conference leadership committee to state my own understandings. I explained what I had done pastorally in leading the congregation through the membership process and outcome of not approving membership for these two men. But I also stated that I was not willing to affirm the part of the newly approved Mennonite Church statement on human sexuality that opposed the possibility of covenanted same-sex partnerships. Because of my unwillingness to say that I was certain that such partnerships are wrong, one member of leadership committee held up my ordination for about three years until finally the ordination was approved.

About this same time, we had further challenges to process. A man who was one of my best friends came out as gay. When we had become friends a number of years earlier, meeting at church, he was married. He and his wife had their first son about the time our son was born. The boys became best friends and our families were close. Their marriage ended not long after Kathleen and I returned to Eugene, but we were still shocked to learn he was gay. Simultaneously, a woman who was one of Kathleen's best friends came out as lesbian. As well, our church received as a new member a college student who moved to Eugene from the East Coast. He came out to me privately as a gay man.

In these cases, we were challenged simply to walk with our friends. The issues weren't theological so much as simply being there. And in two of the cases, after some rocky years, our friends found intimate partners. Both relationships are still strong, more than 20 years on.

In 1994, we moved to Freeman, South Dakota, and took a shared pastorate. As I mentioned, in that context it wasn't much of an exaggeration to compare the gay issue with the Martian issue. It scarcely came up in the two years we were there before moving on to Virginia, so we could teach at Eastern Mennonite University.

SETTLING IN VIRGINIA

After arriving at EMU, we learned that the pattern on campus had been for a number of years that the gay issue would erupt for a time, then recede. That pattern has continued in the 14 years I've been on the faculty. It has happened that the times the issue has become more prominent, I have often been part of the controversies.

Probably the biggest catalyst for getting involved was my sense that gay and lesbian students likely would find EMU to be a scary place. Typically there is a small handful of students who have had the clarity of their own self-identity and have had the courage to let it be known that they are gay or lesbian. I am not aware of terrible consequences for such self-revelation; the sense of lack of safety is more subtle and based on more a general atmosphere of antipathy toward sexual minorities.

Our first step was to form a kind of support group. When we first began to publicize this group, we made it clear that it was not in any formal way linked with EMU; we called it a neighborhood group. Our idea was mostly simply to provide a safe space especially for young adults in the community who were struggling with their sexual identity. From the start, though, the presence of our group was controversial. For several years a small number of us, some faculty, staff, and students, some from outside, met regularly and offered support and encouragement. For various reason, for a time, the group kind of petered out.

In the meantime, things got more tense on campus. A number of faculty and staff signed an open letter in the *Mennonite Weekly Review* that advocated for the Mennonite churches taking a more inclusive approach. There was some talk at the time about possible disciplinary action against signees, but that blew over. However, at about this same time, EMU's administration decided to terminate the employment of several staff and faculty for reasons related to their being lesbian or gay. An ad hoc group of faculty and staff that had emerged in relation to the open letter evolved into an advocacy group challenging the administrative decisions. There

were a few meetings with administrators, some distress expressed, and in time this group also petered out.

A third kind of group also emerged out of this ferment, an official student group called "A Safe Place." This group was active for a few years, hosting several well-attended panel discussions and the like. Then, as often happens with student groups, a Safe Place became dormant when the student leaders graduated. In time, though, Safe Place was revived and became an active presence on campus.

I was involved in varying ways with each of these efforts, as well as working through a process with Virginia Mennonite Conference concerning my ministerial credentials after I signed the *Mennonite Weekly* open letter. I also engaged in several quite lengthy debates with people with contrary views on the internet discussion group called MennoLink.

In the context of this ferment, at some point I decided that I needed to take the time and write out a coherent position on my views concerning homosexuality and the Christian faith. I tried to put down on paper theological convictions that had emerged through biblical study, pastoral engagement, and philosophical reflection. The fruit of those efforts make up Part II in this book.

2. Hermeneutics, biblical teaching, and "homosexuality"

[From a presentation at Community Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, Virginia on September 30, 2001]

My wife Kathleen Temple and I first became attracted to the Mennonite tradition in the late 1970s, largely because of the Mennonite peace position. I read a lot of John Howard Yoder in those days and we began to attend the Eugene (Oregon) Mennonite Church. During the 1980-1 school year we attended Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana and had a terrific experience. That was when decided for sure to cast our lot with the Mennonites. We joined Eugene Mennonite Church upon our return to Oregon. I served brief terms as an interim pastor first in Eugene and then at Trinity Mennonite Church in Phoenix, Arizona in the next couple of years.

Beginning in 1984, we spent three years in Berkeley, California, attending graduate school. I earned my Ph.D. in Christian Ethics from the Graduate Theological Union. While we were in the Bay Area, we attended First Mennonite Church of San Francisco. Attending the GTU as a student and First Mennonite as worshipers, we were exposed to gay and lesbian Christians for the first time. Both settings were environments within which the issue of the compatibility of homosexuality and Christianity was settled. We simply had to accept that as a given, not an issue for debate, and watch and listen and try to learn.

I had had my conscience stirred back in Eugene in the late 1970s during a very vitriolic political campaign over whether the voters should overturn an anti-discrimination policy the city council had adopted. At that time, I believed homosexuality and Christianity were definitely incompatible, but I was deeply troubled by the intensity of the anti-homosexuality sentiment I saw among many of the Christians I was around. I had recently become a pacifist, and I found this hostility toward gay and lesbian people to be quite incompatible with what I was learning about the gospel of peace. Only after we lived in Berkeley, though, did I come face to face with the reality that it is indeed possible

to be a deeply committed Christian and gay or lesbian. I learned to know too many people whose depth of faith and commitment to the core beliefs of Christianity (including the authority of the Bible) far surpassed mine to question whether indeed they were Christians.

In 1987 we returned to Eugene, and I began a seven-year stint as pastor at the Eugene church. Immediately, I was thrown into the fray, and I have not really left it since. The church had welcomed as active participants two gay men who were living together as a couple. Shortly after I began as pastor, they asked if they could become members. I helped the congregation process this request very intensely for several months, and ultimately we decided that we were not ready to accept them as members. In the years since that time, I have dealt with this issue pastorally, theologically, and politically.

IDENTIFY THE ISSUES

In a published essay, "The 'homosexuality' debate: Two streams of biblical interpretation" (see chapter 11, below), I summarize the basic biblical arguments of six writers (three of whom I put in the "restrictive" category and three in the "inclusive" category—referring with these terms to people's perspective concerning the involvement in the church of gay and lesbian Christians). At the end of the essay, most of which simply summarizes other people's viewpoints, I identify what I see to be the main points of tension between these two sides, the main issues related to biblical interpretation.

How do we apply the biblical materials? Do we equate the biblical teaching concerning homosexuality with our present-day position *or* do we conclude that the biblical teaching yields no clear position? Do we conclude that it is relatively easy and appropriate to bridge the gap in time, culture, and language between the biblical times and ours *or* do we conclude that this gap is too wide to be able to make direction application from biblical times to today?

How do we interpret the core direct references to homosexuality? Do we understand these references to provide us with clear and applicable guidance that forbids all same-gender sex *or* do we understand these references either not to refer to all same-gender sex or to do so in ways that no longer apply to us?

Is Leviticus 18–20 reflecting an underlying, universal, creation-based principle as the basis for the prohibition of male/male sex *or* is it reflecting instead time-bound contextual concerns that no longer are directly relevant for Christians? Is Romans 1 relevant for all same-gender relationships *or* only to same-gender sex practiced by people who are

heterosexual in orientation? Does the critique of same-gender sex as "against nature" in Romans 1 rest on an understanding of a God-ordained created order in which male/female sex is the exclusive norm *or* does it rest on a more practical view that such sexual activity is unconventional and "unexpected"? Do the terms in 1 Corinthians 6:9 that have in recent years been variously translated into English as "homosexuals" have in mind same-gender sex per se *or* have in mind exploitative sex (with the implication that there could be same-gender sex that is not exploitative)?

What is the relevance of the Genesis creation accounts? Is this created-as-male-and-female confession a clear basis for saying that sex is meant only for men with women *or* this confession simply a descriptive statement that we come from procreative sex with no further relevance for these issues? When Jesus refers to the creation account (Matthew 19:3-9) is he making male/female sex the exclusive norm *or* is he mentioning it merely in order to address the particular issue of divorce. Does being open to same-gender marriage-like relationships threaten the viability of male/female marriage *or* does is openness irrelevant to one's support for male/female marriage?

How do we think of the biblical teaching on sin? Are the sins Christians should be most concerned with sins that threaten the purity of the faith community and sins that are direct violations of biblical law codes *or* is the sin problem understood to be centered on mistreatment of marginalized and vulnerable people? Should the church be focusing on the "sin" of the alleged misbehavior of gays and lesbians *or* should the focus be first of all on the "sin" of the alleged misbehavior of the church toward gays and lesbians?

A PUZZLE TO SOLVE, NOT AN ARGUMENT TO WIN

I conclude my essay with the suggestion that the *only* way the church can move through these issues is by treating them as a puzzle to be solved rather than as an argument to win or lose. In part, I base this comment on the simple *fact* that all of these positions are held be a significant number of people *within* the church. The church does not have consensus—and never will as long as it simply has debates, takes votes, and shuts down discussion.

The question we *must* face is how do we solve this puzzle. I happen to reject the ethical and biblical relativism (or even nihilism) that says we cannot resolve them – that we have no choice but to fall back on power politics. Partly, I reject this relativism on theological grounds. I do believe in truth, in a hierarchy of values—and that these are discernible and

livable. Partly, I reject this relativism on practical grounds. The Mennonite churches simply have *not tried* very hard to solve this puzzle.

A good start was made in the early 1980s. In early 1982, AMBS hosted a conference that was amazing in two ways. First, it was a gathering in an academic institution characterized by a wide spectrum of perspectives being openly, honestly, and safely presented. Second, it was totally secret. No one outside the Seminary knew that it happened. It was never reported on and news of it spread only after the fact and by word of mouth. And nothing like this has happened since. In the early 1980s, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church appointed a joint committee of pastors and scholars to produce a study document on human sexuality. The final product, a book called *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life,* was published in 1985. It was a very strong document, covering many issues in a careful, objective way that recognized the breadth of perspectives in the Mennonite churches. This document was intended for wide use as a study and discussion resources for across the Mennonite world in North America. But it remained mostly unread.

Had the AMBS conference been but the first of many in various educational settings, had the study book been seriously grappled with across the church—we would have been spared a lot of blood-letting over the past 15 years. But this did not happen….

READING STRATEGIES

When we consider how different people within the church approach the Bible, we can identify four general tendencies. I would like to chart them as follows:

Restrictive	Inclusive
Stronger Authority	
(1A) Focus on direct references—"Bible is opposed to homosexuality and so should we be"	*(2A)* Focus on biblical themes—"Bible is not opposed to homosexuality; since it supports inclusion of vulnerable people, so should we"
Weaker Authority	
(1B) Focus on natural law—"Bible is not central; homosexuality is unnatural"	*(2B)* Dismiss "core texts" as inapplicable—"Bible is opposed to homosexuality but we need not be"

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 be boiled down 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—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—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 resolve the problem. 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 that default restrictiveness must be overridden. The starting point we take then becomes crucial. Hence, this is probably where we need 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—whether we have a stronger or weaker view of biblical authority.

MY APPROACH

Back in the late 1970s, my newly established pacifist convictions (and perhaps my genetic "grace-filled" Lutheran make-up) moved me toward making the assumption in favor of inclusiveness once I faced the issues in a concrete way. But I recognize that this assumption is only the starting point and is not a conclusion. With this 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." In my research (see chapter 5 below) I conclude that none of them clearly make a strong case for overriding my position.

Only one text in the Bible makes a clear statement that same-sex sex is forbidden—Leviticus 18–20. Given its context in the Holiness Code amidst other laws that are no longer considered normative, given its reference only to male/male sex and not to all same-gender sex, given what appear to be context-specific reasons for the prohibition, and even given the message elsewhere in Leviticus 18–20 that highlights the call to care for vulnerable people in the community, I conclude that the only possible text that clearly might prohibit all same-gender sex does not do so in a way that can be normative for Christians today.

Does the argument from creation provide a clear basis for overriding the default position? If we emphasize that we need "clarity," I have a hard time seeing how this argument 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-sex marriage. That is, Genesis 1–2 and Matthew 19:3-9 are not addressing our issue. Perhaps they could serve as supporting evidence for additional strong bases, but since the "core texts" don't actually provide such bases, I conclude that this argument on its own does not either.

Does biblical teaching on holiness provide a clear basis for overriding the default position? In considering this argument, we must discern what the "biblical teaching" actually tells Christians about holiness. First of all, as noted above, 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 this chapter.

Jesus understood himself in terms of Leviticus 19 (he cites 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 certainly does not provide a basis for overriding our default position—rather, it reinforces it.

So, my position can be summarized thus: Gay and lesbian Christians in our day are prime examples of vulnerable and marginalized people. The overall thrust of biblical teaching about God's special concern for vulnerable and marginalized people and about the central attribute of God's calling of people is mercy and acceptance for all who trust in God establish 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. However, when we look at biblical teaching with the question of whether there is contained therein a basis for overriding our default position of inclusion, we find nothing with the clarity and forcefulness to do so. For a complete perspective, we would need to turn to other sources for moral convictions as well as the Bible. For people in the Mennonite tradition, however, these other sources are traditionally not given the same level of authority as scripture is. So we would have to find *extremely* clear and persuasive bases in extra-biblical sources if we were to override our default position, given that this position does itself have strong biblical indirect warrant (even if it does not include a direct, overt statement commanding inclusion).

SECTION TWO: Bible

3. What *did* Jesus do?

[First published in Ruth Conrad Liechty, ed. On Biblical Interpretation: Welcome to the Dialogue, Booklet #4 *(Goshen, IN: The Welcome Committee, 2001), 41-55]*

Christians who believe that the churches should be welcoming of LGBTQ Christians as full members, leaders, and participants in fully blessed marriages have many bases for their convictions—though there is diversity in the arguments in favor of such welcome. However, surely all such welcoming Christians would point to Jesus and his welcoming message and practice as one key element of the rationale for welcome.

In this chapter, I will articulate one Jesus-centered argument for the inclusive approach. We welcome because we believe we should imitate what Jesus actually did in his ministry in general, even if he did not explicitly face the question of how to respond same-sex marriage.

JESUS AS OUR MODEL

In recent years, merchandisers of "Christian" jewelry have reaped a windfall of profits from "WWJD" bracelets, necklaces, pins, and the like. "What Would Jesus Do (WWJD)?" This question, seemingly, serves as a personal reminder to keep the Savior in mind as one goes through life. In the end, a cynic could suggest, the Jesus of this slogan bears a strong resemblance to the young George Washington, who said, "Father, I cannot tell a lie;" he is a person with a strong focus on personal ethics.

"WWJD" does not seem to have direct relevance to social ethics. What would Jesus do in the face of current church and societal struggles regarding same-sex affectional issues? Are we simply left with our individual preferences that we speculatively project onto a symbolic icon?

On one level, we are pretty much in the dark. We cannot speak with authority about how Jesus would respond to our struggles over sexuality because he said nothing directly about them. However, his followers, we cannot simply ignore these questions. As I reflect on the relevance of

Jesus for our social ethics, I want to rephrase our slogan. Rather than speculate on "what Jesus would do," I want to focus on something more concrete: What *did* Jesus do? I hope not so much to find a definitive resolution for our issues as to find clarity about the social ramifications of Jesus's way—ramifications that do provide guidance for communities of Jesus-followers today.

Even though Christian creeds give short shrift to what Jesus did during his life (the Apostles Creed skips from "born of the Virgin Mary" to "crucified under Pontius Pilate" in its confession), historian Jaroslav Pelikan is accurate when he writes, "As respect for the organized church has declined, reverence for Jesus has grown. . . . There is more in him than is dreamt of in the philosophy and Christology of the theologians. Within the church, but also far beyond its walls, his person and message are, in the phrase of Augustine, a 'beauty ever ancient, ever new.'"[1]

Human beings throughout the world and across religions sense that Jesus's life holds something special—a model of human life as God intends for it to be lived. Jesus's life and teaching manifest a profound awareness of truth, holiness, and what matters most. Tragically, Christianity, the religion that explicitly professes its allegiance to Jesus, has not always practiced faithful stewardship of the gifts of awareness that Jesus gave the world.

In his book *The Politics of Jesus*, John Howard Yoder outlines several reasons for Christianity's failure. He mentions, among others: (1) Many Christians believe that "the nature of Jesus' message was ahistorical by definition. He dealt with spiritual and not social matters, with the existential and not the concrete. . . . Whatever he said and did of a social and ethical character must be understood not for its own sake but as the symbolic or mythical clothing of his spiritual message." (2) That "Jesus came, after all, to give his life for the sins of humankind" is the conviction of many Christians. The crucial aspects of his time on earth were his sacrificial death and resurrection-his life before that is basically irrelevant.[2] In what follows in his book, Yoder persuasively argues that Jesus' life is of "direct significance for social ethics" and *is* "normative for a contemporary Christian social ethic."[3]

Accepting the basics of Yoder's case (and the instincts of the many, many people in our world to whom Pelikan alludes), I believe we should turn to Jesus and his way of life for guidance on an issue such as the

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[1] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 232-3.

[2] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 5-8.

[3] Yoder, *Politics*, 11.

inclusion or exclusion of sexual minorities in the church. Of course, as is well known, Jesus did not directly address such issues. This silence does not mean, however, that we should turn elsewhere for our ethical guidance. Jesus is our model, not our blueprint, for contemporary issues.

In other words, Jesus's relevance for any aspect of our ethics does not lie so much in the arena of explicit directive; rather, Jesus's relevance most directly follows from his general way of life. How might Jesus's way of life provide guidance for today's church in the area of inclusion versus exclusion of sexual minorities?

JESUS LOVED PARTICULAR PEOPLE

Almost everyone affirms that Jesus taught and practiced love. Jesus's portrayal of love stands at the center of his relevance. However, in order to appropriate what he teaches us about love, we need to look at what Jesus actually *did*. We might discover that Jesus's love is more distinctive than we have thought.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky gives a powerful portrayal of the distinctiveness of Jesus's way of loving. In an extended parable of the "Grand Inquisitor" in the novel,[4] Dostoyevsky tells of Jesus's appearance in Spain in the late Middle Ages at the height of the Great Inquisition, when the church was cracking down on "heretical" Christians and Jews, putting hundreds of the unorthodox to death. Jesus circulates among the poor, fearful, suffering masses, and offers compassion, healing, unconditional mercy, and acceptance. He does not say much, but people recognize him, and soon crowds follow him and marvel at his kindness. The Cardinal, who is the Grand Inquisitor, observes Jesus and immediately has him arrested and taken away.

The Inquisitor then challenges Jesus, and accuses him of not having genuinely loved humankind. He bases his accusation on Jesus's resisting the three temptations of the devil in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. According to the Inquisitor, if Jesus had genuinely loved humankind, he would have taken that opportunity to make the largest possible number of people happy. He would have turned the stones into bread to feed the hungry. He would have come down from the cross in order to captivate humankind's conscience. He would have organized humankind into a single, harmonious ant colony in order to relieve our loneliness.

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[4] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1957 [1880]), 227-44. I rely on James Breech's interpretation of Dostoyevsky in *The Silence of Jesus: The Authentic Voice of the Historical Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

The Grand Inquisitor, of course, is not truly concerned with humankind's well being. In actuality, he harbors a secret contempt for human nature and human possibilities. Critic James Breech writes, "He loves humankind in general because he hates his concrete neighbor"—the actual individuals he has to deal with face-to-face.[5] In Dostoyevsky's parable, Jesus does not defend himself against the Inquisitor's accusations. Breech points out that the silence of Jesus indicates that he represents something quite different from love for humankind in general.[6] Jesus does not argue with the Inquisitor over what is best for all humankind. He simply acts in love in concrete ways toward actual people. He displays love for the particular neighbor.

Much of *The Brothers Karamazov* is a meditation on this theme of love for particular people—and how difficult such love is. One of the main characters, Ivan Karamazov, confesses, "I could never understand how one can love one's neighbors. It's just one's neighbors, to my mind, that one cannot love, though one might love those at a distance."[7] A good illustration of this fact, perhaps, is the way we can so generously give money, time, and energy to support relief and development and evangelism throughout the world and yet find it so difficult to respond lovingly to the actual gay and lesbian neighbors among us.

As Dostoyevsky's parable illustrates, one of the more radical and profound characteristics of Jesus was his openness. Jesus consistently showed deep-seated and at times costly kindness and respect to particular men, women, and children. Jesus was not so much a "general humanitarian." He did not have big plans for large-scale projects. He was not so concerned with winning the whole world. Mostly, Jesus cared for specific people. He cared for Matthew the tax collector. He cared for the woman at the well. Jesus modeled for us the practice of simply accepting other specific people. He treated individuals with respect. He listened to others, was interested in them, shared food with them.

THE "POLITICS OF COMPASSION"

Jesus's love for particular people, however, most certainly had social consequences. He loved particular people in all their real-life, social aspects as a political strategy. Marcus Borg characterizes Jesus's approach to life and his social ethics as the "politics of compassion"—

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[5] Breech, *Silence*, 16-18.

[6] Breech, *Silence*, 17.

[7] Dostoyevsky, *Brothers*, 218.

contrasted with what Borg calls the "politics of holiness."[8] "Politics," used in this sense, may be defined as "the structuring of relationships among persons in groups."[9]

The politics of holiness had emerged in Judaism in the generations following the destruction of the ancient Jewish state in the sixth-century BCE and the exile of many Jews in Babylon. Following their return to Palestine, Jewish religious leaders sought to lead the people in a much more rigorous adherence to the holiness code in hopes of sustaining their community in a hostile world. At the core of holiness in this context lay the principle of separation. "To be holy meant to be separate from everything that would defile holiness," writes Borg. Polarities emerged to mark holiness: clean and unclean, purity and defilement, sacred and profane, Jew and Gentile, righteous and sinner.[10]

Over time, the politics of holiness engendered the development of a large group of "sinners" and "outcasts." These were people who for various reasons were unwilling—or more often, unable—strictly to adhere to the holiness code. Included among the "unclean" were shepherds, tax collectors, impoverished landless people, menstruating women—and, of course, all Samaritans and Gentiles.[11] Borg writes about the "conventional wisdom," long entrenched by Jesus's time, that understood these divisions between "clean" insiders and "unclean" outsiders to be unbridgeable. This conventional wisdom was a system focused on security. "The primary allegiances cultivated by conventional wisdom are ultimately pursued for the sake of the self in order that it might find a secure 'home' in them."[12]

Jesus challenged this conventional wisdom and its politics of holiness with his politics of compassion. Jesus and his followers formed a social organization that contrasted with the relatively rigid social boundaries of their culture. They rejected boundaries between righteous and outcast, men and women, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.[13] Jesus's politics of compassion was founded on a profound understanding of God's mercy. God, as represented in Jesus's teaching (e.g., the parable of the prodigal son, Luke 15:11-32), does not discriminate but loves all people. Jesus's God is our model—"be merciful, as God is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

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[8] Marcus Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 131.

[9] Yoder, *Politics,* 42.

[10] Borg, *Jesus*, 86-87. See also Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, 2nd edition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 151-78.

[11] Borg, *Jesus*, 91-92.

[12] Borg, *Jesus*, 107.

[13] Borg, *Jesus*, 131.

Jesus proposed a social life ordered around openness and inclusion rather than purity and exclusion. Borg outlines some key characteristics of Jesus' politics of compassion:[14]

(1) *Jesus ate with outcasts.* He practiced "table fellowship" with all kinds of people—including the "unclean" (e.g., tax collectors, women, Gentiles, poor people). In so doing, Jesus showed God's kingdom to be inclusive. Table fellowship carried tremendous symbolic weight in Jesus's day, as it still does in ours. In contrast to the politics of holiness that required eating only with those who are "clean," Jesus welcomed "unclean outsiders" to his table.

(2) *Jesus associated closely with women.* Jesus encouraged women to be part of his movement (a powerful example is the story of the woman at the well in John 4[15]). In doing so, he directly contradicted conventional wisdom's relegation of women to a subordinate position.

(3) *Jesus brought good news to the poor* (Luke 4:18). He specifically stated that his message was intended to provide a blessing to "you who are poor" (Luke 6:20). He challenged rich people to change—the fruit of conversion to Jesus' way included redistribution of unjustly-gained wealth (cf. the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19[16]).

(4) *Jesus spoke of peace*—not as a vague, general ideal but as concrete love for neighbors (who included even adversaries such as Samaritans), even for enemies (Mt 5:43-48). Jesus's works came in a context of great social unrest, conflict, and impending revolution. As Borg writes, "For a public figure to speak of loving one;s enemies in such a setting would unambiguously mean to disavow the path of violence and war."[17]

(5) *Jesus offered a message of hope to all kinds of people.* Since true spirituality stems from the heart, anyone who wants to is capable of living a faithful, God-oriented life. Even those who had been labeled unclean and placed beyond the pale by official religious institutions could know God and practice authentic discipleship in following God's will for their lives.

(6) *Jesus proclaimed the presence of a new social and spiritual community*, the "realm of God." Participation in this community was open to all who chose to be part of it; all they had to do was "repent" (turn toward God) and "believe the good news" (trust in God's mercy for them). This was Jesus's fundamental message (Mark 1:15). In the ministry that embodied his proclamation, Jesus made clear the openness of his community.

One clear expression of this openness may be found in Matthew's gospel. A repeated verse in both 4:23 and 9:35 sets off a discrete section:

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[14] Borg, *Jesus*, 131-41.

[15] See Kraybill's discussion in *Upside-Down*, 214-21.

[16] Kraybill, *Upside-Down*, 107-29.

[17] Borg, *Jesus*, 139.

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." This section of Matthew shows that the "good news of the kingdom" includes both Jesus's teaching (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount, 5:1–7:29) and his healing.

A partial list of the recipients of healing shows the incredible openness of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed: demoniacs, epileptics, a leper, a centurion's servant, Peter's mother-in-law, two Gentile demoniacs, tax collectors, sinners, and the daughter of a synagogue leader. Many of these were outsiders—people considered "unclean" or "contaminanted" by the established religion. Jesus offered them mercy just as they were. He was not simply a knee-jerk radical, however. He was willing to bring healing to anyone who turned to him, including even a leader of a synagogue. Jesus's politics of compassion included all who responded.

The Christian church in the past 2,000 years has been plagued by the politics of holiness. For the sake of the "distinctiveness" and "security" of the church, sharp lines of exclusion have often been drawn. Our recent controversies over sexuality, in part at least, reflect those types of concern. Jesus' model clearly challenges us to place compassion over holiness as the core ordering principle for our social lives.

THE CASE OF TABLE FELLOWSHIP

Of these aspects of Jesus's politics of compassion, the practice of open table fellowship perhaps most powerfully speaks across times and cultures. The metaphor of table fellowship resonates deeply in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, as it does in the story of Jesus. Sharing table fellowship has always been a powerful, concrete expression of fellowship, inclusion, and communal connection. Because of its deep symbolic significance, Jesus's practice of table fellowship reflects perhaps most profoundly his philosophy of life.[18]

The important role that table fellowship served in all the cultures of Jesus's world cannot be overestimated. Meals were not simply about people meeting their physical needs. The sharing of meals had become a ceremony symbolizing friendship and close social connections. Joining for meals expressed one's acceptance of another as an integral part of one's community. Usually, people shared food with those of their own social class. Hence, mealtime reinforced social differences, fortifying the

[18] I draw here on Scott Bartchy, "Table Fellowship," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels,* ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 796-97.

boundary walls between insiders and outsiders. People tended to provide hospitality toward those whom they expected would reciprocate—I invite you to eat with me, fully expecting that you will invite me back.[19]

The religious leaders of Jesus's time who focused the most on the politics of holiness, the Pharisees, especially considered table fellowship to be central. In their longing for Israel's salvation, they sought a pure society unmarred by ritual uncleanness. This quest for purity began in the home. Their food was totally prepared according to the purity laws. They expected everyone who ate in their homes to be ritually pure.

Jesus's approach stood in sharp contrast. He delighted in breaking bread with an enormous variety of people, regardless of their ritual cleanliness. "He directly challenged the social and religious exclusiveness associated with table fellowship," writes Bartchy. "He showed radical openness."[20] In Luke 5:27-39, Jesus eats with a tax collector, Levi, and his friends. To the upholders of strict purity, tax collectors were considered intrinsically unclean, in large part due to their close collaboration with the hated Roman occupation forces. The Pharisees and their scribes strongly criticize Jesus for this breach of table fellowship purity. "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" they asked. That is, why do you defile yourself? Why do you share this deeply meaningful time of fellowship with low-lifers and scumbags? Jesus speaks of his love for these outcasts-and of the current "at-handness" of God's kingdom. He shows the presence of God's kingdom by his openness, even to those whom his culture considered to be unclean.

Luke 7 contains another story of table fellowship that breaks taboos. A woman named Mary, labeled a sinner, imposes herself on Jesus while he is having dinner with a Pharisee. She comes to him crying and anoints his feet with ointment. Jesus is criticized for allowing this, but he responds by asserting that this woman had received mercy.

In a third example from Luke, Jesus again faces criticism due to his openness and lack of concern with purity and separation: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Jesus replies to this attack by telling three parables of lost things being found. The third of these parables is the most well known-the story of the prodigal son who, significantly, is welcomed to his father's love feast without having confessed his sins (he had, among other things, worked with unclean animals), and without undergoing any ritual purification acts. The

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[19] Kraybill, *Upside-Down*, 190-97.

[20] Bartchy, "Table Fellowship," 797.

picture of God in this parable is one characterized by welcome, mercy, and radical openness.

Another example of Jesus's radical openness and its connection with table fellowship is the familiar story of the feeding of the 5,000. This is one of the few stories that appears in each of the gospels. In this meal, there are no questions asked about purity or if any of the people are sinners or unclean. The meal is for everyone. Thus, Jesus chose an extraordinarily evocative and concrete way to make clear the openness, inclusiveness, and unconditionality of God's realm. He shared food with all sorts of outsiders and did so publicly—at great cost to his reputation and, ultimately, at the cost of his life.

CONSEQUENCES OF JESUS'S OPENNESS

Jesus's practice of openness fostered conflict with the religious leaders most concerned with Israel's purity, the Pharisees. A passage from Matthew's gospel helps to illumine this conflict. Two stories in Matthew 12:1-14 show that Jesus, in contrast to the Pharisees, stressed human wellbeing over Sabbath observance. On the Sabbath, Jesus' disciples are hungry and, we are told, they pluck heads of grain with which to feed themselves. Some Pharisees notice this and criticize Jesus for his followers' violation of the Sabbath.

Jesus replies to his critics, giving two biblical examples. David and his companions ate the "bread of the Presence" (see 1 Sam 21:1-6; Lev 24:5-9 tells of this consecrated bread), even though it was the Sabbath. The second example is that priests "work" on the Sabbath (Num 28:9-10). This implies that the sacrificial system (and hence, the temple) is greater than the Sabbath. Sabbath regulations are subordinate to the sacrificial system. Now, Jesus has stated, something greater even than the temple is here—that is, the kingdom of God, present in Jesus (Mt 12:6). If Jesus is greater than the temple, then of course Jesus is greater than the Sabbath.

At this point, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 for support: Mercy is more important than sacrifice and Sabbath regulations. In other words, as the central characteristic of the realm of God, mercy is the highest priority. Mark's version of this story contains Jesus's telling words: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27).

The scene then shifts in Matthew 12, and Jesus goes to a synagogue and heals a man with a withered hand, still on the Sabbath. The Pharisees try to set Jesus up. By using the example of rescuing a sheep on the Sabbath and inferring that humans are more valuable than sheep, Jesus asserts, "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Mt 12:12). That is, doing good, healing human beings, is within what the law allows. Jesus

does not reject Sabbath law out of hand. Rather, he sets Sabbath in the context of the wider meaning of the law: Mercy comes first. For Jesus, the issue is not law versus no law; the issue is how the law is interpreted. The story concludes with the ominous words: "The Pharisees went out and conspired against Jesus, how to destroy him" (Mt 12:14).

God meant the Sabbath to enhance human life, not to shackle it. Jesus insisted that one who takes an action on the Sabbath that helps other people is within the law. Mercy supersedes the sacrificial system and Sabbath regulations, and purity has to do with the heart. What comes from the inside defiles, not what comes from the outside. Defilement has to do most of all with hurting other people.

The gospels tell us that the Pharisees' hostility toward Jesus continued to escalate and that others also came to oppose Jesus's message. The Sadducees, who were the leaders charged with running the temple in Jerusalem, recognized that Jesus's inclusiveness and provision of direct access to God (what John Dominic Crossan calls an "unbrokered" relationship[21]) directly threatened their institutionalized religion. Ultimately, the Sadducees joined with the occupational Roman political leadership (i.e., Pontius Pilate) to put an end to Jesus's life.

The conflict with the Pharisees, though, continued even after Jesus was killed, as the early Christians continued on Jesus's inclusive path. The Apostle Paul, writing in the second and third decades following Jesus's death, provides helpful analysis on why this conflict over the application of the law was so volatile.[22]

As Paul portrays it, many people no longer understood the law as Moses had presented it—as practical guidance for how to live faithfully in light of God's mercy and saving work for Israel (cf. Exod 20). Rather, the law had become Israel's badge of exclusiveness. This was how the Jews knew they were uniquely special—doing "works of the law," rituals that marked them as different from non-Jews. Three key expressions of this boundary-marking function were: (1) food laws (kosher law, ritual cleansing); (2) Sabbath observance; and (3) circumcision of males. Religious leaders had come to insist that faithfulness to these practices was absolutely necessary to Israel's identity. They were signs of God's special connection with the faithful people. For Jesus to challenge

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[21] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

[22] In what follows, I rely heavily on the writings of James D. G. Dunn. See especially: *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990) and *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philiadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

reliance on these practices as the center of religious life posed a huge threat to the entire system.

Jesus did not reject the law itself. Rather, he radically challenged the Pharisees' interpretation. Jesus tried to reorient the law to its original intent: guidelines for faithful living in light of God's mercy. According to the gospels, many of the Pharisees were not open to this challenge. They saw Jesus as an enormous threat to their entire culture. He undercut the culture's identity with his openness and emphasis on direct access to God apart from strict ritualism.

In the years immediately following Jesus's death, according Acts, Pharisees led the violent opposition to Jesus's followers. Their opposition came to be spearheaded by the zealous anti-Christian attitude of a brilliant young Pharisee known as Saul of Tarsus. A central issue was the law—access to God and salvation, and openness to Gentiles. But this Saul met Jesus in a vision on the road to Damascus and had his life transformed. He was renamed Paul and became Jesus's apostle.

The Apostle Paul came to see that by using "defense of the law" as the rationale for violence against the Christians, he had actually been an idolater. He had placed works of the law above God's mercy. Jesus called Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles and to welcome them into the community of his followers without requiring strict food and Sabbath laws. Jesus called Paul to imitate Jesus's own radical openness and rejection of boundary-marker-oriented religion.

Jesus's insistence that external works of the law did not connect people with God led to his being killed. He showed that God's mercy is for everyone. The structures people build to show others that they are "insiders" have nothing to do with God's favor. God's favor is, instead, for those who know God's mercy and share that mercy with others.

Paul does not argue that Jesus abolished all human differences; rather, Paul makes the point that Jesus abolishes the need to make these differences signs of righteousness and unrighteousness. Jesus abolishes our need to protect our own security as people who are "okay" with God. We do not need to exclude others from God's favor on the basis of external boundary markers because the law of the Spirit is not about boundary markers. External distinctives are not bases for elevating ourselves over others. What matters is simply trusting in God's mercy, which we all need equally.

Paul writes that God set people free from this law of sin and death. God set people free from needing to judge others and to exclude outsiders. When the law or any other cultural system is used as a basis for identity before God, then it is the law of sin and death. Then it is keeping people from understanding God as unconditionally merciful.

JESUS'S RELEVANCE

Jesus's relevance for the discussion of inclusion of sexual minorities in the church does not lie in direct comments he made on this issue; he made none. However, the themes in Jesus's life we have examined provide the needed foundation for a faithful, inclusive response.

(1) Jesus practiced a radical openness that ran contrary to the purity-oriented exclusionary practices of religious people. The symbol of open table fellowship with outsiders, "sinners," excluded ones, reveals Jesus's approach with stark clarity. Table fellowship for Jesus meant a welcome into the kingdom of God. The love feast that Jesus welcomed people to join had no prerequisites, no initiation rites, no insistence on purification as a prerequisite. All it took was open hands—the prodigal son's return, the five thousand accepting the bread and fish, Mary's tears.

The lesson of Jesus's approach for today's church can be summarized as simply one word—*welcome*. The church has difficulty being unconditional in its love and in embodying the way of abundance to replace scarcity. But Jesus asks nothing less of us. For the church to truly know God as merciful, the church must live God's mercy.

(2) Once Jesus perceived that not all the religious leaders were going to join in his radical openness, he did not hesitate to offer critiques of a boundary-marker-oriented approach to faith. His modeling of such a critique remains potent today, as do his specific critiques and alternatives.

When the Pharisees restricted access to God's mercy to the ritually pure, excluding most people, Jesus sharply oppose them. He certainly offered a message of love and respect, but his positive message contained a direct confrontation to those not willing to respond to it with love and compassion of their own. Present-day followers of Jesus are challenged to find a similar kind of balance-fostering love and compassion in our lives but also standing against forces that resist Jesus's mercy. When churches restrict access to God's mercy, followers of Jesus are challenged by Jesus's example to speak out in opposition to such exclusiveness.

(3) The direct consequence of Jesus critique was that he suffered, ultimately to the point of death. Significantly, Jesus taught at length and with uncomfortable clarity that his followers will also follow him on the path of the cross. To imitate Jesus, in New Testament terms, has most of all to do with imitating his faithfulness to God's mercy and love even to the point of suffering for such faithfulness. Those who advocate a Jesus-style openness and inclusion can expect to find similar responses to what Jesus found to his openness-anger, hostility, even violence.[23]

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[23] Yoder, *Politics,* 112-33.

Jesus himself unequivocally opposed the use of violence by his followers—under all circumstances. Yet he was utterly realistic about the likelihood of violence in his followers' lives. Jesus's followers are never to resort to violence, even though their acts of love and inclusion in the face of the politics of holiness will invariably elicit hostility from the protectors of the status quo.

(4) The underlying priority of Jesus's life and teaching was mercy. Whatever conflict Jesus took part in was conflict for the sake of communicating God's mercy intended for all people. "Be merciful as God is merciful": the unpopularity of this message in some contexts, the violence such a message may elicit, the difficulty in living such a message out—none of these minimize the centrality of mercy as the core value of Jesus and his followers.

The Book of Revelation is full of visions of the costly consequences for those who would make merciful living central in a world all too often dominated by the power politics, large-scale and small-scale, of the Beast. Interspersed with terrible visions of persecution and conflict, however, we find consistent words of exhortation (to be victors, Christians must "follow the Lamb wherever he goes") and visions of worship and celebration. The worship is portrayed also as a *present* reality, amidst the tribulation.

This juxtaposition of visions of suffering and celebration is a promise for disciples today of moments of hope, joy, and communal solidarity. That is, as we seek to follow Jesus, we can have confidence that God will provide us with sustenance along the way—in large part, the sustenance that we offer one another as co-pilgrims on this path.

4. A basic Christian argument for affirming gay marriage

[Adapted from a presentation at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, Virginia, April 2012]

My assignment has been to provide an argument for why Christians should support gay marriage. I recognize that this is only one example of such an argument and that I don't have the space to do more than sketch this argument without giving thoroughgoing support for it.

POINT ONE: MARRIAGE IS A GOOD THING

My starting point is the belief that marriage is a good thing. Christians should offer support for married people—to help couples in their struggles, to celebrate the beauty of these relationships, to encourage people entering into healthy and life-enhancing covenant relationships.

In our contemporary American society, marriage is a difficult undertaking; the odds are tragically high that couples will face major crises and have a strong likelihood of moving into divorce territory. Couples need the resources offered by supportive faith communities.

Now, I recognize that this is all quite complicated. Some marriages are not life enhancing. People who do go through divorces also need the support of faith communities. And, absolutely, people who are single need support as well. Singleness should not be seen as an inferior state, and churches often have a lot of work to do to become redemptive places for single people.

Nonetheless, we do recognize the potential for beauty and life in the context of marriage and believe that the churches should bless and encourage people who choose marriage. The issue then becomes whether the churches have moral bases for withholding such blessing and support for people in same-sex covenanted partnerships (and now, in many places around the world, actual marriage).

POINT TWO: THE CALL TO HOSPITALITY

A second point has to do with the general disposition of communities of faith. Churches have many different ideals and responsibilities. At the heart of their vocation, if they are to be true to the biblical model (both the model in the Old Testament based on Torah and the model in the New Testament based on the life and teaching of Jesus), is a call to be hospitable. The basic vocation of biblically based communities of faith found expression at the very beginning when Abraham and Sarah were told that they would parent a "great nation" that would "bless all the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3 and elsewhere).

Two stories that have been misused to justify inhospitality toward LGBTQ people underscore the importance of hospitality. In Genesis 18–19 we read how Abraham models hospitality both in his welcome of two emissaries from God and in his pleas on behalf of the wayward cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In contrast, men in those two cities model some of the worst cases of inhospitality as they seek to gang rape these same two emissaries, thereby bringing terrible judgment upon themselves. The main lesson of this account is to underscore the centrality of hospitality in the biblical mindset, and to lift Abraham up as our model.

Echoing many of the elements of the Genesis story, in Judges 19 we read of terrible inhospitality characterized by an attempt to gang rape a vulnerable visitor. In this case, the visitor pushes his wife out the door and she is raped and killed. The terrible element of this story is that this happens in Israel, the cold-hearted visitor is a Levite priest, and the outcome of these awful events is a devastating civil war. This all illustrates the corruption at the heart of the community of faith—finding its most notable expression in a blatant violation of the laws of hospitality.

The call to hospitality in Torah has at its heart a special concern for vulnerable people. Jesus captured something of the spirit of Torah hospitality when he challenged his listeners. Everyone tends to be generous to people who can be generous back, but those who fulfill the heart of the Law will be generous to those who can't be generous back. In Leviticus 19, the heart of what is often called "the Holiness Code" that outlines a distinctively Torah-based way of life that contrasts with surrounding cultures, the call to holy living finds its core expression in care for widows, orphans, and immigrants—that is, vulnerable people, people all too often exploited and marginalized in "the world."

The failure to practice such generosity provides the focus for prophetic critique throughout the story that follows. This concern is then made central in the message of Jesus. He made welcome to vulnerable people a central element of his attempt to recover the heart of Torah.

The importance of hospitality toward vulnerable people pushes present day Christians to be disposed toward welcoming gay people. When this is combined with placing positive value on marriage, we are pretty far along toward an affirmation of gay marriage in Christian churches. However, many Christians would still argue against such an affirmation. These arguments seem to center on three main points: (1) There is something inherently harmful about same-sex marriage for those in such relationships. (2) To affirm same-sex marriage undermines the sanctity of heterosexual marriage. (3) The Bible gives us clear teaching about the sinfulness of all types of homosexual sexual intimacy.

A TEST CASE

To test these points, let's imagine an actual relationship. This relationship is based on people I know. Some specific details are fictional, but are surely possible, even probable. Two young women, "Ilse" and "Jennifer," become friends as students in a Christian college. In time, each realizes that they have strongly romantic feelings toward the other. They work together and decide that they want to commit themselves to live as a couple. They seek out a pastor for pre-marriage counseling and, in time, formalize their commitment in a union ceremony and begin life as a married couple. Throughout this period they are active in a faith community that affirms their relationship and blesses their union.

After several years of married life, Ilse and Jennifer decide to expand their family. Through artificial insemination, one of them becomes pregnant. They welcome their baby into their family, and after awhile add a second child. They continue in their church involvement and are widely recognized as mature and spiritually fruitful Christians.

So, in every obvious way, this family parallels Christianity's ideal for a heterosexual marriage and nuclear family. There are no differences in the details of their courtship and marriage except for the sex of the partners. How, then, does Ilse and Jennifer's relationship measure up in relation to the concerns raised by Christians who argue their relationship should not be blessed by their church—and, in fact, may even argue that they should not be allowed to be full participants in the church as long as they are in their relationship and, presumably, sexually active?

The argument in favor of affirming gay marriage is at its heart an argument in favor of rigorous moral expectations concerning intimate relationships. It is an argument that same-sex couples should be expected to adhere to the moral standards that govern heterosexual marriage. It is not an argument for relaxing those standards or applying different standards to same-sex couples than apply to heterosexual couples.

So, the challenge for those who oppose gay marriage is to show that there is something inherently wrong simply in the partners being of the same sex. I use the case of the relationship between "Ilse" and "Jennifer" (based on actual people I know) to present a positive scenario on behalf of affirming gay marriage. To withhold such affirmation, one would need to show why *this* relationship is immoral (and overcome the benefit of the doubt in favor of affirmation based on the positive value we see in marriage and the biblical call for hospitality toward vulnerable people).

IS THE RELATIONSHIP INHERENTLY HARMFUL?

We should recognize that a persuasive argument concerning inherent harmfulness needs to apply to all same-sex partnerships. The argument needs to show that it is the same-sexness of the partnership that leads to harm. The argument makes claims about same-sexness per se, not just about specific examples. If some same-sex intimate partnerships are not harmful, then this argument fails because the harm that may be part of some relationships is not due to the same-sexness itself.

We acknowledge that there are many harmful heterosexual intimate partnerships—due to abuse, disrespect, etc. But the existence of some harmful heterosexual relationships does not render all such relationships harmful. Should we have examples of same-sex partnerships that are not harmful, we would have cause to suggest that we have to do with a parallel dynamic. That is, the existence of some harmful same-sex partnerships does not render homosexual relationships as a class harmful.

At this point, we could consider Ilse and Jennifer's relationship. As it turns out, anyone who knows them very well would testify that their relationship is mutually beneficial for them and beneficial for all who are part of their lives. In their partnership, they are a blessing to each other in every way that a healthy and long-term heterosexual marriage is a blessing to all who are affected by it. Ilse and Jennifer are not likely any more unusual within the set of same-sex married couples than a happily married heterosexual couple would be within the set of opposite-sex married couples. There are many other same-sex couples whose partnerships make it clear to any who would observe that there is nothing inherently harmful about such relationships.

DOES THE RELATIONSHIP UNDERMINE THE SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE?

This question also leads to intense debates. It is difficult to imagine how these debates can avoid being circular, though. Same-sex marriage

undermines the sanctity of marriage if you define marriage as being limited to opposite-sex partners. Same-sex marriage does not undermine the sanctity of marriage if you don't define marriage as being limited to opposite-sex partners.

Part of the issue, then, is what constitutes the core of our definition of marriage. Is it (1) the sexual identity of the two partners? Or is it (2) the commitment and quality of life that is shared by the two partners? Some would say that both of these are part of the definition. But do they have to be? Is #2 dependent upon #1?

What makes marriage sacred? Numerous writers have commented recently that the church did not consider marriage to be a sacrament until the 12th century.[1] The Bible itself surprisingly offers few actual accounts of examples of the "one man/one woman" "sacred" marriage many Christians today see as the norm (as a thought experiment, try to think of important male characters from throughout the Bible whose "one-woman-for-life" marriage is described). The meaning of marriage seems to have been different in different times and places. Thus it is difficult to ascertain one particular model that may be seen as "sacred" for all times and places.

However, we could argue that the best way to support the institution of marriage is to focus on the virtues of fidelity, mutuality, faithfulness, commitment to God and the way of Jesus, and enhancing of the wellbeing of those affected by the relationship. Given the multitudinous failures of opposite-sex marriages to embody such virtues, might those committed to these virtues best make common cause?

Again, if we look at Ilse and Jennifer's relationship, we see an impressive embodiment of these key "sacred" virtues that underlie the ideal of marriage. Their relationship seems to undergird the sanctity of marriage, not undermine it.

WHAT ABOUT THE BIBLE?

The discussion of the Bible's teaching is probably the most contentious of all three of our "debates." Here are just a few thoughts. [I develop these points in more depth in the next two chapters of this book.]

The Bible, on the one hand, contains a great deal of teaching and many stories that indirectly speak to our general theme of affirming (or not) gay marriage. Not least are the teachings and stories that speak about hospitality and God's special concern for vulnerable people. As

[1] For example, Garry Wills, "The Myth About Marriage," *New York Review of Books* blog, May 9, 2012.

well, teachings and stories about human relationality (going back to when God says of Adam that it is not good for this first human being to be alone). We also have teaching and stories about the importance of fidelity in relationships and the problems of socially harmful actions (such as violence, injustice, adultery, abuse in various forms).

On the other hand, the Bible does not say much directly about "homosexuality" (which is not surprising given that the term "homosexuality" itself is a modern term that seems to reflect a modern awareness of affectional orientation and sexual identity). What do we make, though, of the several texts that have typically been seen as providing a basis for generalizing about a biblical mandate to forbid same-sex intimate relationships (and, certainly, same-sex marriage)?

We should notice three things about these texts (the main ones that interpreters focus on are the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18–19, the teaching in Leviticus 18 and 20 against "men laying with men as with women," and Paul's references in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 to problems with same-sex sexual behaviors [1 Timothy 1:10 is derivative from I Corinthians 6 and adds no new information to the issues raised in these texts]): (1) the Bible speaks only of male "homosexuality," (2) the Bible is concerned with various behaviors, not just one "homosexual practice," and (3) the New Testament contains no direct commands to Christians concerning homosexuality.

THE BIBLE SPEAKS ONLY OF MALE "HOMOSEXUALITY"

First, these texts all refer only to males (with the possible exception of Romans 1). The Genesis passage refers to males seeking to gang rape male visitors. Leviticus speaks only of "males laying with males." The particular word used in 1 Corinthians (and 1 Timothy) that is generally seen to allude to homosexual activity literally means "males laying" and is quite likely an allusion to the Leviticus verses. In Romans 1, the mention that certainly refers to homosexual sexual activity refers to "males lusting after other males." The one possible exception, also in Romans 1, that may refer to female/female sexual activity is irresolvably unclear. It speaks of women "exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural" (1:26). What is unclear is whether the "unnatural" refers to the women having intercourse with other women or the women being "consumed with lust" (1:27). If the latter, the issue for Paul is the "consumed with lust" not the same-sex aspect of the behavior.

The general point, then, is that the Bible does not actually seem to speak directly to, for example, Ilse and Jennifer's relationship. It seems to

be concerned with male/male sexual situations, not homosexuality as a general condition. If we are looking for clear teaching that would require churches to withhold affirmation for relationships such as Ilse and Jennifer's, we would expect the teaching straightforwardly to speak of homosexual relations as a class, not simply one subset of possible relations. We would need then to look closer at the specific texts to see what they are concerned with if they aren't making general claims about all possible same-sex situations.

THE BIBLE IS CONCERNED WITH VARIOUS BEHAVIORS, NOT JUST ONE "HOMOSEXUAL PRACTICE"

So, second, when we look at the specific texts we see that they focus on particular problematic practices (plural), not on "homosexual practice" as a general category. A problematic rhetorical move that those who oppose gay marriage make is to use this term "homosexual practice" in the singular, with the implication that all we need to find is a single negative reference to *any* possible same-sex "practice" in order than to conclude that *all* possible "practices" are forbidden.

We would not think of taking such an approach to "heterosexual practice." The Bible contains many more stories and commands that speak against heterosexual sexual behaviors (rape, adultery, promiscuity, disrespect, etc.). No one I know of would generalize from these prohibitions (in command and story) to say that the Bible is against "heterosexual practice."

What happens if we look at the specific texts asking why in each case the negative association is made with male/male sex? What we will find is that in each case the behavior that is in view is behavior that would also be seen as wrong for heterosexual people. That is, the references are not to the same-sexness itself being inherently wrong.

Recognizing that several of these passages are cryptic (another reason not to but much weight on them), we can see that in each case they do refer to behavior that would be equally problematic if it were male/female. In Genesis, it is gang rape. In Leviticus, it is sex outside of marriage and, perhaps, sex that happened in the context of pagan religious rites. In Romans, it is promiscuous sex. And in 1 Corinthians, it is sex linked with economic exploitation (probably prostitution).

So, the Bible does not give us any direct guidance that would determine the churches' affirmation (or not) of Ilse and Jennifer's relationship. If we put much weight on the two starting points I mentioned at the beginning (the goodness of marriage and the call to

hospitality), we would be led to conclude that the Bible does not overcome the inclination toward affirmation.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CONTAINS NO DIRECT COMMANDS FOR CHRISTIANS CONCERNING HOMOSEXUALITY

This conclusion is reinforced by my third point, that the New Testament (our most important source of ethical guidance as Christians) contains no direct command against same-sex sexual intimacy. When we look at the (quite) rare references to same-sex sexual activity, we will actually discover that neither of the two main references (Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6) are in the form of direct commands.

In fact, in both cases, Paul describes the behavior of non-Christians in order to make points that have little or nothing to do with sexual ethics. In Romans, Paul describes the general descent toward violence and injustice that characterizes people who trust in idols rather than in God. He uses the orgies of the Roman elite as an obvious example of this descent. Ironically, in light of how this Romans 1 text is often used in relation to homosexuality, Paul then goes on to challenge his self-righteous Jewish Christian readers that they actually are guilty of the same kind of descent when they point fingers at others.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul confronts wealthy members of the church for their efforts to defraud poorer members of their congregation economically—and to rely on unjust pagan courts to enforce their exploitation. The pagan judges are unjust, in the same way the Corinthians Christians had been before they met Jesus. To make his point, Paul lists sinful behaviors that the pagans are guilty of. This list includes economically exploitative male/male sex.

So, rather than clearly teaching to Christians that they must not be involved in relationships such as Ilse and Jennifer's, the New Testament is actually silent in this regard. So, again, if we are influenced by the affirmation of the goodness of marriage and the call to hospitality, we would be led toward affirmation given the lack of clear biblical teaching to overturn such an inclination.

CONCLUSION

Christians should affirm gay marriage for precisely the same reasons and in the same ways that we affirm heterosexual marriage. We should not think of this as making a special exception that allows this "deviant" behavior as some kind of "concession." Instead, we should think of it as

refusing a double standard that affirms marriage for heterosexuals but refuses such affirmation for homosexuals.

Going back to the beginning of this chapter, we do this because we believe marriage is a good thing. We should want everyone possible to enjoy the benefits of healthy and life-affirming marriage relationships. And we also do this because we believe that as biblical people, our disposition should be to welcome vulnerable people (and we recognize how LGBTQ people have been and continue to be mistreated). And, finally, we have no bases to overturn our disposition toward affirmation. Gay marriage is not inherently harmful. It does not undermine the sanctity of marriage. And it is not condemned by the teaching of the Bible.

5. Does the Bible condemn same-sex intimacy as sin? A thought exercise

[First published in Ruth Conrad Liechty, ed., These Too Are Voices From God's Table: Welcome to the Dialogue, Booklet #7 *(Goshen, IN: The Welcome Committee, 2004), 5-26.]*

How shall Christians attend to the "homosexuality" issue? I write this essay with the belief that we are, metaphorically, stuck in the middle of a rapid stream right now in the churches, and have no choice but to work to move ahead or risk being totally overwhelmed by the current. One (though only one) important element of such an effort to move ahead relates to thinking.

I offer a thought exercise in hopes of fostering more clarity about the issues that are at stake for Christians. I want to focus on what I believe to be a foundational issue in the on-going debate. This is the issue of sin. Is every possible type of relationship that involves sexual intimacy between two people of the same sex by definition sinful?

We have many types of sexual expressions we may call "heterosexual" (e.g., monogamous marriage, coercive sexual intercourse, promiscuity). Likewise, we also have many that we may call "homosexual." I will be concerned mainly with only one type of "homosexual" sexual expression, that which parallels male/female marriage-intimate, covenanted relationships between two people who affirm their own affectional orientation and commit themselves to a long-term relationship.

Recognizing that actual reality contains much more complexity than our labels, I will suggest for the sake of simplicity in this essay that we may see two general ends on the spectrum of ways Christians answer this question about same-sex sexual intimacy being inherently sinful—the "restrictive" perspective and the "inclusive" perspective; that is, "restrictive" and "inclusive" with regard to the participation of gays in Christian churches.

The "restrictive" viewpoint holds that churches should limit the participation of Christians in same-sex intimate relationships. These restrictions could range from total rejection to acceptance only as

participating non-members to restricting the possibility of gays exercising ordained ministry. The "inclusive" viewpoint holds that being in a committed same-sex relationship should have no bearing on one's participation. This perspective would also assert the moral values (such as opposing sexual promiscuity, adultery, and sexual abuse) the church affirms in relation to opposite-sex sexual practices should apply to gays.

The difference between these two perspectives may be boiled down to a difference about whether or not gay sexual intimacy is inherently sinful. Both perspectives accept that Christians engaging in unrepentantly sinful behavior should have their participation in the church restricted in some sense, if only on the level of the church making public affirmations that such behavior is wrong for Christians. Where they disagree is whether every possible gay relationship is by definition sinful behavior.

Acknowledging this distinction between the restrictive and inclusive perspectives does not solve the problem of knowing how to negotiate this crucial disagreement. In the "thought exercise" that follows, I do not intend to provide a surefire solution. Rather, I intend more modestly to pursue one direction of reasoning that could aid a process of discernment and conversation in an attempt to further our efforts to find more resolution on the big issues.

If the key issue is whether gay relationships are inherently sinful or not, we Christians are bound to take the biblical writings seriously and apply them to this question. That is not to say that the Bible alone will solve the problem. The issues are much more complex. But in this one essay, I will only have space to focus on the one important element; does the Bible condemn same-sex intimacy as sin?

OUR STARTING POINT

A crucial element of the discussion has to do with the question of our starting assumptions about where the burden of proof lies. Do we start with the assumption that inclusive people need to prove that gays should be in? Must inclusive people prove that it is okay to be inclusive, overriding the assumption that it probably is not? In this view, we could say, gays start outside the church and must find a basis for getting in.

Or, do we start with the assumption that restrictive people must prove that gays should be out, with restricted participation? Must restrictive people prove why it is okay to be restrictive because it is assumed that it probably is not? In this view, we could say, gays start inside the church and the church must find a basis for restricting their participation.

The 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 point we start from then becomes crucial. 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 gays.

Reasons for putting the burden of proof on those who would be inclusive and say that the churches' default position should be restrictive) include: (1) The Christian tradition has always operated with a restrictive consensus. Restrictiveness is the historic position of the church. (2) The Christian community is called on to oppose 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 reading of the Bible makes it clear that the Bible is against homosexuality. Believers and non-believers alike tend to assume that the Bible takes this stance.

Reasons for putting the burden of proof on the other side and say that the church's default position should be inclusive include: (1) Jesus modeled inclusiveness. His treatment of people labeled as "sinners" in his world parallels how the church should relate to vulnerable and ostracized people in our day. (2) The Old Testament teaches that the community of faith has a special responsibility to care for vulnerable people such as 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.

For what follows, I will start with an inclusive assumption. The Bible's message of God's special concern for vulnerable people (highlighted especially in God's acts to liberate the Hebrew slaves from Egypt; the Law's commands to pay special attention to the needs of those on society's margins; the prophets' critique of social injustice; and Jesus's welcome to people excluded by the religious structures) support starting with a sense that a strong case must be made for overriding the Bible's bias in favor of vulnerable people in order to conclude that the churches should take a restrictive stance.

Taking this starting point need not be irreconcilable with restrictive conclusions. If the case for the restrictive view is valid—for example, if the Bible clearly condemns same-sex intimacy as sin—this case should be able to show that our bias in favor of vulnerable people needs to be overridden in the case of the churches' response to gay Christians. Those with a restrictive perspective should be willing to show how their

argument overcomes a benefit of the doubt in favor of inclusiveness—and does not simply rely on unexamined anti-gay prejudice.

What do we find if we examine the biblical teaching asking if it provides clear and persuasive bases for the restrictive position? Is there a clear basis for overturning the inclusive assumption? Focusing a bit more narrowly, do the "core texts" that explicitly mention homosexuality provide a clear basis for overriding the default inclusivist position?

We certainly also need to look at other issues, most centrally the question of whether biblical teaching related to marriage and creation would provide such a basis, and I will discuss this issue in an appendix to this essay. However, none of the texts related to the marriage/creation issue speak of "homosexuality" and none of the "core texts" on "homosexuality" refer to creation/marriage in a clear and direct way.

Since the question of whether present-day gays are actively sinning seems to be the most basic issue in dispute, then the focus of our investigation should be on that issue. We need to focus on the alleged bases for saying that they are. If the Bible clearly teaches that gays are sinning, that may be enough for someone with a conservative biblical hermeneutic to override the pro-inclusiveness benefit of the doubt. If such clarity is not forthcoming, then the case for the restrictive perspective will be much more difficult to make.

In what follows, 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 same-sex covenanted relationships? I will take a direct approach to the Bible. If one follows a conservative reading strategy, will one find clear bases to assert that the Bible condemns same-sex intimacy as sin. To answer this question, we need to ascertain whether the "condemnation" is explicitly expressed. This question can be answered only by considering the texts that have been cited as directly speaking to the issue.

I will focus on the six passages seen to speak directly to same-sex sexuality. These include (1) the story of Abraham and Lot, Sodom and Gomorrah, in Genesis 18–19; (2) a similar story in Judges 19; (3) Leviticus 18–20, the Holiness Code of legislation for Israel's practice; (4) Romans 1:18-32, with its well-known connection between idolatry and sexuality; (5) the list of sins that often is understood to contain reference to same-sex sex in 1 Corinthians 6; and (6) a similar list in 1 Timothy 1.

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.

OLD TESTAMENTS TEXTS

Genesis 18:1–19:29. Genesis 18 and 19 contain two contrasting accounts of hospitality. In juxtaposing these two accounts—Abraham's hosting of the visitors from God and 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.[1] 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 under-score 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.[2]

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. 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 seems to be domination over vulnerable outsiders, not same-sex sexuality.[3]

Genesis 18–19 tells us nothing about same sex affectional orientation, same-sex loving relationships, or even about alleged ancient Near Eastern revulsion regarding what 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

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[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis,* Interpretation Biblical Commentaries (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 163.

[2] Terance E. Fretheim, "Genesis," in Leander Keck, ed., *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 468.

[3] Geroge Edwards, *Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), 25.

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.[4]

Judges 19:1-22. This interpretation of Genesis 18–19 correlates with Judges 19:1-22. George Edwards argues that 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.[5]

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 gang 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."

Restrictive scholars do not as a rule ground their position on this passage. Stanley Grenz is typical in admitting that at most Genesis 19 refers to "violent homosexual rape," not "homosexual relationships between consenting adults."[6] However, Robert Gagnon does differ with Grenz. Though he goes into great detail on the Sodom and Gomorrah story, Gagnon nonetheless ignores the broader context of Genesis 18-19's concern with Abraham's contrast with Sodom and does not engage the notion that the implication that the key issue is hospitality, not sexuality.

Gagnon does not consider stories of men seeking to rape women (e.g., the tragic story of King David's children) as relevant to discerning the moral legitimacy male/female covenanted relationships. So, he fails to consider that similarly stories of men seeking to rape men are not relevant to the moral legitimacy of same-sex covenanted relationships.

Leviticus 18–20. The Book of Leviticus centers on the need for Israelites to maintain clear distinctiveness from surrounding cultures.

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[4] Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 49.

[5] Edwards, *Gay/Lesbian,* 35-38.

[6] Stanley Grenz, *Welcome But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 40.

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, called the Holiness Code, 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."

In Leviticus 19, Israel's calling to be God's holy nation is given concrete shape. The people are called to be holy—just as God is holy (19:3). In 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" (19:9-10); do not lie or steal (19:11); do not withhold the laborer's wages (19:13); treat the deaf and blind kindly (19:14); do not slander (19:16); respect the elderly (19:32); and be inclusive of aliens (19:33-34). We may sum the teaching up (as Jesus did) with 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord."

The core identity of Israel as a distinctive people of God centers on concern for all members of the community, especially the vulnerable ones, that they may function as community members. The legislation concerning sexual practices must be seen in the 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.[7] In Leviticus 18, the focus on differentiating Israelite culture from other 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, "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). 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.

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

[7] Baruch Levine, *Leviticus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 117, 123.

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.

Why specifically would the command that the Israelite male "shall not lie with a male as with a woman" be included here and what might this command be referring to? This is a cryptic 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 to male/male sex.

Some scholars argue that we should assume that behind these prohibitions of male/male sex is a Hebrew worldview that simply saw "homosexuality" as inherently wrong. Hence, there was no need to say why.[8] However, if we do not assume that this is the case and instead ask for evidence, we find little to indicate that the Hebrews viewed "homosexuality" as inherently wrong. There is no mention of male/male or female/female sexual relations elsewhere in the Old Testament.

From the immediate context in Leviticus 18 and 20, we may see that the problem with male/male sex here is in large part based on the problem of "wasted seed." This would explain why we see only male/male sex mentioned and nothing about female/female sex. Since we are given no details about why these practices were forbidden, 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).

Leviticus 18–20 contain numerous other prohibitions that are rarely if ever understood by Christians to be determinative for Christian ethics. For example, we also find prohibitions of male/female sexual intercourse during menstruation (18:19), wearing clothes made with more than on kind of fiber (19:19), wearing tattoos (19:28), and planting more than one type of grain in a single field (19:19). Christians in the present rarely cite these as proof that the Bible "condemns" these practices once and for all.

The reasons for the prohibition of male/male sex in Leviticus 18–20 seem to be context specific. Though numerous writers who argue that the Bible indeed condemns "homosexuality" claim that the Leviticus

[8] For example, Christopher R. Seitz, *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 332, and Marion L. Soards, *Scripture and Homosexuality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 57.

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 condemns some sort of male/male sex. But in the absence of clear evidence for seeing this condemnation as universalizable, have no basis to generalize from these two cryptic references. These verses at the most give us a reason to say that the Bible condemns male/male sex in the context of concern for wasting seed (just as it condemns sexual intercourse during menstruation) and for mirroring 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 issues in Leviticus might be, they do not appear to be in-principle condemnation of all same-sex sexual intimacy.

Finally, the obscurity of the prohibition of male/male sex counts against using it as strong evidence that "the Bible condemns same-sex intimacy 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.

NEW TESTAMENT TEXTS

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 role 1:18-32 plays in that broader argument. And, third, I will discuss the significance the reference to same-sex sex has for Paul's discussion.

Debates over the meaning of Romans 1 dominate biblically oriented discussions of "homosexuality." What renders these discussions deeply unsatisfactory 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 propose 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.

For Paul, 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 act unjustly toward their fellow human beings as 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 argues as follows: Human beings outside the covenant live unjustly, deserving 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). Hence, we must conclude, 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 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 make his central point—religious people too are just as much under the power of sin. 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 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; the sins that arise with religiosity are 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 in two ways. 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 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. Paul writes of this process 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.

This passage, though, 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 does not center on same-sex sexuality, he does seem to see it as in some sense characteristic of the worst of pagan injustice. But we are limited in our quest to know why Paul chose this particular expression of sinfulness by the lack of other passages in the New Testament that could help us out. If Paul reflects widespread Christian assumptions about the inherently sinful nature of all possible forms of same-sex sexual relations, we simply do not have any concrete evidence for that (the only possible direct 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 Romans one, though, that hint at what Paul may have had in mind in using the example he does, especially when combined with some extra-biblical historical knowledge.

The entire section, 1:18-32, is concerned with injustice. The type of sexuality to which Paul refers here should 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 arise in the context of the broader elaboration of injustice that is associated with trusting in things rather than 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. David Fredrickson argues 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.[9]

Paul's setting provides clues about what he may have had in mind. At the time he wrote, the sexual outrages of recent Roman emperors had scandalized many in Rome. He would likely have seen these as reflecting the worst of pagan culture. Paul's readers in Rome could easily have connected his general comments in Romans one with what they knew about Caligula and Nero. Neil Elliot points out that among those who assassinated Emperor Caligula was an officer he had sexually humiliated who stabbed Caligula several times in the genitals. Perhaps this event is echoed in Paul's words in 1:27: "Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their persons the due penalty of their error."[10]

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.'"[11]

"Surely it is reasonable to suppose, against this context," Elliott argues, "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 exaggerates 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."[12] We may be confident that Paul did not have pagan morality as

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[9] David Fredrickson, "Natural and Unnatural Use in Romans 1:24-27: Paul and the Philosophic Critique of Eros," in David L. Balch, ed., *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 199-207.

[10] Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 194.

[11] Elliott, *Liberating,* 194-5.

[12] Elliott, *Liberating,* 195.

a whole in mind in chapter one, because in chapter two he makes it clear that some people outside the covenant ("uncircumcised") are indeed fully capable of keeping the law (2:27).

Romans 1:18-32 does not provide direct evidence that "the Bible condemns same-sex intimacy 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. As well, to use this passage as a basis for judging the behavior of Christians in same-sex loving relationships reverses the role they play in Paul's overall argument. Paul seeks in 1:18–3:20 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 paganism has to do with injustice, people hurting other people, not with covenanted, loving, mutual partnerships.

The male/male sex Paul had in mind 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 most probably refers to female participation in such sex, whether with men or with 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 all same-sex intimacy as sin."

1 Corinthians 6:1-11 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Most restrictive writers discuss the 1 Corinthian text much more than 1 Timothy, assuming that the latter simply reiterates what is in mind with 1 Corinthians 6:9. In the treatment of 1 Corinthians, almost never do the analyses take seriously the broader context for that verse. However, we must consider the points Paul addresses in the section 6:1-11 in order to understand what he then has in mind with his cryptic reference to male/male sex in 6:9.

1 Corinthians 6 begins with a charge that some in the Corinthian church take legal action toward others in the church. In 6:7-8 Paul writes of defrauding, indicating that the conflicts had to do with economics. Paul's angry that the church does not take care of its own business, and he speaks harshly of the Corinthians relying upon "unbelievers" to settle their disputes. Earlier Paul refers to the courts of the unbelievers as unjust (6:1). Richard Hays suggests, "When the Corinthian Christians take one another to court, they are declaring primary allegiance to the pagan culture of Corinth rather than to the community of faith."[13]

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[13] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation Biblical Commentaries (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 93.

The court system in the Empire favored the wealthy over the poor. Corinthian Christians initiating the court actions may have been wealthy aiming the suits 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 his concern is not with sexuality. Rather, he chastises the Corinthian Christians for taking each other to "secular" courts, using unjust nonbelievers to buttress their own injustice. He means in 6:9-10 to emphasize 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 ones] who use the courts to settle their property disputes in favor of the wealthy.

Justice is central to Paul's point here. Because of 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–and Paul uses the example of the injustice of "pagans" to challenge his Christian readers to faithfulness.

Nonetheless, as with Romans 1, debates concerning the application of 1 Corinthians 6 to "homosexuality" focus on the meaning of specific words without paying attention to the wider context. Following the common English translations that use "homosexuals" and "sodomites," some scholars conclude that Paul has in mind here a general condemnation of "homosexuality."[14] I argue below that these are not adequate translations; 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.

Paul intends in 6:1-11 to challenge the Corinthian Christians to quit taking their internal disputes to secular courts—these courts are not places of justice but of injustice. He gives his "vice list" in 6:9 not to tell his Christians don't do this or that; rather he gives this list to illustrate the injustice of the pagans in order to underscore why the Christians shouldn't us the courts.

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[14] E.g., see Thomas Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 96.

Still, we do have these references in 1 Corinthians 6:9. The NRSV translates the Greek words *malakos* as "male prostitutes" and *arsenokoites* as "sodomites." However, the meanings of these words are far from clear. Paul simply gives a list of examples of injustices characteristic of pagan judges. He does not describe *how* any of these examples are problematic.

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.[15] 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 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*, while more obscure than *malakos*, more likely has overt 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. Numerous scholars suggest that Paul himself may well have coined this term, combining two words from the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 20:13. According to Donald Wold, Paul "pulled together two terms used in the Leviticus text: *arseno-* ('male') and *-koitai* ('sexual intercourse'). Paul creates this compound word accurately to capture the meaning he sought-the active partner in the homosexual act."[16]

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" goes far beyond the evidence. There is no parallel use anywhere in 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.

Dale Martin surveys the scattered uses of *arsenokoites* in the second century and concludes that it tends to be used in vice lists in the contexts of other terms dealing with economic injustice or exploitation. Such usage fits 1 Corinthians 6. Martin concludes, *arsenokoites* "seems to have

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[15] Dale B. Martin, "*Aresnokoites* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences," in Robert L. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 118-19.

[16] Donald Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 189-90.

referred to some kind of economic exploitation by means of sex, perhaps but not necessarily homosexual sex. Sibylline Oracle 2.70-77 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.'"[17]

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 likely has a similar meaning in 1 Timothy. For both, the vices listed tend toward violations of justice, not of rules governing sexual conduct for those otherwise living just lives. If the lists refer to sex at all, it likely condemns exploitative sex used for economic purposes—as an expression of injustice. These texts do not show that "the Bible condemns same-sex intimacy as sin." Neither speaks directly about same-sex intimacy at all.

CONCLUSION

Our question has been whether these few texts speak clearly enough to conclude "the Bible condemns same-sex sex as sin." In looking at each of the key texts, we find reasons to doubt that they support such a conclusion.

The story of Sodom underscores the importance of hospitality toward people in need. The problem with the Sodomites' action lies in their inhospitality, expressed through their brutal intent to gang rape their city's guests, not in their being "homosexual."

Leviticus 18–20 contains the Bible's only direct prohibition of male/male sexual expression. 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 since this text does not speak to female/female sexual expression. Likely this prohibition reflects (1) a concern with "wasting male seed," given the premium ancient peoples placed on population growth in an environment where life was very fragile and (2) a concern that Israelites remain distinct from "Canaanite" religious practices. It makes sense to understand Leviticus to address some contextual issues rather than to be issuing a 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

[17] Martin, "*Arsenokoites,*" 120.

Paul had in mind most likely was the kind of excess characteristic of the worst of the Roman emperors. Mention of females in Romans 1:26 likely refers 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 to be what Paul had in mind.

Like Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 describes 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 the Corinthians for relying on secular courts for resolving their conflicts. He tells them, don't go to the courts run by unjust unbelievers. He then gives a list of vices that characterize these unjust unbelievers. This list tends toward exploitative behavior, especially of an economic sort. Included are two obscure words that may have sexual connotations. However, the context makes it likely that if they do, Paul had in mind exploitative sex, not same-sex intimacy in general.

So, the evidence supports the conclusion that the Bible does not "condemn same-sex intimacy as sin." Hence, the restrictive perspective loses much of its basis. Where might this leave the churches? It would appear that we do not have clear bases for dogmatic conclusions.

I hope for two outcomes for Mennonites. The first is to recognize that we need on-going, open, and safe discernment processes where we recognize the diversity that currently exists within our denomination. The diversity runs too deep and too wide for us to find unanimity on the inclusive/restrictive debate in the near future. Hence, our biggest immediate challenge is to find a way to step back from fearfulness and threats to break fellowship and listen to each other.

The second outcome is movement toward a more congregational polity, recognizing that membership issues should be decided on the congregational level. On the "homosexual issue" especially, given the complexity of the arguments and diversity of conclusions throughout the denomination, the most legitimate context for discernment is the face-to-face, directly accountable level of the local congregation.

APPENDIX: THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON MARRIAGE

Many writers representing the "restrictive" perspective argue that part of their basis for arguing that "the Bible condemns same-sex intimacy as sin" is their understanding of the Bible's normative portrayal of male and female marriage. I would like to reflect on this argument a bit more.

Stanley Grenz asserts that the importance of marriage is built into creation itself according to the Genesis one and two accounts. This is

God's means to populate the earth ("be fruitful and multiply") and to provide for human companionship. Departure from this norm, thus, threatens the very fabric of human community. It is at this point that Jesus's teaching is understood to speak most directly to sexuality issues. Jesus directly quotes from Genesis in asserting the centrality of opposite-gender marriage to be 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-gender marriage relationships.[18]

This point about the normativity of opposite-gender marriage lays at the heart of many restrictive writings on our topic. However, the applicability of this point must be challenged for several reasons:

(1) To use 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. 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. So, the restrictive writers are using texts that make particular, contextual, points to speak authoritatively about altogether different points.

(2) Logically, believing that the biblical norm is procreative sex between males and females in the context of monogamous marriage does not necessarily force one to believe that other expressions of sexuality are wrong or threaten that norm. Our churches now accept as morally legitimate some forms of non-procreative sex (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 sex) is inherently threatening to the norm.

(3) Restrictive writers, in drawing upon what they see as a normative biblical view of marriage, ignore the Bible's portrayal of marriage in varied ways. An example is the biblical portrayal of polygamy as a norm for marriage throughout the Old Testament. The New Testament never overtly rejects that relationship pattern. The Bible also seems to assume a strongly patriarchal notion of marriage, in which wives are essentially thought of as their husband's property.

So, the view of many restrictive writers concerning marriage (one man/one woman, relating as equals) is clearly not 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

[18] Grenz, *Welcome*, 103-5.

over time. If this is the case, one does not reject biblical authority or the order of creation simply by questioning 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 fluidity of understandings of marriage. Understandings of marriage are 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.

(5) Since 2004, when this essay was written, a sea change has occurred in the United States (and elsewhere) with the legalization of same-sex marriage. Many such marriages have shown themselves to be healthy and life affirming. In the end, probably the main reason the American courts affirmed the legal legitimacy of same-sex marriage was the failure of its opponents to provide persuasive evidence that such marriages are harmful. So, the practical experience of people in same-sex marriages has provided concrete evidence for the failure of the restrictive argument against its validity.

For all these reasons, we are led to conclude that the biblical perspective on marriage does not provide clear bases for "condemning same-sex intimacy as sin."

6. A biblical theology of welcome

[Adapted from a lecture given at Oak Grove Mennonite Church, Smithville, Ohio, January 18, 2015]

In this chapter, I will explain why I believe Christian churches should take what I call an "inclusive"[1] rather than "restrictive"[2] approach to Christians who are in—or who are open to being in—committed intimate relationships with partners of the same sex (for simplicity's sake, I will use the term "gay"). In a nutshell: I support non-discrimination—gay Christians and straight Christians should seek to adhere to the same set of expectations concerning intimate relationships.

MORAL ANALOGIES

Let's imagine several "moral analogies" for how we might think of gay marriage.

(1) The least accepting view is that gay marriage is a choice to sin by people who could easily choose otherwise. *The analogy could be that gay marriage is like adultery.* It's simply wrong and the person sinning is fully culpable even for wanting to sin.

(2) A more moderate view is that gay marriage is a wrong choice for one who has an unchosen affectional orientation toward people of one's same sex. *The analogy could be that same-sex marriage is like alcoholism.* We tend to see the proclivity toward alcoholism to be something that is innate for some people and as such not morally wrong. But the choice to act on that proclivity is sinful. Likewise, one who is attracted to people of the same sex should not act on that and become sexually involved.

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[1] The view that gay Christians should be accepted as full participants in the churches with the acceptance of their intimate relationships being understood in the same way as acceptance of heterosexual intimate relationships—and that gay marriage should be affirmed in the churches.

[2] The view that limits should be placed on the participation of gay Christians due to their sexual identity—and that the churches should not affirm gay marriage.

(3) A more accepting view is that same-sex attraction is problematic, not the ideal, but not inherently morally wrong. Given that it is deep-seated and, for some, unchangeable, church and society should accept the validity of gay marriage because marriage is a good thing that should not be withheld from people who are not suited for "normal" opposite-sex partnerships. *The analogy could be that same-sex affectional orientation is like a birth defect* (such as being born without sight). The task is to work at living as full a life as possible in face of the defect. So, if not an ideal state, being "afflicted" with same-sex affectional orientation need not disqualify one from finding a marriage partner and living a pretty normal life.

(4) The most accepting view sees same-sex attraction as completely morally neutral, just as is opposite-sex attraction. *The analogy could be that same-sex affectional orientation and gay marriage are like being left-handed*. Most people are strictly right-handed, a few are strictly left-handed, and some others are a mixture. Handedness is simply part of who we are. We don't understand it very well, but we have learned that it is unchangeable for people at the farthest ends of the "handedness" spectrum.

In my view, left-handedness is the best analogy. We should approach sexual ethics as being the same for heterosexual people, homosexual people, and bi-sexual people. The issues will be how to encourage intimate relationships that are life-giving and to challenge behavior that is not life-giving—with the same expectations for mutuality, fidelity, and respect for all people in intimate relationships. Why do I think this?

THE CALL TO HOSPITALITY

In terms of their mission, Christian churches should take as their starting point a general stance of welcome or invitation or hospitality toward all people. The church exists for the sake of making a home for people from all nations who seek God. This assumption of welcome is a core theme throughout the Bible.

The vision for the community of God's in the Old Testament law codes (the "Torah") has at its center a sense that the call to hospitality extended to people within the community who were vulnerable and in need of special care (widows and orphans) along with hospitality toward people from the outside who wanted to be part of the community (so-called "strangers" or "aliens").

Jesus re-emphasized this call to welcome, to bless all the families of the earth and to give special care to vulnerable people in the community, including people labeled as "sinners." Jesus' welcome to sinners included welcoming both people who had violated Torah (for example, the woman caught in adultery, Zacchaeus the tax collector, and the woman

"of the city" who washed his feet) and people who were inappropriately labeled "unclean" (such as poor people, lepers, or menstruating women).

The Bible does place a high priority on the need for the faith community to sustain a clear identity as God's people—so we should resist forces within the community that compromise that identity. Not everything goes, but we limit hospitality only in order to serve the vocation of welcome. We are not called to an identity that places the highest virtue on purity or being different just to be different. We are called to an identity that recognizes that purity and difference are to serve welcome and hospitality.

In relation to same-sex intimacy, same-sex marriage, and "homosexuality" in general, the fundamental call to hospitality does not fully resolve the issues. However, we should see the call to hospitality as the starting point. There must be clear evidence that we should not be inclusive in relation to a specific situation in order to withhold welcome.

To help us think more concretely about the possibilities of limiting welcome, let's consider two actual women to whom I will give the pseudonyms "Ilse" and "Jennifer" who are married to each other. They are life-long Anabaptist Christians who followed the same path the churches expect for heterosexual couples—courtship, counseling, discernment, marriage, commitment to fidelity, open to the possibility of children, continued involvement in a local congregation, and offering their gifts to the churches' ministries. If we are to be restrictive, we have to show why we should be so in relation to this couple.

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Most of the theological literature in relation to same-sex intimacy until quite recently did not focus on marriage. Major books from a "restrictive" perspective that urged Christians not to "normalize" "homosexuality" could comfortably repeat stereotypes about sexual promiscuity and short-term relationships being the norm especially among gay men (and probably among lesbians as well).

It was easy to equate "homosexuality" with obvious "sexual immorality" since gays and lesbians were, it seemed, not involved in committed, long-term relationships—and probably did not really desire to be. So in the literature, we encountered widespread use of terms such as "the gay lifestyle" and "homosexual practice" (note the singular) as if there was only one "lifestyle" or "practice" and it involved a lot of casual sex with multiple partners.

In recent years, though, we see a remarkably successful movement toward legalizing and affirming gay marriage. We now know of many

committed same-sex partnerships that have existed for decades and reflect similar patterns as opposite-sex marriages. So, we face this question: Is it possible to construct a theology of marriage that does not discriminate against same-sex couples? The evidence suggests at least some such couples are capable of sustaining long-term partnerships in practice. Can we come up with a theology that fits the practice?

Understandings of marriage have evolved a great deal over the generations. Christians in the 21st century typically affirm that many of our convictions about marriage are shaped by biblical themes. However, understandings of marriage have evolved, inspired by the Bible but also adding additional elements. And deleting some elements—such as polygamy and patriarchy.

The list I offer here of many of the main elements of Christian marriage is gathered from general understandings and impressions of what Christians think today. What are the generally accepted elements of a Christian understanding of marriage? I'll suggest seven:

(1) It is based on shared Christian values and commitments. Both partners have similar convictions about God, the meaning of life, sources for faith, vocation, commitment to a faith community, ethical values, and other aspects of the life of faith.

(2) It is centered on promises of fidelity, commitment, and monogamy. In entering the marriage covenant, both partners agree to be faithful to each other, to share life together, and to work at their disagreements in constructive ways.

(3) The relationship is accountable to a faith community for support and encouragement. Being "married in the church" is an act that provides the community's blessing to the relationship and involves a mutual commitment where the couple commits to the community and the community commits to the couple.

(4) The relationship is considered to be permanent—as Jesus commanded. We say, "until death do us part." An acceptance of the permanence of marriage provides more incentive for partners to work out their differences and resolve their conflicts.

(5) The relationship is to be characterized by companionship and intimacy. The creation account in Genesis 2 taught that the original human person's loneliness was identified as the major reason for the creation of a second human being made out of the "rib" of the first—for companionship.

(6) Marriage provides the context for the birth and nurture of children. Human beings, of all species, are born vulnerable and needing help. We learn how to navigate life over time; we need family to protect and guide us.

(7) The Bible presents marriage as being an arrangement made between males and females. Genesis refers to marriage being made up of one male and one female. Jesus quotes this in his discussion of marriage.

WHAT ABOUT EXCEPTIONS?

We should note right away, though, that both the Bible itself and Christian practice (especially currently) allow for some exceptions to the norms implied in this list. When such exceptions are made, Christians generally do not assume that the exceptions invalidate the norms—marriage is defined in terms of these seven points even if in some cases not every single one of the points on the list is present.

So, for example, one of the passages where Jesus quotes Genesis two in describing marriage as between a male and a female (Matt 19:1-9) has as its direct point the allowing for divorce under certain circumstances, compromising on the norm of permanence. The Apostle Paul also allows for divorce under certain circumstances in 1 Corinthians 7:10-15.

Most Christian groups in North America today are pretty accepting of divorce and remarriage. Increasingly, in fact, it is seen as unremarkable for pastors and other church leaders to be in their second (or more) marriage even while their first spouse survives. Yet, the churches still affirm the permanence of marriage as the ideal and expectation.

The Mennonite Confession of Faith defines marriage in Article 19 as being for one man and one woman for life. The article's note cites the Gospel of Mark's version of Jesus' statement about marriage that actually does not allow for divorce or remarriage at all. But in the commentary, the Confession hints at flexibility on this point and, in fact, Mennonite practice is becoming increasingly accepting of divorce and remarriage.

Even though the Genesis one passage implies that the main purpose of marriage is procreation ("be fruitful and multiply"), Christians tend to accept childless marriage as fine. Certainly, marriage between people older than childbearing age is seen as acceptable as is marriage when one of the partners is infertile.

Our questions, then, are how much leeway do we have in thinking about how we view marriage in the churches today. What exceptions to traditional "one-man-one-woman-for-life-with-children" norms for marriage do we accept? More specifically, to return to the marriage I just mentioned, the partnership of "Ilse" and "Jennifer." How do we think of their marriage in relation to our list of the elements of Christian marriage and our list of exceptions to the standard picture of marriage?

The first five points on the list of elements of Christian marriage clearly are present in Ilse and Jennifer's relationship (shared Christian

convictions, commitment to fidelity, connection with a faith community, permanence, and companionship). The sixth point, having and nurturing children is potentially present either through artificial fertilization or adoption. Only the seventh point is missing.

The churches today make exceptions to our norm for "Christian marriage" and bless second marriages for divorced people and bless childless marriages. Why can't churches also make an exception to our norm for "Christian marriage" and bless marriages between people of the same sex that include the other elements (as with Ilse and Jennifer)?

One reason why churches should be willing to make this kind of exception is our starting point of the call to hospitality. We should not put stumbling blocks in the way of people of faith such as Ilse and Jennifer by asking them to choose between participation in a faith community and sharing their lives together. We should be especially sensitive to their situation because they are part of a vulnerable population that has been treated with hostility and violence.

Another reason why churches should make this kind of exception is the *high* value that Christians place on marriage. We recognize that marriage can be a good thing, a very good thing:

- It is virtually universal among human beings, seen as valuable in all cultures
- It can be important for people's emotional health
- It helps meet our needs for intimacy and companionship
- It provides pleasure—physically, socially, emotionally
- It makes monogamy more possible
- It can enhance physical health
- It provides economic benefits
- It is a context for spiritual community
- It gives a context for child-rearing—note especially the crucial importance of healthy environments for early childhood

I do accept , for the sake of my argument, that we could still decide that it is necessary to withhold this embrace of same-sex marriage. It would be necessary if the evidence that gay marriage is wrong is too clear. The benefit of the doubt is toward embrace for the reasons I've given, but that benefit of doubt may be overcome with clear evidence. The main rationale for withholding the churches' affirmation of Ilse and Jennifer's relationship would be the belief that the Bible clearly teaches that such relationships are sinful and not to be accepted as morally legitimate for Christians. So, that's what I'll focus on. Does the Bible clearly teach this?

WHAT "PRACTICES" ARE WRONG?

In much of the literature and in most discussions of which I have been part, the basis for arguing against gay marriage is the belief that the Bible does provide clear teaching against "homosexual practice"—clear enough to overcome this benefit of the doubt in favor of welcome.

Notice the use of the singular, "homosexual practice," in the language the restrictive side tends to use. "Homosexual practice" implies that there is only one issue at stake, there is only one "practice" common to all "homosexual" people.

It seems that what actually matters, then, for this view, is that the people involved are "homosexual," not what the specific "practice" might be. Hence, we do not actually need to pay much attention to the specific issues that are spoken to in each the particular biblical texts. We need not try to understand the particular context of each text in order to understand what kind of practice is being addressed. In this view, all we need to know is that the text refers to "*homosexual* practice"—that's enough to support forbidding all possible same-sex intimate relationships (including Ilse/Jennifer).

My high view of the Bible, though, challenges me to pay close attention to its content. I believe that we must pay close attention to each text. This is especially true if we accept the presumption toward hospitality in general, and if we accept that we must have strong reasons to deny the good of Christian marriage to Ilse and Jennifer. That is, Christians should carefully consider the evidence—not just assume that the Bible calls every "homosexual practice" sinful.

Please note first that the Bible acknowledges a variety of "heterosexual practices." Some ways heterosexual people act sexually are moral and some immoral. That we have immoral heterosexual practices does not invalidate all heterosexual practices. We don't assume a single "heterosexual practice" that encompasses all instances of opposite-sex sexual intimacy.

I suggest we think similarly about "homosexual" sexual intimacy. We should recognize that there are a variety of "practices" and not think one "homosexual practice" encompasses all instances of same-sex sexual intimacy. That is, we should not impose a kind of double standard where we accept distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate sexual practices for straight people but not for gays.

Here's a short list of some heterosexual practices—both morally appropriate and morally inappropriate:

Sexual practice:
(1) Sex within marriage
(2) Affection in dating and courtship
(3) Affection in friendship

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(4) Intercourse before marriage
(5) Casual intercourse
(6) Promiscuity
(7) Adultery
(8) Coerced sex
(9) Prostitution

Christians affirm sexual intimacy for heterosexuals in the context of marriage, and also affirm limited intimacy in the context of dating and courtship (#1-2). We also affirm affection in friendship (#3). Traditionally, Christians also believe that sexual intimacy of the type in the list below the line (#4-9) is not morally appropriate. So some "practices" are good, some are immoral.

How would we think about this list in relation to same-sex intimacy? We could agree that all behavior below the line (#4-9) is immoral in same-sex contexts just as it is in opposite-sex contexts. We would probably also agree that affection in friendship (#3) between people of the same sex is morally appropriate.

The debate concerns the top two "practices" for gays (#1-2). People on the restrictive side and people on the inclusive side could agree that we should have some kind of line that differentiates between sexual practices that are morally appropriate and those that are not. And we could agree on where that line should fall in relation to "heterosexual practices." So the issue need not be a debate about whether sexual behavior should not be evaluated morally or whether we can have such a line differentiating moral from immoral sexual practices at all.

This is the issue: Should we have the same line for "homosexual practices" that we have for "heterosexual practices." Or, should we have a double standard—one for each orientation? The main rationale people on the restrictive side give for affirming the need to have such a double standard is that this is what the Bible teaches. So, what do we learn from the Bible when we look at it carefully?

KEY BIBLICAL TEXTS

As discussed in the previous chapter ("Does the Bible condemn same-sex sexual intimacy as sin?"), I believe that when looked at carefully and

in their appropriate contexts, the biblical passages that often are used to support that restrictive approach actually are not incompatible with an inclusive approach. I will briefly summarize that discussion here.

Genesis 18–19 and Judges 19 are stories about hospitality refused, with that refusal expressed in acts of violence—gang-rape and, in Judges, murder. In both cases, terrible consequences resulted from the violations of hospitality. These stories, when read together, reinforce the centrality of the call to hospitality. Abraham's model of faithfulness contrasts not only with the heathen Sodomites in Genesis but also with the unfaithful Israelites in Judges 19. The negative example of Israelite inhospitality is meant to reinforce the centrality of hospitality for people who would be faithful. There is nothing here that supports inhospitality toward people such as Ilse and Jennifer. The particular "homosexual practice" here is coerced sex, not a committed relationship between mutual partners.

Two underlying issues motivate legislation concerning sexual practices in Leviticus 18 and 20: (1) the need to differentiate Israel's way of life from that of the Canaanites and (2) concern about procreation. Leviticus 18 begins by asserting that the Israelites "shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan" (18:3). The main reasons for the prohibition of male/male sex in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 seem specific to the book's setting, not a general rejection of homosexuality (for one thing, they only apply to men). Simply the presence of a single cryptic command in Leviticus is not sufficient to provide a timeless norm for all times. The "homosexual practices" here are casual sex, adultery, and possibly "sacred" prostitution liked with pagan religious rituals.

In the New Testament, the key restrictive texts are Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6. Paul's concern in Romans 1:18–3:20 is to critique judgmentalism, not to foster it. Paul's example of the consequences of pagan idolatry focuses on injustice, people hurting other people, not on covenanted, loving, mutual partnerships. The type of sexual activity associated with injustice and with obsessive lust seems to be what Paul had in mind—not condemning all possible same-sex intimacy as sinful. The "homosexual practices" here are promiscuity and prostitution.

As with Romans one, the central concern of 1 Corinthians 6 has to do with justice and injustice—and Paul uses the example of the injustice of "pagans" to challenge his Christian readers to faithfulness in not taking their internal disputes to unjust secular courts. He simply does not, in either place, focus on constructive ethical guidelines for sexuality, and even less does he center his concern on condemning all possible same-sex intimate partnerships as sinful for Christians. In Paul's list 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 a couple of the words have sexual connotations, they most likely they connote sex of an unjust and exploitative type. The "homosexual practice" here likely is prostitution.

CONCLUSION

If we refer to our list, we will notice that the types of "homosexual practices" refer to in these texts all fit below our line differentiating morally appropriate heterosexual practices from those that are not. The texts refer to "practices" that would also be wrong for heterosexuals: Genesis nineteen refers to coercive sex (#8), Leviticus eighteen and twenty refer to casual sex (#5) and adultery (#7), Romans one refers to promiscuity (#6), and 1 Corinthians six refers to prostitution (#9).

Sexual practice:
(1) Sex within marriage
(2) Affection in dating and courtship
(3) Affection in friendship

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(4) Intercourse before marriage
(5) Casual intercourse [Lev 18; 20]
(6) Promiscuity [Rom 1]
(7) Adultery [Lev 18; 20]
(8) Coerced sex [Gen 18–19]
(9) Prostitution [1 Cor 6]

Just as the existence of heterosexual practices that are immoral does not render all heterosexual practices immoral, the existence of some immoral homosexual practices in the Bible should not lead us to see all homosexual practices as immoral. I would suggest that the sexual intimacy in a relationship such as Ilse and Jennifer's is as likely to be morally valid as that in any healthy heterosexual marriage.

What I've done in this chapter is try to clear away the main reasons for opposing same-sex marriage based on the Bible. If I have been successful, we should move back to the reasons to support it: (1) the Bible's call to hospitality and welcome and (2) the goodness of marriage.

So, I believe that the Bible, especially the message of Jesus, calls the churches to welcome and hospitality. This call inclines Christians to be inclusive with regard to gays and lesbians, with the implication that the churches apply the same moral standards concerning intimate relationships to same-sex partnerships as they do to opposite-sex partnerships.

SECTION THREE: Mennonites

7. Hospitality and faithful community: Why the "gay issue" matters

[First published in Ted Grimsrud, ed., Gay and Lesbian Inclusion as a Peace and Justice Issue. *Welcome to the Dialogue, Booklet #8 (Harrisonburg, VA: The Welcome Committee, 2006), 40-56. The article was adapted from a presentation at the Connecting Families annual retreat, April 16, 2005, Ligonier, Pennsylvania.]*

I have three themes I want to discuss in this article. First, I want to share some biblical and theological reflections; second, to tell some stories; and, third, to point forward. My overall concern is with reflecting on one question: Why does the "gay issue" matter, especially for Christian communities, in particular for Mennonite churches?

For ease of expression, I will use "gay issue" in this article. By this I mean especially the issues that have swirled in our churches for some time now over how we will treat men who love men and women who love women. Whenever I use this term, "gay issue," I mean the so-called gay issue. I actually mean the "anti-gay issue" or the "bigotry issue" or the "failure of hospitality" issue.

THE BIBLICAL IMPORTANCE OF HOSPITALITY

During the past 30 years I have found myself feeling a sense of urgency to try to convince those who don't share my welcoming views that we do have an important issue here in the sense that the status quo is unjust and needs to be rethought. What I have come to realize, though, is those who are comfortable with the status quo (or those who fear it changing) are best served by denying my sense of urgency, by working not to hear my concerns, by stifling conversation and debate.

However, I realize even more that the most serious basis for urgency is not that those of us unhappy with the status quo need to find some way to change it. Rather, I now believe that the urgency has to do with the

very viability of my institutional church, the Mennonite Church USA. That is, when I think about why the "gay issue" matters, I think not so much that it matters for gay people and their friends. It is not that this "issue" is an issue of whether gay people and their friends can somehow persuade the church to let us in and let us have a voice. No, I think more and more it is an issue simply of whether the church is going to retain its living connection with its lord and with its biblical roots.

So, let's look at some things the Bible tells us about what a living connection between God and faith communities is about. I believe this living connection is most about hospitality. And the "gay issue" matters, at least in part, because it is where our church institutions are being severely tested—and too often found wanting.

One of my passions is to make the case that if we do genuinely care about peace and justice in our world today, if we do genuinely care about bringing healing among alienated human beings, if we do genuinely care about being in solidarity with vulnerable people, then we are on the side of the Bible. The Bible, when read as a whole, is a manifesto for justice. The Bible does not belong to the militarists, the punishers, the homophobes, or even the bureaucrats who defend the status quo.

I believe the central message of the Bible may be summarized in this way: God loves the world and its people and grieves the pain and alienation that characterizes so much of human existence. God's love finds expression when human beings love other human beings. God seeks to bring healing to the world through this love for people and among people. The main way God brings healing is by working through communities that know and share God's love. We see this in the crucial story that comes early on. God calls Abraham and Sarah and promises that although Sarah has been unable to bear children, God now will give the couple descendants. And these descendants will bless all the families of the earth. God creates this particular community of the promise in order to use it as a channel to bring healing to the entire world.

The rest of the Bible tells of this community of the promise and argues throughout that God's promise remains alive. The crucial point of interpretation of the Bible arises right here. Why did God establish this community? Is it so that people who know the truth, who are the special elect ones, will be in paradise with God while those outside the promise will weep and gnash their teeth? Or, is it so that these people of the promise might be the channel for God's love, God's blessing to spread to all the families of the earth?

I believe the Bible teaches, when read as a whole, that God calls the community of the promise not to be a place that excludes outsiders for the sake of God blessing the insiders. God calls the community of the

promise so that in the end there will be no insiders and outsiders, but that all may know the healing power of God's love. As self-proclaimed heirs of this promise, are our churches truly channels for healing?

The Bible provides us with clear criteria to measure our communities' faithfulness. Going back to Genesis, the central criterion of faithfulness is the community's hospitality. Practically, in biblical times, human life in a largely harsh, unforgiving physical world was fragile. Desert people need each other; they rely on hospitality from others for their survival. Even more, hospitality takes on a profoundly spiritual dimension. Our relationship with God is shaped by our living hospitably. Communities that refuse hospitality cut themselves off from their life source.

I want briefly to trace this theme in the Bible, giving only a few obvious examples of what I believe can be found in detail throughout both Testaments. I will start with a couple of examples that actually are a little ironic in relation to the "gay issue." Both the Sodom story in Genesis 18–20 and the teaching in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 18–20 are concerned above all with hospitality as defining faithful living in relationship with God.

The Sodom story is actually a hospitality story that contrasts the failure of hospitality in Sodom with Abraham's hospitality as the chosen channel of God's blessing. First the angels visit Abraham prior to going to Sodom. Abraham models what Sodom should have done. He gives the angels a welcome, showing genuine hospitality. After their visit to Abraham, the next place the angels go is to Sodom. Rather than hospitality, they are threatened with rape. This story, thus, holds up Abraham as the model of hospitality in contrast to Sodom. As part of this model, Abraham actually intercedes with God on behalf of Sodom, being so bold as to remind God of God's loving and just character while pleading with God to show mercy to Sodom.

Leviticus 18–20 is a very different kind of literature than the stories of Genesis. These chapters are the heart of the Holiness Code in the Old Testament law. And at the heart of this section, in Leviticus 19, we get a picture of what holiness is, and, it is *not* God punishing those who violate the call to purity.

Leviticus 19 teaches: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (19:2). These are some manifestations of this holiness: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien" (19:9-10). "You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind" (19:13b-14). "When an

alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (19:33-34). At its core, holiness includes hospitality toward the vulnerable people in the community—the poor, the alien, the laborer, the deaf, the blind. Elsewhere we also read of the widow, the orphan, the daughter.

Later on, prophets voice concern. Israel has departed from God's will for their lives. A sure sign of Israel's crises may be seen in the lack of hospitality, the disregarding of the concerns of Torah for the vulnerable members of the community. Probably most forcefully, the prophet Amos makes clear that injustice and inhospitality are sure signs that amidst Israel's apparent prosperity, something is rotten. A catastrophe is coming to the people of Israel, Amos cries, "because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way" (2:6-7). Amos goes on to assert that when the community is so inhospitable, their very worship is sinful. To tolerate such injustice and then turn to God as if it does not matter is the worst of blasphemies.

Catastrophes are visited upon the people. Assyria and Babylon bring ruin to Israel. According to the prophets, though, the deepest problem did not come from these outside enemies but from within. With its kings, its quest for prosperity, its disregard of the true meaning of holiness, the community had departed from its calling. The community was far, far away from being a blessing to the families of the earth—rather, it imitated the worst injustices of the inhospitable nations of the earth. God keeps the community going, though. When Jesus comes onto the scene, the core issue of hospitality surfaces again front and center. For Jesus, the central criterion of faithfulness may be seen in the call to hospitality.

Jesus made a point of showing welcome specifically toward those outside the circle of approved and "pure" religiosity. And this was not simply because he had a soft spot in his heart for strays. Jesus portrayed salvation itself as directly tied to such welcome. One time, Jesus responded to the question about eternal life with an affirmation of following the commandments. When he summarizes them this way—love God and love neighbor—he quotes Leviticus 19. When pushed as to whom the neighbor actually is, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. This story packs an amazing punch when we realize that the hospitality illustrated here (again, being linked directly with salvation) is risky, unconditional, and counter to any kind of boundary line that seeks to separate faithful insiders from outsider "sinners." Remember, the Samaritans were the worst of sinners to Jerusalem-centered Jews.

One other place Jesus directly connects salvation with hospitality.

Matthew 25 tells a parable of the day of judgment, the separation of those who inherit the kingdom and those who are excluded from the kingdom. What is the criterion? "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (25:35-36). When did we do these things for you? "Truly, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:40).

The entire world, so rent by costly hostility, needs examples of healing hospitality. When God called Abraham and Sarah to bless all the families of the earth through the hospitable communities their children would form, this was why. And when Abraham and Sarah's children instead form communities that reinforce hostility, that refuse hospitality, they become a curse rather than a blessing. Jesus himself spoke directly to this choice, hospitality or hostility: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot" (Matt 5:13).

To summarize, the Bible teaches from the start that the authenticity of the communities that have professed their faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel, may be seen most clearly in the quality of their hospitality. By definition, this hospitality is tested most tellingly in relation to vulnerable people, the people who most need it, perhaps, we could even say, the people the communities have the most difficulty welcoming.

I will go on to suggest that sexual minorities, people whose affectional orientations do not fit into the narrow heterosexual mold, today offer our churches an opportunity. Let us see how we are doing. How authentic to the biblical model are our communities? How much are we tending toward hospitality—and how much toward hostility? How truly are our churches serving as channels of salvation? And I will speak from my own experience as a Mennonite over the past 25 years to reflect on some ways our Mennonite churches have fallen short.

HOW ARE MENNONITE COMMUNITIES DOING?

If hospitality lies at the core of our faith, we will want to think about how we are doing. Where are we most challenged? I believe that the "gay issue" among Christians serves as a litmus test concerning hospitality. I will illustrate this "test." How representative might my illustrations might. Is this in general the way our Mennonite churches are? Am I right in suggesting that we are facing a major spiritual crisis? Another question is what can and should we be doing about this problem? If hospitality stands at the core of our faith, if inhospitality toward gays signals a major

spiritual crisis, where does that leave us?

That the Christian churches have failed dismally to offer hospitality to gays and lesbians is a generalization with all too much truth to it. These are a few paragraphs from Louis Crompton's recent book, *Homosexuality and Civilization*:

> During the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas appealed to natural law and called all non-procreative sex acts treasonous rebellion against God. A contemporary English law decreed that "the inquisitors of Holy Church" should seek sodomites to put them to death. These were not idle threats. We know of executions in Switzerland, in Spain, in the Low Countries, in France, and in Italian cities. In Spain, more than a thousand men were tried by the Inquisition for sodomy, and in some years more were executed for sexual than for doctrinal heresy.
>
> Executions also became common under Calvin and his successors in Protestant Geneva, and in the Netherlands a nationwide pogrom was launched so that, as the authorities put it, "God might not punish the iniquity of the land with his terrible judgments." Executions in England clearly result from centuries of campaigning by clergy who called upon the nation to "exterminate the monsters."

I think we may say there are signs of progress in recent years. But make no mistake, we still have Christians in our society who would happily return to the practice of criminalizing same-sex sexual intimacy. The struggle is far from over. Working to make our faith communities places of genuine hospitality remains a challenge.

How about the Mennonite churches? Based on my summary of the biblical message concerning hospitality compared to my experience in our churches, I think our tradition is in crisis if our standard for health is being a biblical people. The signs of the crisis are not only official condemnations of gay Christians in intimate relationships. Remember, the official documents have balancing emphases. People of good conscience supported those documents because of the balance.

Some of you may have noticed Elaine Summers Rich's comments in a recent *Mennonite Weekly Review*: "When I voted for the resolution on sexuality at the General Conference Mennonite Church assembly in Saskatoon, Sask., in 1986, I thought I was voting for continuing to listen to one another in the search for truth. I never dreamed that the resolution would be interpreted as a litmus test for who could or couldn't become a minister" (February 7, 2005, p.8)—or, members, we could add.

The biggest problem lies with how these statements have been used, with process. Promises made in the 1980s that Mennonite churches would have open processes of dialogue and discernment have not been

kept. I have several examples of experiences that seem to me to reveal dynamics that, if widespread, would indicate that we are facing a spiritual crisis among Mennonites. I tell these stories with the intent of stimulating theological reflection more than focusing on these experiences themselves. I want to illustrate an underlying problem. In our churches we tend to short-circuit careful, respectful process and mutual respect and discernment because of our blindness to the importance of hospitality. The "gay issue" helps make this failure more clear.

I will talk about three different types of experiences—complications over pastoral ordination, the ending of employment for gay and lesbian employees of Mennonite institutions, and the disciplining of congregations. My main point in telling these stories is to point toward the breakdown in processes, the lack of care and respect, the ways in which Mennonites have been so quick to short-circuit mutual, patient discernment. I do not mean to emphasize unacceptable outcomes here, rather unacceptable processes that I suggest reflect a spiritual crisis as measured by failures in offering hospitality.

ORDINATION

I began my first pastorate in 1987, just after the Mennonite Church General Assembly approved the Purdue Statement on human sexuality. About a year later, my congregation requested othat I be ordained. I met with the conference leadership committee, and when asked about the Statement, I said it was good, I expected to use it in my work. I especially appreciated the call for on-going talk about these complex issues. When I was asked if there was anything I did not agree with, I said that I was not yet sure what I believed about the statement's assertion that all same-sex sex is sinful. I was still in process, unable to say for sure if I agreed.

One committee member insisted that no one who was uncertain on this issue should be ordained. He would not budge, and thus began a three-year ordeal. Finally, I was ordained, after three conference pastors threatened the conference minister two days before the ordination to take their churches out of the conference if I were ordained. Later, these pastors engineered an attempt at the delegate session to have the delegates reject the Leadership Committee's report, hoping such action would invalidate the ordination. That failed by one vote. Even though the conference had ordained me, I was now suspect. This deep suspicion played a big role in my family's decision to relocate to a different area.

A second crisis came when I signed the "Welcoming Letter" in the *Mennonite Weekly Review* in February 2000 that challenged Mennonites to be more hospitable to gays. I did not know this at the time, but I was the

only ordained person in my conference to sign the letter. No one from conference leadership talked with me about this prior to the following summer, when the conference began disciplinary proceedings against me. When informed of their action, I became a bit testy and asked how they could take such an action without ever talking with me. To their credit, they did relent and actually rescinded their action.

During this time, I was pressured to give up my ordination. I was told if the conference took my ordination I would be fired. I asked if it would matter whether the conference action were unjust. I was told most people who are disciplined think the action is unjust. Since my superior was not in a position to judge the justice of the action, he would have to act simply in terms of whatever action the conference took.

As it turned out, I did receive some support from high places within the conference. I had to meet for a year with a committee of three conference overseers to discuss the Mennonite Confession of Faith. These meetings were actually pretty congenial and at the end of the process I was endorsed by this committee and hence freed from further scrutiny.

My wife, Kathleen Temple, pastoring at the time, did not sign the Letter though she wanted to. She remained low key in the congregation. She withdrew from active involvement in our welcoming support group. She met regularly with her overseer. She met with conference reps and promised not to commit "contrary advocacy." Even though the official conference position stated that the conference is forbidding "contrary advocacy" (that is, public expression of support for gays and lesbians) not asking for "full assent of mind and will," it was made clear in her meeting with conference people that indeed their problem was with her beliefs. When her overseer realized that she was not going to change her beliefs, he reported this to the conference and they began action to take away Kathleen's ordination—based totally at that point on her beliefs—as she had continued to avoid "contrary advocacy."

The timing of events then served to hide that the conference was going to act based on her beliefs. Two friends who were having a union ceremony asked the two of us to be part of the service. We said we could not "perform" the ceremony, but would "participate" in ways that would have nothing to do with the actual vows and committal part of the wedding. This provided the conference cover to claim that the action they took to revoke Kathleen's ordination was because of this ceremony. She was told, resign your ordination quietly or you will have it taken.

Two ironies underscore the process's corruption. First, throughout, Kathleen continually received affirmation from conference leaders that she was doing a very good job as our congregation's pastor. So, what was the ordination about then, if it was not about her serving as our pastor?

They said, you are doing a great job and we hope you continue pastoring, but we are taking your ordination away anyhow.

The second irony was that I, too, "participated" in the ceremony. When I was questioned by my overseer (a different one than Kathleen's), I said that I had understood that what was forbidden was *performing* the ceremony, not participating in any way. I agreed to write a letter of apology saying that I had not realized the conference would have such antipathy toward even participation. With my overseer's support, I submitted this letter and was exonerated. More recently, I heard second-hand that a Conference leader expressed regret that they had not handled Kathleen's situation very well and that he wished they had worked at a solution similar to what happened with me. Sadly, though, he has never told Kathleen this.[1]

DIS-EMPLOYMENT

It seems now to be automatic for Mennonite institutions to dismiss openly gay employees. In one case, a long term and successful employee was confronted and told immediately to resign. No due process, no assumption that the employee's loyalty and quality of service deserved giving her the benefit of the doubt in resolving the situation.

In a second case, a recently hired employee was asked whether he was in a relationship with another man. He answers yes, but to conform to the institution's stated policy (no sex outside of marriage) he and his partner commited to remain celibate while he worked at his institution. In this case, the policy was interpreted by administrators to mean no "relationships," not no "sex," and the employee was fired on the spot. Later, due to staffing needs he was reinstated to finish the semester, but only on the condition that he move out of his house for that time.

In a third case, another employee had let it be known that he was gay, but single (and would remain so as long as he worked at his institution). He spoke to a student group about his sense of his own identity as a gay man. A written version found its way into the hands of an area pastor, who complained to his administrators. This employee was in the midst of a contract review and up until this point had been given clear indicators that he was in good shape. The first word from his supervisor he was not in "good shape" was when she informed him that he would lose his job. The rationale was couched in other terms—but these "other terms" were vague and supported by little or no evidence. He was given no warning prior to his dismissal that these "problems" even existed and had no

[1] For a further account of this story, see the Appendix below, pages 218-41.

opportunity to try to address them. One obvious link in all three cases is the vulnerability of these employees. As sexual minorities they were up against the full weight of the institution with virtually no protection.

CONGREGATIONAL EXPULSION.

Broad Street Mennonite is a tiny church in Harrisonburg, Virginia. A few years ago, the congregation agreed to let a friend of one of Broad Street's members use their building for her union ceremony, a ceremony unconnected with the church. Then, an area pastor contacted leaders of Broad Street's district demanding that the ceremony not be allowed in the church building. Ironically, just a few weeks after his complaint (and in spite of the remarkably rapid response of the district to act against Broad Street) this pastor pulled his church out of the conference anyhow.

Almost immediately after the complaint, district leaders contacted Broad Street, demanding that they not allow the ceremony. The church refused to take it agreement, and in the course of the conversation admitted that even though the couple were not connected with the church, it did affirm their choice to share life together in this way. With breathtaking speed, first the district and then the conference moved to expel Broad Street. Almost exactly one year from the time concerns were first raised with the congregation, its expulsion was consummated. Once again, hostility trumped hospitality. Anxiety and fear trumped careful process. The benefit of the doubt went toward quick expulsion, not finding ways of working out differences while sustaining the fellowship.

The common thread in all these stories is power being used to push vulnerable people out. How representative are my stories? Are there others like these? Are these cases signs of a spiritual crisis in our church? How seriously should we take the norm of hospitality as the indicator of spiritual health? How do our churches stack up?

SEEKING TO EMBODY HOSPITALITY

So, what do we do? Let me reflect on three ideas. (1) We need to embrace the full legitimacy of all communities of hope and resistance that do practice biblical hospitality. (2) We need to recognize that the institutional churches (including denominational structures and regional conferences) are fallen powers, capable of both great good and terrible evil, worthy of our critical support and efforts to improve them, but not worthy of loyalty that would cause us to hurt others. And, (3) we need to do our biblical and theological work to construct a theology for inclusion, refusing to give up the Bible to the forces of inhospitality.

(1) Let us take seriously Jesus's words, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you" (Matt 18:20). Let us embrace all gatherings where we come together to share life, to kick against the darkness, to encourage one another to take courage and keep the faith. Let us embrace these gatherings as authentic expressions of the church of God. In her book, *Powers of the Weak*, Elizabeth Janeway writes of two core empowerment strategies for people who seem to be "weak": Cultivate a sense of disbelief toward the messages given by the powers that be and gather together in communities of mutual support.

Our various ad hoc gatherings are expressions of God's healing strategy, direct heirs of the community God formed with Abraham and Sarah, essential parts of the Spirit's blessing all the families of the earth. If the core mission of God's people is hospitality, let us indeed make our congregations, conferences, and denominations as hospitable as we can, but let us also remember that any hospitable group joins in the line of God's endorsed communities, not only "official" institutions. If the organized church is indeed deathly ill with the disease of inhospitality, let us build healthy communities wherever we can that will send green shoots up through the cracks in the rubble of the old edifices.

(2) The institutional church is a human institution like all others. I have become increasingly negative about traditional two-kingdom ways of thinking that assume that we have some kind of qualitative difference between "Christian" communities and institutions and "worldly" communities and institutions. One problem with this separation is that we end up not appreciating that life-affirming things happen in the world. The other problem with this separation is that it may blind us to the fallenness of our "Christian" institutions, including our churches.

Walter Wink's discussion of the principalities and powers is helpful. The church is created good, is fallen, and is redeemable—all at once. We need organizational structures to sustain life and faith. I am grateful to the Mennonite heritage, our worldwide network of friends, the peace tradition. Yet, like with other institutions, our Mennonite church structures can tend to take God's place as the focus of our loyalty. The big test always is the violence test—do our loyalties to our institutions justify hurting people? We must demythologize our church structures, recognize that they are fallen too, every bit as capable of separating us from God's love as any other fallen human institution.

William Stringfellow's *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, gives us profound insights into the principalities and powers. He states that while we do have evil people in high places, the most dangerous people are the "good, well-meaning" people who give their highest loyalty to their institutions. The sign of this kind of idolatry is,

again, the willingness to hurt people for the sake of the survival of the institution. People in church institutions do this all the time.

Yet, as Wink insists, the powers (including the church) are also always redeemable. We can seek, with some basis for hope, to make our institutions more humane, more hospitable. I would say, for one example, we can seek to move the MC USA toward the old General Conference polity that allowed congregations essential freedom to act on their own discernment when it came to membership issues. If, like the old General Conference, it were simply impossible for conferences to kick churches out, we would all be forced to be respectful of our differences.

The key in working at redeeming the powers is always to keep central our identity as people of hospitality. There are certain core elements of the identity of the authentic people of God that must never be compromised for the sake of any institution. I hope I have made a persuasive case that hospitality toward vulnerable people is one of those elements. I believe that as we struggle with sexuality issues and the needs of our institutions, we need to strive always to work with two givens, two certainties that we do not give up. One is that our institutions have legitimate needs and concerns and these must be respected; the other is that we do not hurt people in order to respect those needs and concerns. If we would strive to hold to *both*, we will be freed to be creative in ways we maybe cannot imagine right now. Unfortunately, as long as hurting people is allowed for (even, supposedly as a "last resort") we tend to short circuit our creative processes and take the easy way out.

(3) I have tried to show how we might utilize the Bible as a resource for inclusion. It takes work to study and apply the Bible as such a resource, and to frame our convictions about hospitality, inclusion, compassion, and resistance to oppression and violence in overtly biblical and theological terms. However, I believe more every day that doing so is not twisting the Bible to our own agenda but actually keeping faith with the truest biblical message.

Certainly, all who live for hospitality and resistance to oppression are to be celebrated. Nor do I even mean to hint that only biblical people have a legitimate basis for such convictions. But for those of us who have thrown our lot in with this particular tradition, we have a resource of tremendous power in this book with its stories and instruction. And, the thing is, this tremendous power can also be a power for oppression and inhospitality, as we know all too well. We simply cannot give up on this struggle for the heart and soul of the Bible.

8. The logic of the Mennonite Church USA "teaching position" on "homosexuality"

[Published in Brethren Life and Thought *55.1-2 (Winter and Spring 2010), 10-23]*

Numerous times over the past 25 years I have conversed concerning our churches' response to the presence of gay[1] Christians. These conversations remain as challenging and seemingly irresolvable as ever. But they also remain interesting. And I keep learning as I engage in such conversations —about my own views and deep-seated values, about the dynamics of the conversation, and about the perspectives of my conversation partners (especially those with whom I disagree).

Certainly the conversations are complex and viewpoints are almost infinitely varied. We all bring a mixture of motivations, ethical resources, political agendas, social locations, levels of education, personal experiences, and so much more. However, as a trained ethicist, my tendencies run toward trying to provide some kind of conceptual order in analyzing these conversations. This leads me to suggest various ordering categories—not (heaven forbid!) as stable slots into which to fit various actors (so I will avoid the word "type" and instead use terms such as "tendency," "way of arguing," and "inclination")—as aids for growing in understanding (the proverbial "heuristic devices" as artificial categories that have educational value but must be held lightly).

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[1] Negotiating the language is a daunting task. We can easily enter into an interminable process of defining terms and never get beyond those debates. However, the vast majority of writing on this topic tends to go to the other extreme and use complicated terms without definition. What I will try to do in this paper is define the terms I use without devoting much energy to defending those definitions.

Right away we face the issue of our overall rubric. I am choosing to use the word "gay" as an umbrella term for people whose primary affectional attraction is toward people of their same sex *and* who affirm that attraction as part of their own identity generally with the additional affirmation of openness toward entering into an intimate relationship with a person of the same sex.

The first set of categories I will use is meant to give us reasonably neutral terms for the two sides in the debate, focusing on issues centered in the churches. These terms are "inclusive" and "restrictive." These two terms focus on the specific question of whether a church participant's "gayness" per se should play a role in the level of involvement this participant will be allowed.

The term "inclusive" conveys an approach that would not limit the involvement due to whether the people are gay or not (this view could easily hold that the church should restrict the involvement of all people who are involved in sinful relationships, heterosexual or homosexual—the point being, though, that heterosexual couples and homosexual couples are held to the same standards).

The term "restrictive" conveys an approach that would limit the involvement of people who are presently in intimate same-sex relationships (or perhaps also those who are open to entering into such relationships). The degree of restrictiveness might vary greatly among different churches, but in all cases the basis for restriction is the gayness of the participants.

In the conversations among Christians about the place of gay Christians in the churches, we may discern several different kinds of reasoning occurring, drawing in different ways on different ethical sources. A simply way of beginning to separate out a few of these types of reasoning is to set the types of reasoning in a quadrant. One spectrum (running left to right) would be the restrictive/inclusive spectrum. The other spectrum (running up and down) would be a biblical authority spectrum (that is, a spectrum tracking various views on the centrality of the Bible in the ethical rationales that are put forth).

Restrictive	Inclusive
Stronger Authority	
(1A) Focus on direct references—"Bible is opposed to homosexuality and so should we be"	*(2A)* Focus on biblical themes—"Bible is not opposed to homosexuality; since it supports inclusion of vulnerable people, so should we"
Weaker Authority	
(1B) Focus on natural law—"Bible is not central; homosexuality is unnatural"	*(2B)* Dismiss "core texts" as inapplicable—"Bible is opposed to homosexuality but we need not be"

This simple chart shows us that some on the inclusive side operate with a high view of biblical authority and that some on the restrictive side draw heavily on natural theology more than direct biblical texts. Surely most who are involved in this conversation draw in various ways on both biblical texts and human experience. However, it is appropriate to challenge people to be self-aware of what type of reasoning they are tending to use.

For example, often people on both sides accept the truism that there is a direct correlation between one's view of biblical authority and one's tendency toward an inclusive or a restrictive view. However, this simply is not the case. Some who focus on general biblical themes such as hospitality and argue that the "direct texts" do not speak directly about all types of same-sex sexual intimacy (such as I do) still should be seen as ranking pretty high the "biblical authority" spectrum. On the other hand, many on the restrictive side draw heavily on natural law when they speak about how "unnatural" same-sex sexual intimacy seems or even when they speak about the centrality of the exclusive norm of male/female marriage.[2]

THE "TEACHING POSITION" OF THE MENNONITE CHURCH USA

This term "teaching position" came into prominence with the publication of the "Membership Guidelines for the Formation of the Mennonite Church USA" in 2001. Section III of the Guidelines focused on "issues related to homosexuality and membership," and articulated several "teaching positions"—affirming the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) and especially its statement, "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life" (Article 19); affirming the Saskatoon (1986) and Purdue Statements (1987) that describe "homosexual, extramarital, and premarital sexual activity as sin;" and affirming the call from those two statements "for the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views."[3]

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[2] Admittedly, this last statement will be contested by many on the restrictive side who cite the creation account and Jesus' quoting from that account as biblical bases for this argument. I would submit, though, that the Bible never uses its allusions to creation to make this kind of statement. The connection between creation and what is "natural" in marriage seems to owe much more to natural law than biblical teaching.

[3] The Mennonite Church USA came into being in 2002 with the merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church. In

These Membership Guidelines are treated as authoritative directives, being the main basis for affirming that MC USA has an official "teaching position" on homosexuality. Of course, we actually have three "teaching positions" mentioned there: the affirmation of the Mennonite Confession of Faith's statement on marriage, the affirmation of the Saskatoon/Purdue statement's description of "homosexual sexual activity" as sin, and the affirmation of the call for the church "to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views."

Clearly, when Mennonite leaders use the term "teaching position," they have in mind the assertion that "homosexual activity is sin." They also seem to assume that this is a clear and settled conclusion. However, given that the discussion among Mennonites is scarcely over, we would do well to think more carefully about what this "teaching position" might entail, as well as asking more foundational questions about what it's based on and how its logic works.

One of the first elements of this examination is the lack of detail in the stating of this "teaching position" in the formal documents. We have only a few documents that this position is based on. Centrally, we have the afore-mentioned "Membership Guidelines." These Guidelines coin the term "teaching position," but they add no new content to that position, merely citing two earlier documents, the Mennonite Confession of Faith (CofF) and the Purdue/Saskatoon statements (P/S). So we need to turn to the CofF and P/S for the content of the teaching position.

Before turning to those two documents, though, we may note one point of ambiguity in the Guidelines where the language differs from P/S. The Guidelines state, in its third "teaching position," that P/S calls "for the church to be in dialogue with those who hold differing views." The actual statement in P/S reads this way: "We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ, recognizing that we are all sinners in need of God's grace and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance.… We covenant with each other to take part in the ongoing search for discernment and for openness to each other."

In P/S, the tone is one of fellow church members in an on-going conversation, seeking with mutual humility to continue to discern the directing of the Holy Spirit. Fifteen years later, with the Membership

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preparation for the merger, the two merging denominations had jointly created the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, which was adopted in 1995. The Saskatoon Statement was adopted at the General Conference Mennonite Church General Assembly in 1986, and the Purdue Statement was adopted at the Mennonite Church General Assembly in 1987. They had been created cooperatively by the two denominations.

Guidelines, the language has become "the church" being in dialogue "with those who hold differing views." This latter statement seems to imply that "the church" and "those who hold differing views" are distinct entities, perhaps even implying that "those who hold differing views" are outside the church. At the least, the tone in the Membership Guidelines is that the issue is much more settled than it is presented as being in P/S. However, it appears that the authorization for this "teaching position" of being in dialogue is P/S. No rationale is given for the change in tone.

CONFESSION OF FAITH

The first source that is cited in the Guidelines is the 1995 CofF. That the CofF would be cited as the basis for the "teaching position" on "homosexuality" is interesting. This citation, without explanation, gives the impression that the CofF provides clear, direct teaching concerning homosexuality. However, the actual CofF does not in fact even mention homosexuality. So, here again we have an example of theology by citation more than by exposition. It's enough to cite the official doctrinal statement of MC USA with a proof text to establish a "teaching position" that then will be used by leaders to justify closing down discussion.

Let's look at the actual content of the CofF. Article 19 addresses "Family, Singleness, and Marriage." The first sentence in the third paragraph of this article, the sentence quoted in the Guidelines, reads thus: "We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life." At the end of this sentence, a footnote reference is given to two biblical texts. The first text is Mark 10:9: "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." This verse is part of Jesus' teaching on divorce (divorce, here in Mark, is totally rejected) and remarriage (which Jesus names as adultery, i.e., "sin" [Mark 10:11-12]). Note that the CofF cites Mark's version of Jesus' teaching, which allows for no exceptions to the forbidding of divorce and characterizing of remarriage as sin; it does not cite the slightly more relaxed account in Matthew 19:9 that does allow for a divorce exception in the case of the infidelity of the partner.

The second text is 1 Corinthians 7:10-11: "To the married I give this command … that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife." Note, the CofF ends the citation at verse 11 and does not include the "exception" of an unbeliever leaving a believing spouse (1 Cor. 7:15).

Based on this footnote, we see that the CofF sentence that begins Article 19 emphasizes the permanence of marriage and the sinfulness of

divorce and remarriage (emphasizing the "for life" conclusion to the first sentence). Not only does Article 19 not speak directly of "homosexuality," the one place that may be seen indirectly to allude to "homosexual practice" (the definition of marriage as "one man, one woman, for life) clearly has in mind a different issue—divorce and remarriage.

That divorce and remarriage are in mind in the first sentence of Article 19 is made even clearer by the commentary on this Article. The commentary (which is also part of the CofF as officially adopted by the Mennonite Church USA) speaks to the divorce issue and says nothing about homosexuality. "Today's church needs to uphold the permanency of marriage and help couples in conflict move toward reconciliation. At the same time, the church, as a reconciling and forgiving community, offers healing and new beginnings. The church is to bring strength and healing to individuals and families."

While we need to note that the commentary and scripture citations make it clear that the sentence from Article 19 of the CofF that is quoted in the Guidelines is being misused when it is construed as a basis for an official "teaching position" concerning homosexuality, we should also notice another point the CofF makes.

The commentary softens the strictness of the CofF article and the two New Testament texts cited. "At the same time," the church is a place of welcome and forgiveness. This comment does not spell out a more nuanced approach to divorce and remarriage, but it does open the door for such. One could draw from this commentary a basis for accepting divorced and remarried people as full members of Mennonite congregations (which is increasingly the practice). The point, it would appear, is that the CofF makes a strong statement about the importance of Christian marriage, but implicitly allows for exceptions in the case of divorce and remarriage—exceptions that are not seen, in many contexts, to negate the theological affirmation of the marriage covenant as a life-long commitment. More important, we could say, than absolute fidelity to the ideal is that the church "brings strength and healing to individuals and families"—including even people who are divorced and remarried.

Could such an approach also be applied to people in same-sex covenanted partnerships? The CofF could be read in a way that would imply an affirmative answer to this question—if indeed the churches' priorities should be on bringing "strength and healing." Of course, such a reading and application would stand in tension with the Membership Guidelines' use of the CofF.

Another question we should ask about the Guidelines' use of the CofF arises when we look at the introduction to the CofF, remembering that the introduction was also affirmed by both the General Conference

Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church in 1995 when the CofF was officially approved by the denominations. In the introduction, we read of six ways the CofF "serves the church." That is, the CofF itself gives instruction concerning the role it is meant to serve in the Mennonite churches. This is what it says:

> How do Mennonite confessions of faith serve the church? First, they provide guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture. At the same time, the confession itself is subject to the authority of the Bible. Second, confessions of faith provide guidance for belief and practice. In this connection, a written statement should support but not replace the lived witness of faith. Third, confessions build a foundation for unity within and among churches. Fourth, confessions offer an outline for instructing new church members and for sharing information with inquirers. Fifth, confessions give an updated interpretation of belief and practice in the midst of changing times. And sixth, confessions help in discussing Mennonite belief and practice with other Christians and people of other faiths.

What's missing? Anything hinting that the CofF is meant to be used as an authoritative basis for a boundary marking "teaching position"—not to mention that the CofF should not be used as the basis for such a "teaching position" on a topic it doesn't even address.

THE PURDUE AND SASKATOON STATEMENTS

What we see, then, when we look carefully at the three bases for the "teaching position" of the Mennonite Church USA on homosexuality are the (1) "Membership Guidelines" that name this "teaching position" while providing no additional content beyond (misleadingly) quoting the (2) CofF and summarizing the (3) Purdue and Saskatoon (P/S) statements. Consequently, for the content of this "teaching position" we are reliant on the P/S statements. What do they say?

First of all, they affirm sexuality as "a good and beautiful gift of God." Thus, they imply that sexual intimacy is a good thing, a valuable element of our humanness. The P/S statements do go on to limit access to this good thing, but they do so with the benefit of doubt that there must be some other wrong that would clearly make this good thing unavailable for faithful Christians. Sex is good, we should embrace it; only if there is some other wrong involved does this good thing become wrong.

The P/S statements then list cases where the wrong is seen to be wrong enough to make the good of sexual intimacy immoral: wife-battering, premarital sex, extra-marital sex, and homosexual sex. The

statements do not explain why these are wrong, presumably assuming that the rationale is self-evident. We would have a pretty easy time identifying the wrong in wife-battering, premarital sex, and extramarital sex. But what about "homosexual genital activity" as a single category? What is wrong with this "activity"?

What the P/S statements offer is a simple: "We understand the Bible to teach that genital intercourse is reserved for a man and a woman united in a marriage covenant and that violation even within the relationship (i.e., wife battering) is a sin. It is our understanding that this teaching also precludes premarital, extramarital, and homosexual genital activity. We further understand the Bible to teach the sanctity of the marriage covenant and that any violation of this covenant is sin." (This is the wording of the Purdue statement, slightly changed from the earlier Saskatoon statement).

Boiled down: The Bible teaches that all homosexual genital activity is sinful. This is pretty cryptic. No texts are cited to illustrate this teaching. No clear definition of "homosexual genital activity" is given. No clarity is offered concerning other elements of the physical and emotional elements of intimate relationships. This statement seems to reflect the assumptions of the common "people in the pews" that the Bible clearly is "against homosexuality."[4] What is not discussed is what this "against homosexuality" refers to. I will suggest three responses to this question—all of which would indeed agree that the "Bible is against homosexuality" but draw quite different implications from that statement.

That this is a complicated discussion should be recognized first off from the fact that the term "homosexuality" is itself never used in the Bible, nor does it remotely approach any term used in scripture. The word itself is recent, and is a joining together of Greek and Latin roots. Neither biblical Hebrew nor biblical Greek has any words like this.

The places in the Bible that are generally understood to speak about "homosexuality" all make reference to specific actions, not a broad category of people (such as today's "homosexuals"). In Genesis 18–19,

[4] This assumption is reflected in this comment by Mark Thiessen Nation in the midst of his and my "conversation on homosexuality": "I do believe it is important that we look carefully at [the most immediately relevant passages of Scripture]. But I think one of the reasons I have shied away from offering this sort of detailed discussion of all the passages is because, in some ways, I think it is a diversion. I tend to think we would get farther if we simply stipulated that the Bible says homosexual practice is wrong. Then let's spend our time arguing about whether or not we still agree with that and why" (Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation, *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality* [Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008], 207).

the story refers to men of the city wanting to "know" their male visitors (i.e., presumably have sex with them). In Leviticus 18 and 20, the commands prohibit men "laying with other men as with women." In Romans 1, Paul writes of men consumed with lust for other men. And in 1 Corinthians 6 (echoed in 1 Timothy 1), included in a list of vices, Paul mentions "men laying" (presumably with other men assuming Paul has Leviticus in mind, though the invented word for "men laying" does not specify who the men are laying with).

So, we cannot simply find a proof text where the Bible refers explicitly to "homosexuality." Rather, we have several references to problematic things some men do. These are three common understandings of what the "Bible is against homosexuality" conclusion might mean:

(1) It is believed by some that the "Bible is against homosexuality" statement reflects a general condemnation of the entire spectrum of what people today means by the term "homosexuality," including the same-sex affectional orientation, sexual intimacy between same-sex partners in the context of marriage-like relationships, and sexual acts that are also understood to be sinful when engaged in by heterosexual people.

(2) It is believed by others that the "Bible is against homosexuality" statement points toward the sinfulness of all types of same-sex sexual intimacy but not the affectional orientation. This would appear to be the view reflected in the documents said to form the "teaching position" of MC USA. The Mennonite "teaching position" presents itself as biblically based and suggests that it is not the orientation but the "practice" that is proscribed by the Bible. This understanding would also be common among many on the inclusive side who argue that the Bible being "against homosexuality" is not binding for present-day Christian ethics.

(3) It is believed by others that "the Bible is against homosexuality" statement should be linked with the specific kinds of activity referred to in the direct texts. This view would probably prefer language that does not use the broad term "homosexuality" but refers more specific to the actual behaviors that are mentioned—so, the Bible is against inhospitable gang rape that is used to deny hospitality to visitors (Genesis 18–19).[5] The Bible is against sexual acts that are non-procreative when the community's survival is at stake (Leviticus 18, 20). The Bible is against lustful, promiscuous sex that reflects idolatrous practices (Romans 1). The Bible is against unjust sexual practices that are economically driven (1 Corinthians 6). These are practices that are sinful for both heterosexual and same-sex couples. At least some who share this understanding would

[5] See Marti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

also believe that sexual intimacy that is acceptable for opposite sex partners would also implicitly be acceptable for same sex partners.

As a consequence of recognizing these three distinct understandings of the truthful statement "the Bible is against homosexuality," we must recognize that that simple statement does not provide much help for the churches in their discernment concerning the acceptability of gay Christians in the churches. The discussion of differences regarding understandings of the phrase "the Bible is against homosexuality" may then be expanded to include another significant definitional difference with major implications for how churches negotiate our issue. This is the difference in meaning between using the term "homosexual practice" (singular) versus "homosexual practices" (plural).

The use of the term in the singular is characteristic for many who wrote in support of the restrictive approach, particularly those who were heavily influenced by Robert Gagnon's massive *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.[6] Unfortunately, none of these writers takes the time to explain why precisely they insist on the singular "practice" and what the implications of that usage are for how they address the issues and especially for how they interpret and apply the "direct texts" in the Bible said to be definitive for the churches' approach to our issue.

So, we need briefly to piece together the logic behind and the ramifications of this usage. All of these writers, even if they don't use this language, would agree that there are many "heterosexual practices" when it comes to sexual behavior. Mark Thiessen Nation, for example, in *Reasoning Together*, writes about the goodness of morally appropriate sexual intimacy (within the context of opposite-sex marriages). He also writes of morally inappropriate "heterosexual practices" (e.g., a friend who suffered from a sexual addiction). So, we have "heterosexual practices" (that is, occasions for sexual intimacy)—some sinful, some blessed by God as good.

However, for Nation, Gagnon, and others, we have only one "homosexual practice," that is always sinful. What might this mean? These writers seem to think that all the various forms of sexual intimacy that might be practiced by same-sex couples fit into a single category for the purposes of moral discernment. What follows from such an understanding is the practical conclusion that since each type of same-sex

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[6] See also the document issued in July 1991 by the Mennonite Church General Board, "Summary Statements on Homosexuality": "We support the several ministries in our church for assisting homosexual persons who desire … freedom from *same-sex practice*." Accessed on Loren John's website: http://ljohns.ambs.edu/ChurchDocs.htm. Emphasis added.

sexual intimacy is an example of "homosexual practice" and that since "homosexual practice" (of whatever variety) is sinful, we do not need to pay much attention to what specific type of behavior is in mind when we conclude that it is wrong. So, when we turn to the Bible, we do not need to concern ourselves with the specific context or type of behavior our several texts speak to. If today's same-sex marriages fit into this rubric of "homosexual practice," they are sinful, just as all the allusions to "homosexual practice" in the Bible are also referring to sinful acts.

We may identify two ramifications from this logic. First, since there is just one "homosexual practice," all we need to establish from the Bible is that this "practice" is condemned in order to be certain that every type of behavior that is an example of this "practice" is sinful. We may establish this condemnation from the direct texts that all are negative about this "practice." Second, we accept that "homosexual" and "heterosexual" sexual behaviors are not morally parallel. We may recognize a variety of "heterosexual practices," each with its own distinct moral status, while also recognizing only one "homosexual practice" with a uniform moral status for all varieties of behavior within this single "practice."

When we consider the other option, seeing a variety of "homosexual practices" analogous to the variety of "heterosexual practices," we can see why so many of the inclusive/restrictive conversations make little progress. This is so, at least in part, because one's understanding of whether we should be thinking in terms of a single homosexual "practice" or a variety of homosexual "practices" will greatly shape one's way of reading and applying the Bible.

Those who think in terms of "homosexual practices" with distinct kinds of moral status for the distinct practices (parallel to how everyone seems to think of "heterosexual practices") will put much more weight on the specific contexts for the direct texts. They may well think that texts, when read in context, actually are proscribing specific practices for men (all the direct texts that clearly link behavior with gender refer to men[7])

[7] The one often-cited possible exception is Romans 1:26-27. This passage reads (NRSV): "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men exchanged shameless acts with men …." We simply cannot say with certainty what the "same way" that links the women's behavior with the men's refers to here—either "consumed with passion" or "for one another." Is Paul's concern the "unnaturalness" of the women being "consumed with passion" and acting lustfully or is it the "unnaturalness" of the women having sex with other women? It could be either. One's conclusion likely follows from one's sense of Paul's overriding concern here—with out of control promiscuous sex or with same-sex sex. Strong

that would be equally sinful for same-sex and opposite-sex couples. If so, they would reason, there is no reason not to assume, based on the Bible itself, that "practices" that are morally approved for opposite-sex couples might not also be acceptable for same-sex couples.

The P/S statements also have a clause that calls the churches to "confess our fear and repent of our absence of love toward those with a different sexual orientation." This clause leads to several questions. As it stands, it is pretty cryptic. What would such a confession entail? Would the expectation be that the repentance would lead to any efforts at overcoming the problems caused by the "absence of love"? What might those problems be? Might the use of the P/S statements themselves as boundary-marking absolutes about the sinfulness of "homosexual practice" and the main basis for the "teaching position" that in practice is used to shut down the promised on-going process of conversation among fellow-church members about their different views on homosexuality itself be an expression of "absence of love"? Who determines whether the "absence of love" is truly overcome—those who make this confession or those who have borne the brunt of this absence?

A different kind of question emerges in relation to the acknowledgement of "a different sexual orientation" here. As has commonly been seen as the intent of the P/S statements, the general sense of the statement as a whole is to combine two affirmations: (1) some people are fundamentally affectionally attracted to people of their same sex, and (2) such people are forbidden by the churches to enter into same-sex intimate partnerships (since 1987, when the P/S statements were written, the possibility of actual legal same-sex marriages has become a reality, so calling same-sex partnerships "extramarital" or "pre-marital" by definition is no longer possible in every case). These two points obviously stand in tension with one another. The tension heightens when we add to the mix the earlier part of the P/S statements that make a strong affirmation of the goodness of sexuality (with the implication I have noted that the logic of the statement seems to be that only some clear moral wrong would override the acceptance of the goodness of sexual expression for Christians).

These questions and tensions and the acknowledgment of differences within the churches ("We covenant with each other to mutually bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of

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arguments can be made either way, at least making clear that this text (the only one remotely hinting at "female homosexuality" in the entire Bible) cannot be used as a basis for the certain assertion that the Bible is against a "homosexuality" that equally includes males and females.

Christ, recognizing that we are all sinners in need of God's grace and that the Holy Spirit may lead us to further truth and repentance" [Purdue]) leave us in a bit of a quandary. We could reject the possibility of some people having a fundamental attraction toward people of the same sex. We could nuance our understanding of the Bible's teaching on this issue to allow that some same-sex intimate relationships might not be forbidden for Christians. We could decide that the commitment to "remaining in loving dialogue" is not as important as establishing clear boundary lines and moving ahead without continuing debates. We could assume that the P/S statements were only ad hoc formulations from a past generation that no longer speak for Mennonites. Probably we will have to follow at least one of these possibilities. Many of us already have.

Certainly, though, the P/S statements alone do not provide us with much guidance (in spite of the authoritarian use of them by the Guidelines). They don't give us explanations or rationales or clarity about many of the most important questions. At the heart of their message, especially as inferred in the Guidelines, is a reassertion of the basic unquestioned assumption that characterizes much of the discussion on the "homosexuality" issue in general: "The Bible teaches …"

However, the P/S statements do not explain what the Bible teaches. They cite no texts—either about sex in heterosexual marriage or about "homosexual practice." They also do not cite any teaching documents that would explain what the Bible teaches except, a bit ironically, the "working document for study and dialogue" commissioned by the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, published in 1985 as *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*. This citation is ironic because that book, a careful, thoughtful, 166-page treatment of a wide variety of themes does not support the simplistic conclusion of the P/S statements. The *Human Sexuality* book reflects the genuine differences in the churches on homosexuality and draws no clear conclusions on what "the Bible teaches."

Human Sexuality, a study document prepared by a large committee made up of a wide diversity of Mennonites, asserts after its survey of the "direct texts" of the Bible: "The passages reviewed above focus rather narrowly on specific homosexual acts and by themselves do not help us move toward redemptive actions."[8] The section on homosexuality concludes with a comment that points in the opposite direction than that taken by the P/S statements: "If the church should err, let it be on the side of caring for and loving a group of people who are much persecuted

[8] Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue* (1985), 113.

in our society."[9]

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[9] *Human Sexuality*, 118. One member of the committee that produced this book later published an article that expressed dismay at how politics undermined the careful, consensus-building work of the committee and resulted in a problematic "official" statement. See Maynard Shelly, "Compassion for Today's Lepers," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, April 18, 1996. Shelly wrote of this committee: "We prepared reports for the church not only on homosexuality but also on the broad range of related issues from marriage and singleness to intimacy and abuse. We drew on the teachings of the Bible from Genesis to Jesus. Though we reflected differing points of view, we agreed on a statement that opened a small door for gays and lesbians to feel they belonged to our Christian family. That was our best judgment after six years of prayer and study. But the Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church General Boards rewrote out statements for Saskatoon '86 and Purdue '87. They closed the door to fellowship with our homosexual children. Politics won out over prophecy."

The GCs and MCs undertook one other sustained organized effort to gather together a representative group to pay sustained attention to discernment concerning homosexuality among Mennonites. The "Joint Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns" was formed by the two General Boards in 1990 and completed its work in 1992. The Listening Committee understood its mandate to follow from the P/S statements expressing commitment to ongoing "loving dialogue" and focused its energies on soliciting input from various church members, especially those attending the denominations' three General Assemblies that occurred during the course of the committee's life.

The Listening Committee's final report recommended in light of on-going questions and disagreements they had heard concerning biblical and theological understandings of the issues related to homosexuality, that the denominations "intensify … efforts to help congregations study homosexuality to discern how homosexuals can relate to the church's life and ministry" (quoted in Melanie Zuercher and Ed Stoltfzfus, "The Story of the Listening Committee," in *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality*, edited by C. Norman Kraus [Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2001], 84).

Both General Boards rejected this recommendation and decided to make the Listening Committee's final report available only to those who requested it (and not formally release it). And the copies made available in this way did not include the committee's concluding sections of recommendations. (The entire report, with recommendations, was published in Kraus, ed., *To Continue*, 303-22; it is available on-line at: http://www.ambs.edu/LJohns/ChurchDocs.htm.)

The irony of the Boards' decision not to pursue helping "congregations study homosexuality" in 1992-3 may be seen when nearly 20 years later, the merged Mennonite Church USA, at its General Assembly, passed a resolution that stated, "We affirm the church's commitment to ongoing dialogue and discernment, and 'agreeing and disagreeing in love.' We confess that we as a

The "teaching position," as affirmed in the Membership Guidelines, lacks the nuances of the *Human Sexuality* study, depending solely on the P/S statements and ignoring the one official study document the ancestor denominations of the Mennonite Church USA commissioned. Instead of the careful, if brief, recognition of the complex content of the Bible on sexuality issues presented in *Human Sexuality*, the "teaching position" relies simply on the P/S statement that "the Bible teaches … homosexual genital activity is sin" without any elaboration.

So, the role the Bible actually plays in the "teaching position" is more as a source of authority for the global condemnation of "homosexual practice." It is the Bible's authority that matters, not careful consideration of its content in all its complexity. And the authority of the Bible here is impossible to reason with since the P/S statements provide no content from the Bible itself.

THE LOGIC OF THE "TEACHING POSITION"

When we consider ways the logic of the position on "homosexual practice" actually works, we see that the Bible may not actually play as central a role as is generally assumed. Since we don't have any specific biblical content in the "teaching position," we need to extrapolate a bit in relation to other writings on this issue.[10] But this is how the logic seems to work: The "teaching position," in a nutshell, is that "homosexual practice" is sin. That is, given the use of the singular "practice," that any possible sexually intimate relationship including fidelity in the context of marriage, is sin and hence to be rejected by the church.

Why does the church say this? The presumed answer: because it's what the Bible teaches. Though the documents that the "teaching

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church (congregations, conferences, denomination) have rarely found a way to create a healthy, safe environment in which to have this dialogue, one that builds up the Body of Christ, and is respectful and honest about our differences. … And so we call upon the Executive Board of the Mennonite Church USA to work with conferences to provide and encourage the use of resources which assist conferences and congregations to engage in this discernment. Our hope is for a broad range of resources that help us live faithfully, extending hospitality to all of God's people" (*The Mennonite*, July 7, 2009).

[10] The two most thorough treatments of these issues from an overtly Mennonite perspective that are supportive of the "teaching position," both published by the Mennonite Publishing House and written by Mennonite seminary professors, are Willard M. Swartley, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003) and Mark Thiessen Nation's contributions to Grimsrud and Nation, *Reasoning Together*.

position" affirmed in the Membership Guidelines rests on (CofF and P/S statements) don't themselves refer to any specific places where the Bible teaches this, we may learn from scholars such as Mark Thiessen Nation and Willard Swartley that texts such as Leviticus 18 and 20, Romans 1, and 1 Corinthians 6 do give us the data we need to know that the Bible condemns "homosexual practice" as sin—and that this condemnation extends to same-sex marriage.

However, in light of my above discussion on the difference between thinking in terms of "homosexual practice" (singular, different than "heterosexual practices") and "homosexual practices" (plural, parallel with "heterosexual practices"), how do we know that the "direct texts" (which everyone agrees actually do not speak directly about same-sex marriage) should be seen as support for condemning *all* possible homosexual practices (including same-sex marriage)?

It is impossible to say for sure. All we seem to have are assumptions. No one I am aware of who supports the view that the Guidelines' "teaching position" condemns same-sex marriage has addressed the question as I have posed it. However, it does seem that for many "knowing" that same-sex marriage is condemned follows not only from biblical authority but also what we could call general revelation (or, "natural law"). Perhaps this latter plays a more important role than usually acknowledged.[11] Lurking here is a strong sense that same-sex marriage must be rejected because only opposite sex marriage is "natural"—that is, capable of producing biological offspring, reflecting the way bodies fit together, and seen as normal to most people, whereas opposite-sex coupling is seen over most of history as disgusting.

So, the basis for the "teaching position" may actually not be "the Bible teaches …" so much as "what seems best to fit with human experience." However, there is an important dynamic going on here that should be noticed. Once the locus moves from the direct texts toward general revelation, then much of the rhetorical force of the "teaching position" is lost. Once we are in the realm of human experience many other kinds of questions arise. How objective is general revelation? How well does general revelation work as the basis for specific moral

[11] For an example of an openly natural law argument that closely parallels Swartley's position in his book *Homosexuality*, see Catholic theologian James P. Hanigan, *Homosexuality: The Test Case for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988): "Homosexual individuals are not called to a two-in-one flesh unity because they cannot become such a unity. They can become a two-in-one-flesh unity neither ritually in the act of sexual intercourse, nor substantially, either in the new shared life in love of unity and difference that is male and female, or in the new life that is flesh of their flesh and bone of their bone" (99).

regulations? Don't we then simply end up with a debate about human opinions?

Why should some people's opinions about what is "natural" (the way males and females fit) carry more weight than other people's opinions about what is "natural" (some people are born with both a fundamental attraction toward people of their same sex and an inclination to flourish best with an intimate partner—just like those with a fundamental attraction toward those of the opposite sex)?

The main point of the questions in the previous two paragraphs is to add to the challenge of the debates about proper interpretation of the direct texts. What seems clear in face of all these questions is that the only way through the current struggles in the Mennonite churches (and Brethren churches, and beyond) is the difficult on-going process of open community conversation and discernment.

Recognizing that the content of the "teaching position" is, in the end, as much about general revelation as it is about the direct biblical texts should push us away from any temptation to use authoritative denominational position statements to end the conversation. Rather, critically scrutinizing the Mennonite Church USA's "teaching position," as done in this essay, will hopefully offer support for a renewed commitment to respectful, honest, and safe on-going conversation that recognizes a wide variety of perspectives.

9. The survival of Mennonite Church USA

[During 2014, in two blog posts on ThinkingPacifism.net, I provided some commentary on some of the struggles Mennonite Church USA has been facing. "Will Mennonite Church USA Survive: Reflections on Three Decades of Struggle" was posted February 28, 2014 and "How Mennonite Church USA Might Survive," was posted March 23, 2014.]

REFLECTIONS ON THREE DECADES OF STRUGGLE

The denomination I have been part of since 1981, Mennonite Church USA (MC USA), is going through a bit of a rough patch right now. The longer-term trend for some time has been shrinking membership totals and an aging demographic. The college where I teach, Eastern Mennonite University, was founded and has existed with a purpose (not always directly stated) of keeping Mennonite young people in the Mennonite community. When I began teaching here in 1996, the student body was a bit more than 60% Mennonite. Now, with the enrollment being roughly the same, the percentage of Mennonite students in our first-year class is about half of what it was 20 years ago. Not a good sign.

Another factor that has led to MC USA shrinking, besides smaller families and the younger generation losing its loyalty to the denomination, has been a steady stream of conservative congregations leaving the denomination—and numerous others continuing to threaten to leave. (It is an interesting phenomenon that it is only conservative congregations that are voluntarily leaving—the couple of progressive congregations that left MC USA since its current structure was established in 2001 with the merger of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Church were kicked out.)

In recent weeks I have heard dispirited speculation from several denominational leaders better informed and much closer to the centers of power than I am that MC USA may not be long for the world. I have no idea how realistic such speculation actually is. I do find it difficult to imagine that the denomination itself would die, but I suppose it is reasonable to imagine a significantly diminished institution.

I perceive that it would be pretty difficult to describe accurately all the factors that are contributing to these troubles. Most of those who talk about these things (including me) may have ideological axes to grind in our analyses. Our understanding of the why of the problem is often shaped by our ideals about what we want the denomination to do.

Here I want to offer not so much a wide-ranging diagnosis of the factors that trouble MC USA as taking one particular factor and thinking about how it might have contributing something to our current situation. This is my thesis: The soul of MC USA has been damaged by a tendency for church leaders and others to allow those who are opposed to efforts to make the denomination more gay-friendly to exercise influence by use of threats to leave the denomination. Our current crises follow—at least in part—from this tendency.

Mennonites have a long, long history of splitting. In fact, it could actually be the case that our current struggles are simply an inherent aspect of the Mennonite tradition. And the tradition, for the vast majority of its history quite decentralized and fairly non-institutional, has continued to survive. So it could be that some reconfiguration and diminishment of this one particular Mennonite institution (MC USA) will not actually damage the Mennonite tradition itself that much.

The current dynamic of congregations leaving or threatening to leave the denomination over the named issue of "homosexuality" has been going on for at least 30 years. It would be my perception, though, that "homosexuality" is only the surface issue—something that provides a focus for deeper and longer-term factors. It would certainly be worthwhile (even necessary) to work at understanding those deeper and longer-term factors of tension and disunity. Right now, though, I simply want to focus on the recent dynamics related to this one "surface issue."

AN ORDINATION STORY

I have some personal history with the leave-and-threaten-to-leave-over-"homosexuality" dynamic that indicates how far back it goes. In 1988, as I finished my first year as the pastor of a west coast congregation, I agreed to enter the process of being considered for ordination. I assumed that it would be a mere formality since things were going well in my ministry and the process for my licensing when I began at the congregation had been quite routine.

The process turned out to be far more than a formality. The initial interview with the leadership committee went well until I was asked about my response to the recently adopted denominational statement on human sexuality (called the "Purdue Statement"). I said I liked the

statement pretty well and expected to use it in my ministry, but that I wasn't sure I agreed with the one sentence that "homosexual genital activity" was inherently sinful. I never said I disagreed, but I was not willingly fully to affirm it. This is all I ever said about this issue, but over the next three years a very difficult process unfolded.

One member of the leadership committee refused to approve my ordination and left the committee at an impasse. He refused to budge in his opposition. Over the next couple of years, denominational leaders were called on to mediate. Discussions went around and around. Everyone in positions of power agreed that the conference was in a very fragile place. They feared that if they went ahead with my ordination, the conference "would fly apart."

Finally the others on the leadership committee decided that they needed to act. The one dissenter resigned from the committee in protest. He joined with two other pastors to meet with the conference minister two days before my scheduled ordination service to issue an ultimatum: either the ordination be stopped or they would take their congregations out of the conference. The conference minister worked out a compromise and my service went forward and I was ordained. Several months later at the conference's annual delegate meeting, a motion was made to refuse to accept the leadership committee's report that included record of my ordination in hopes that that might invalidate the ordination. When the vote was taken, the motion failed by one vote. A revote happened with the same result. My ordination stood. At this point, the dissident pastors acted to remove their congregations from the conference. As it turned out, the congregation that the leadership committee dissenter pastored refused to leave the conference, so he left that congregation instead.

This use of the threat to leave the denomination seems to have had a pretty powerful impact in these past 30 years. It is interesting that I have heard that the post-split dynamics in the area where I was ordained were far more positive than people feared. The congregations that split from the conference remained connected with the other Mennonites through work with Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, and the local Mennonite high school. Personal relationships were more cordial without the conference conflicts coming between people. For me personally, though, it became clear that I would not have a comfortable life working in that conference, so I moved on in 1994.

A LITANY OF THREATS

Even though my ordination controversy had a somewhat happy ending for me, I still see it as part of the dynamic where these threats to

leave have significant power in shaping the responses to the "homosexuality" issue. These responses, time after time for over 30 years now, have actually empowered dark or destructive forces within the denomination that have helped move us to our current sense of crisis.

According to Lin Garber's account,[1] Mennonite engagement with our issue has a key point of origin in the emergence of small Mennonite communities in various major American cities during the 1970s—a time following the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969 that began the gay liberation struggle. Garber cites an anonymous letter to the Mennonite Church's denominational magazine, the *Gospel Herald,* in August 1977 as the first public comment arguing for openness to inclusion of gay people in Mennonite congregations. In 1978, Rainbow Boulevard Mennonite Church in Kansas City, KS, became perhaps the first Mennonite congregation in North America explicitly to state that it would welcome gays and lesbians as members in its fellowship.

Over the next several years, several consultations were held under Mennonite auspices. I remember in 1982 talking with a friend who was attending Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. He told me something was happening there that he couldn't tell me about. With my curiosity piqued I pressed him for more information but he refused to reveal what was going on. Several months later I learned that the seminary had hosted a top-secret conference that included speakers with various views on the topic, including some openly gay people. Papers from this conference have never been made available.

In the mid-1970s, an organization known as the Brethren and Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Bisexual Interests (BMC—its current name) was formed to offer support of gay Mennonites and Brethren and to work at educating the broader denominations about the experiences and perspectives of gay people in their midst. By 1983, BMC had grown to the point where several of its members were ready to request a formal presence at the Mennonite Church General Assembly in Bethlehem, PA. The request was granted and for the first and only time at a Mennonite Church General Assembly BMC was approved to have a booth. After only a few hours, though, this booth was dismantled by denominational leaders.

I don't know the details of that incident, but it may serve as a key moment in our larger story by establishing an on-going pattern that has undermined the spiritual health of the denomination. What if the courageous offer of the BMC participants to have a vulnerable presence

[1] Lin Garber, "Mennonites and the 'Homosexual' Issue: A Recent History," Welcome Committee website: http://www.welcome-committee.info/booklet-2-garber.html

at the Assembly and provide chances for conversations and education with the denomination's blessing been accepted? Two important negative consequences followed from the decisions to dismantle the BMC booth and subsequently to refuse permission for BMC to have an on-site presence at any General Assembly since. The first negative consequence was the lost opportunity for genuine conversations and mutual give-and-take for an entire generation of Mennonite convention attenders. The second negative consequence was an enabling of the tactics of threat, intimidation, and hostility that have and continue to shape the Mennonite Church's response to the persistent interest in many of its members for such conversation and give-and-take.

Despite the continual effort of those opposed to the presence of gays in Mennonite congregations and denominational gatherings, this presence has not abated—and now shows signs of growth and increased power in shaping the direction Mennonite communities take.

SHORT-CIRCUITING CONVERSATION

In the early 1980s, the Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) approved a study process on the topic of human sexuality, including explicit attention to "homosexuality." A study committee produced a study book for congregations in the two denominations to share. This book, *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life*,[2] turned out to be a balanced and perceptive resource. The committee members became a kind of community of discernment. The study book did not try to dictate a single approach to the issue. But it included as one possible action that churches "accept the person and the practice of a monogamous covenantal homosexual relationship" along with other more restrictive options. It concluded "if the church should err, let it be on the side of caring for and loving a group of people who are much persecuted in our society."

This committee's assignment, in part, was to help guide the creation of denominational statements that were to be considered at the 1986 GC convention in Saskatoon and the 1987 MC convention at Purdue University in Indiana. The committee was stunned when their recommendations for openness to various perspectives were discarded by denominational leaders. The resultant "Saskatoon Statement on Human

[2] Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church, *Human Sexuality in the Christian Life: A Working Document for Study and Dialogue* Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985)—available online: http://ljohns.ambs.edu/HSCL/hscl-cl.htm

Sexuality" and "Purdue Statement on Human Sexuality,"[3] approved by the respective delegate bodies, committed the two denominations to explicit affirmations that all same-sex sexually intimate relationships are sinful and to be rejected as acceptable for Christians. The two statements did commend the use of the study book in the congregations, but few actually did use the study book. Its influence in the actions of the denominations in the years that followed appear to have been minimal.

However, dissent toward the anti-gay declarations of the two statements was strong enough that denominational leaders agreed to foster continued conversation by forming a Listening Committee for Homosexual Concerns in 1990 to gather information by talking with church members across the two denominations. The Listening Committee had a presence at both the MC convention in Eugene, OR, in 1991 and the GC convention in Sioux Falls, SD, in 1992. The Committee was then disbanded.

Similarly to the Human Sexuality Committee, the Listening Committee included a diversity of people from both denominations and from the US and Canada—and they also evolved to be a community of discernment. When the Committee was disbanded in 1992, it completed its final report[4] along with a list of recommendations.[5] This report, like the Human Sexuality study book, reported on existence of a diversity of viewpoints within the denominations and on a variety of options in responding to "homosexuality"—including to "accept homosexual orientation, friendships, monogamous homosexual sexual union." This report was received by denominational leadership but then was shelved and not made public. The recommendations were explicitly rejected.

In the meantime, rather than take the Listening Committee's report to heart and acknowledge the diversity of views within the Mennonite churches—and the need for respectful discernment work—the MC's Council of Faith, Life, and Strategy issued a "clarification" in 1995 that stated: "The words 'remaining in loving dialogue' found in [the 1987 Purdue Statement] should not be construed to mean that the homosexual issue is unresolved or that the position of the church is in question."[6]

Of course, this attempt to assert from the top down that it would be wrong to think "that the homosexual issue is unresolved" not only ignored the results of the denominations' one attempt to discern the state of the churches (i.e., the Listening Committee) but ignored the on-going ferment in the churches and broader society that saw increasing numbers

[3] Available online: http://ljohns.ambs.edu/HSCL/hscl-cl.htm
[4] Online: http://ljohns.ambs.edu/LCReport.htm
[5] Online: http://ljohns.ambs.edu/LCRecomm.htm
[6] Online: http://ljohns.ambs.edu/DIALOGUE.htm

of people within and outside of the churches become more open to the acceptance of same-sex relationships.

MERGER AND THE "MEMBERSHIP GUIDELINES"

In February of 2000, an open letter was published in the *Mennonite Weekly Review* signed by close to 1,000 Mennonite church members, including numerous pastors and other church leaders, calling for a more inclusive approach.[7] The letter asked for more conversation among those in Mennonite churches and sought to demonstrate that those who favored inclusion made up a sizable minority of church members.

I signed the *MWR* letter and afterwards learned that I was the only ordained person in Virginia Mennonite Conference (VMC) to sign it. About a year after the *MWR* letter, VMC issued a statement requiring ordained people in the conference to agree not to advocate against the statement's points about "homosexual practice"—including this one: "We believe that the practice of homosexuality is rebuked by Scripture as sin."[8] This requirement was never actually strictly enforced, but I did face an extended process of having my credentials reviewed. The *MWR* letter was released in the midst of negotiations between the MC and GC to merge. Numerous people took the impending merger as an opportunity to exert pressure to keep Mennonite churches from allowing for the presence of the inclusive perspective affirmed in the *MWR* letter.

At the joint general assembly of MCs and GCs in 1999, the GCs voted to affirm the merger. And, Canadian members of both denominations decided to join together apart from the US churches and form Mennonite Church Canada as a separate entity from the US churches. However, the MC delegates did not achieve the pro-merger vote that was required, so the process continued. One of the main stated issues was that numerous MC delegates threatened to reject the merger unless the anti-inclusive stance of the denomination were strengthened.

So, what became the 2001 Membership Guidelines were formulated. Enough of those who opposed inclusion found the strict anti-inclusion provisions acceptable (and enough of those who supported inclusion were willing to give up on a more inclusive denominational stance for the sake of achieving the merger) that the delegate approved the merger and Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) was created. It was notable, that in face of the threats by some not to agree to the merger, these Guidelines, a relatively short document (4 pages) that spoke to the key issues that would

[7] Online: http://www.welcome-committee.info/openletter.html
[8] Online: http://ljohns.ambs.edu/Virginia.htm

shape the proposed new denomination devoted about 25% of its length and one of its three main sections to "Clarification on some issues related to homosexuality and membership," in effect giving the "homosexuality" issue status as the most important issue facing this new denomination.[9]

CONTINUING TO GIVE IN TO THREATS

The Guidelines established as the "teaching position" of MC USA that "homosexual sexuality activity is sin" and that MC USA pastors must not officiate at same-sex weddings. As with earlier efforts, they tried to impose uniformity on denominational understandings—in face of an ever-growing number of Mennonites who favored a more inclusive approach. The Guidelines did not settle the issue. Gays and their allies continued to be visible in Mennonite communities. Hence, the dynamics of threatening to leave continued. Two particularly ironic examples of this process led to the removal of two congregations from MC USA.

The policy of the new denomination allowed only congregations that have membership in area conferences to be members of the denomination (this policy was different in the former GC church that did allow individual congregations to be in the denomination).

Germantown Mennonite Church in Philadelphia had been a member both in the GC Eastern District (EDC) and the MC Franconia Conference (FMC). It had become a publicly welcoming congregation, with openly gay members. During the 1990s, FMC removed Germantown, but the EDC could not because, like the other GC conferences, it did not have provision for the removal of congregations. When the merger was approved (which meant with the new polity, conferences could kick congregations out), leaders of congregations that had already decided to split from the new denomination because it was "too liberal" acted at the EDC annual meeting just before they left the conference to get EDC to kick out Germantown.

When the merger was approved, the various conferences from the two merging denominations had also to decide whether to join the new denomination. The Virginia Conference (VMC) contained two districts that did not favor the merger and threatened to (and eventually did) leave rather than be part of MC USA. Numerous other individual congregations also shared similar sentiments. One of the presenting issues was the lack of rigorous enough rejection of homosexuality (this despite the Guidelines and various Virginia Conference actions such as the above-mentioned prohibition against "contrary advocacy").

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[9] See my critique of the Guidelines above in chapter 8, pages 77-93.

While this process was proceeding, a tiny congregation in Harrisonburg—Broad Street Mennonite Church—agreed to allow its meeting space to be used for a same-sex wedding (neither of the partners were part of the congregation). Another congregation in VMC objected and threatened to leave VMC if Broad Street weren't forced to refuse to allow the wedding. The Broad Street congregation, which had no gay members and had not made a public statement in favor of inclusion, refused this demand. Over just a few months, the conference decided to kick Broad Street out over this refusal. Ironically, the congregation that had initially raised the issue left the conference anyhow.

At this same time, VMC leadership also was pursuing discipline against a pastor of a different conference congregation, Kathleen Temple (my wife) of Shalom Mennonite Congregation.[10] Kathleen sought to adhere to the no "contrary advocacy" demands of the conference, but was under scrutiny because of her unwillingness to agree theologically with the conference position on "homosexuality." Ultimately, the conference leaders decided to take away Kathleen's ordination.

THE SOUL OF MC USA

MC USA has continued to experience people making threats to leave. The threats are used as leverage to impose conformity with restrictive denomination statements. The dynamic is on-going because the numbers favoring inclusiveness have continued to grow. The recent emergence of the Pink Menno movement[11] has provided powerful evidence of the growing presence within Mennonite churches of those with inclusive beliefs, especially among young people. The Pink Mennos have had a prominent public presence at the last several MC USA conventions, asking for the church that they are part of to become more inclusive.

Even more recently, an MC USA conference, the Mountain States Mennonite Conference, affirmed the call to ministry of a lesbian pastor by one of its congregations and granted ministry credentials to this pastor followed by Central District Conference doing likewise. And Eastern Mennonite University initiated a "listening process" of discernment that culminated in the school implementing a policy of non-discrimination in hiring gay faculty and staff—they soon were joined by three other MC USA college: Bethel, Bluffton, and Goshen. And a group of over 150 MC USA credentialed pastors (and a few whose credentials have been removed) signed an open letter calling for more inclusiveness.

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[10] See the Appendix to this book, below, for a detailed account of this story.

[11] See online: http://www.pinkmenno.org/history-vision/

These events have led to a sense of crisis among many. And a renewal, it appears, of threats by some congregations and, now, conferences, to leave the denomination. I had a conversation a few weeks ago with a leader in the largest MC USA conference where he expressed a serious expectation that a major split is quite likely in the near future over these issues.[12]

My sense is that this current crisis, whether or not it is the most serious one we have faced yet in this 30+ year process of coming to terms with the presence of gay Mennonite church members, has roots in the action by denominational leaders at the 1983 Bethlehem Assembly to dismantle the Brethren and Mennonite Council booth.

Ironically, those courageous BMC activists made the Mennonite churches a wonderful offer back then. "We are willing," they in effect said, "to face intense hostility in order to help you to learn to talk about these issues, to learn to know us as human beings, and to help you as you seek to discern the work of the Spirit in our present day." BMC's purpose was not actually so much to do its work on behalf of gay Mennonites (that certainly was part of the work) as it was to do its work on behalf of the Mennonite churches, on behalf of the spiritual wellbeing of this community of Christians that the BMC members themselves loved.

By dismantling that booth, a slap in the face that—to the BMCers' everlasting credit—did not drive advocates for inclusion away, the denominational leaders set in motion a dynamic that continues today. The people who manifest a spirit of fear, a spirit of destruction and coercion, a spirit of willingness to leave and even destroy the denomination if they don't get their way—these people have been empowered by the continual enablement of the threat dynamic that we see in the history recounted above.

THE FUTURE

About ten years ago, my church (Shalom Mennonite Congregation in Harrisonburg) initiated a process that led to our transfer from Virginia Mennonite Conference to Central District Conference (CDC). I have been struck with a sense that CDC is indeed the future of MC USA. I won't make this a prediction, but I will suggest one way to see how things may go. At the heart of the CDC ethos is a commitment (in harmony with the practices of the old GC church that CDC originates in) to being

[12] Since this article was written, this conference, Lancaster, did decide to withdraw from the denomination and a new organization meant to provide a denomination-like home for former MC USA congregation called EVANA was launched.

church together amidst diversity. CDC does not have a mechanism to remove congregations. When there are differences, it is not an option to tell a congregation that you must fit into our mold or else you will be kicked out. So there is no leverage available to leaders or congregations who would threaten to leave unless someone else is kicked out or at least disciplined and forced to conform.

I have often wondered what the past 12 years in MC USA would have been like (and what the future would look like) if the merging denomination had followed the GC path of no provision for kicking people out rather than the MC path of the constant possibility of top-down coercion and threats. As it turns out, I suspect, the GC polity (ala CDC) is where MC USA ultimately will end up anyhow. But it seems as if there are two very different kinds of path to get there.

One path is that the denomination itself makes an overt decision to change how our polity works. We would do this intentionally and allow for extended education and conversation and try to have as much support and agreement concerning this change as possible. We would recognize that some congregations would not accept the change and we would accept that such congregations may leave. The other path would be the longer term result of congregations continuing to split off, denominational leaders continuing to empower the threat dynamic, on-going ill-feeling and low and even high level conflicts. Finally, the people that remain will be those who adhere to a GC-like approach.

As I reflect on the current ferment, I wonder about denominations and about our denomination in particular. I fear that too easily Mennonites have come to equate "church" with "institutional church, i.e., denomination." I hear a lot of people, especially leaders, use the language of "the church" (in the singular) when they talk about the denomination, with the implication that this is a coherent, stable entity. Such a concept of church as institution/denomination can lead to a kind of idolatry. One way this idolatry expresses itself is when violent, hurtful actions (or inactions) happen for the sake of insuring the institution's survival. The above litany of the dynamic of coercive threats, the stifling of conversation, and punitive discipline contains all too many examples of such violence for the perceived sake of institutional survival.

Yet, the denomination can exist and not be an idol. It can be seen as penultimate, as existing not as an end in itself but in order to serve the vision of the gospel—summarized most concisely as love your neighbor as yourself. And I do think the MC USA denomination does serve this vision (at times). The institutions can and do (at times) empower Mennonites better and more effectively to love our neighbors. This commitment to love the neighbor (which Jesus, Paul, and John all tell us

is how we love and serve God) should be at the heart of our thinking about our denomination. Of course, the neighbor includes the gay person (and straight person—and those who are hostile toward the gay person). Too often, MC USA has compromised on the call to pursue this love for the sake of denominational survival. Our terrible irony is that such compromises have continued the denomination on a self-destructive path and made marshaling our spiritual resources for creative response to our present crisis much more difficult. Our deepest hope, though, is that regardless of the viability of our denomination as institution, the opportunity to embody the way of Jesus in our broken world remains. Nothing stops any of us from pursuing that opportunity.

IMAGINING HOW MC USA COULD SURVIVE

Let's imagine what it would take for MC USA to survive and thrive. Key roles would be played by people at the top in MC USA and, even more so, by people at the grassroots. It matters little what the people at the top do if they don't have support from the grassroots. On the other hand, those at the grassroots might have quite a bit they can accomplish even without the cooperation of those at the top. But it would be nice to have that cooperation.

The main thing the people at the top might do publicly is explicitly to promise to refuse to cooperate with any efforts to kick anybody out of the denomination—be it a congregation or conference. They could insist that we are all part of the same family, and family-ness that everyone in the family has the responsibility to be there and to have their voice be part of the group's discernment. Now, I can't imagine exactly how we can get to the place where this promise would be given. Certainly, partly it may simply be a matter of luck in having people appointed or elected to these positions who would believe in making such a promise. At the same time, perhaps if strong and clear communication were given to people at the top from a sufficient number of grassroots people, they could be persuaded to make and hold to such a promise.

It seems that a promise not to kick people out is a prerequisite for genuine discernment processes. However, people who truly care about the well-being of MC USA will insist on expressing their convictions regardless of whether they are promised safety or not. So, promises from the people at the top are not absolutely essential.

Something else people at the top could do is be willing to devote the denomination's staff time, monetary resources, and publicity channels to support the kind of regional and local conversations I will sketch below. Again, such support may not be absolutely essential—people who care

about the wellbeing of MC USA will work at creating contexts for conversation regardless of support from the top, but such support could help a great deal.

THE GOAL: A CRITICAL MASS OF MENNONITES WITH A COUPLE OF BASIC CONVICTIONS

What would contribute in essential ways to the healing of MC USA would be that enough people in the denomination would come to share a couple of crucial convictions.

(1) The first conviction is that churches and conferences should not be about boundary maintenance and exclusion. For a long time people have talked about the difference between "centered sets" where the emphasis is on core convictions and practices and people are given the freedom to join the community or not based on their own discernment and "bounded sets" where the emphasis is on defining what differentiates insiders from outsiders and the community (or its leaders) determines who is allowed in and who is not. Being church (on whatever level) is about being committed to a conversation that includes all others in the faith community. To exclude or to use threats to leave in coercive ways undermines the community's processes of discernment and listening to the Spirit. So the starting point toward creating a healthy MC USA is to insist on operating as a "centered set." It may not be possible with the wave of a hand to transform the denomination from the top down on this issue, but if each person who affirms it began to advocate for a commitment to this approach things could change.

(2) The second conviction, simply the flip side of the first conviction, is to affirm that our denomination's viability (as with local congregations and conferences) ultimately depends upon members' willingness to live with trust—trusting that God's truth has intrinsic power and does not rely upon coercion for its sustenance. In fact, truth is undermined most of all when it is "defended" in coercive ways. This trust is essentially an affirmation of the present, gentle, yet persevering power of God's Spirit in guiding and sustaining communities of God's people.

Neither of these two convictions provides much content for the formulation of doctrinal statements or even mission or vision statements. However, I believe they are essential prerequisites for the work of formulating statements and articulating bases of identity and creating coherent communities with a clear sense of why they exist and what their work is to be. The alternative is to continue in our present downward spiral where, in the words of evangelical pastor Ken Wilson, ""The church [exists as] an anxious system, …organized around the most

anxious members, including those who threaten to leave if exclusionary policies aren't upheld."[13]

ORGANIZE VISION-GENERATING CONVERSATIONS

A first task could be to create opportunities for vision-generating conversations—starting on the local level within individual congregations and moving to those in geographical proximity. Ideally, these conversations would spread and grow to encompass ever-larger areas of MC USA members.

One idea of how these conversations would work is to attempt to create statements of core convictions and shared mission. Back in 2005, I was part of an active discussion on the MennoNeighbors listserve where I drafted a list of convictions, submitted them to the online community for conversation, and revised them in collaboration with a few colleagues. The resulting document, "An Anabaptist Vision for the 21st Century,"[14] did not get a lot of traction, but I think it still remains a possible starting point. I can imagine numerous small conversation groups that will wrestle with that statement (or perhaps an abridged version), freely adapt it, offering alternative themes and ways of expressing things. This process could provide a basis for a larger conversation and perhaps a reinvigoration of a sense of the mission of MC USA.

The point of starting with such a statement would be to encourage a sense of coherence among the various conversations. The point would not be to create another confession of faith as an end product. Rather, the goal is simply to have constructive conversations that generate energy for helping MC USA be a mission-driven entity guided by open discernment processes that include the voices of all those who want to be part of MC USA. A central focus for conversation could be to discern what the shared convictions are currently that allow diverse Mennonites to work together across what seem to be major theological divides. Three major examples are Mennonite World Conference, Mennonite Central Committee, and Mennonite Disaster Service. These three quite different entities do not include all Mennonites, but they do manifest profound levels of cooperation for a wide diversity of Mennonites.

What are the shared convictions that allow for such cooperation? These shared convictions certainly do not cover all that matters with

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[13] "An Interview with Ken Wilson, Author of *A Letter to My Congregation*" (March 4, 2014), online: http://www.readthespirit.com/explore/interview-ken-wilson-letter-congregation/

[14] Online: http://peacetheology.net/anabaptist-convictions/an-anabaptist-vision-for-21st-century/

Christian faith. There are reasons for the separations that keep the diverse groups of Mennonites apart. However, energy spent on identifying and reflecting on the commonalities could be inspirational and could provide guidance for how MC USA might move forward in seeking to carry out its mission even while containing important differences.

HOLD INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES LIGHTLY

During the 20th century and on into the 21st, American Mennonites have created many new institutions (denominational structures, schools, service agencies, financial institutions, etc.). These institutions have required many buildings and other kinds of infrastructure. Creating institutional structures means creating entities that require a large investment of resources of time, material wealth, and creativity. One of the challenges when stresses enter a system such as MC USA is the sense of responsibility to sustain the structures that exist. We have invested so much in such structures that it seems the height of irresponsibility not to work hard to keep the structures afloat.

This loyalty to sustenance of institutional structures may, at times, be in tension with the sense of mission and vision that animates much of the energy that draws people to work together in faith-based communities. One big challenge that it seems those in MC USA face today is how to navigate the tension many feel between, on the one hand, a kind of loyalty to institutional survival and, on the other hand, an ability to respond creatively to evolving understandings of how Christian faith calls followers of Jesus to respond to current challenges.

The kinds of conversations I have in mind carry with them an openness to change and new approaches to denominational life. They seem to require flexibility concerning the future of institutional structures. It seems necessary for the sake of the future of MC USA to recognize the need to hold these structures lightly. It may that a willingness to let some of the structures go might actually be the best attitude to have even for the sake of the on-going viability of those very same structures.

A PRACTICE-CENTERED DENOMINATION

What I would anticipate, should my "fantasy" actually come true, is that MC USA would evolve to be more self-consciously what I would call a "practice-centered denomination." Going back to the experiences of those involved with Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service, it does seem like a lot can be done when Mennonites

focus on practical work of service and compassion—even in the midst of on-going theological differences.

Now, part of the power of MCC and MDS is that neither claims to be a denomination. The analogy between MCC and MDS, on the one side, and MC USA on the other, will only go so far. But the analogy is still useful. I believe that a denomination that is decentralized, centered on local faith communities, accepting of differences among its constituent groups, and focused on practical service work in its common endeavors is imaginable. Actually, to some degree these characteristics already describe quite a bit of the MC USA self-understanding. So moving more self-consciously in that direction could be seen mainly as simply being more intentional about what we already say we want to be like.

Focusing specifically on the issues of how MC USA responds to the differences within the denomination in relation to sexuality, I could imagine that clarity about and shared affirmation of a sense of the mission of our common work could provide a context for accepting our diversity on this one set of issues.

A big part of the problem right now, it seems to me, is that those in MC USA do not have a strong enough sense of common mission and shared convictions. So we experience these intense differences as deeply threatening. Hence, my fantasy on how to move toward "a different structural arrangement" centers mainly on talking together about what matters and then letting those conversations provide bases for constructive and creative communal evolution.

10. The moral crisis of Mennonite Church USA

[This chapter includes three blog posts from ThinkingPacifism.net that continue the discussion of Mennonite Church USA's resistance to becoming a more welcoming church. These were posted April 21, 2015, May 12, 2015, and June 19, 2015.]

My sense is that "MC-Mennonites" (from the former Mennonite Church [Old Mennonite] that merged with General Conference Mennonites) tend to feel a strong sense of identification with everyone in their organization (be it congregation, conference, or denomination). So, if there is someone in the organization that they believe is doing something wrong, that reflects poorly on everyone else. People who feel this way are not likely to be comfortable in any kind of structure that allows the wrong-doers to be members in good standing as well.

The current example would be when Mountain States Conference in MC USA licensed a married lesbian for pastoral ministry. For many, this act seems to have offended them in large part because that makes MC USA as a whole complicit with profound immorality. It has been interesting how this has been framed by many as an offense against the denomination by the "renegade" conference. However such a framing ignores that Mountain States seems to have worked fully in adherence with denominational polity that places licensing and ordination solely in the hands of area conferences.

So, for licensing and ordination, there is autonomy for conferences. This actually was, as I understand it, a victory for the MC-polity at the time of the merger because congregational autonomy was greatly reduced. Power was shifted from congregation to conferences, perhaps in part to keep individual deviant congregations in line. However, apparently it was not imagined then that entire conferences would be willing to accept LGBTQ membership and even leadership. Weakening congregational autonomy led to more conference autonomy (everyone at the time seemed leery of providing for increased denominational power).

The response of many to be so outraged about Mountain States action and to threaten to (and already in actuality to) leave the denomination with that action as one of the main stated causes shows

antipathy toward conference autonomy when it comes to actions that are offensive to these folks. Their intense reaction to the expression of a little conference autonomy shows how far from accepting a move toward more congregational autonomy many in the denomination would be. So the idea that MC USA as it is now could make such a move seems far-fetched. Such a move toward more congregational autonomy would not be likely to stem the tide of those whose offended sensibilities are pushing them to leave (or at least threaten to leave).

"COLLECTIVE-CONSCIOUSNESS" ACROSS THE IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM

Interestingly, though, I don't think that this sense of collective-consciousness is a monopoly of what we could call forces on the "right" that oppose acceptance of LGBTQ Christians. I have heard many on the "left" express strong feelings about being part of a conference or even denomination that would allow congregations to accept active military personnel as church members.

In my experience in the old General Conference Mennonite Church, I did not sense this same kind of concern. Perhaps one could relate this to a deeper desire among those in the MC tradition for a sense of being part of a pure church. There seems to be a sense that one's own purity is tainted by being part of a congregation or conference or denomination that does not patrol its boundaries carefully enough.

My suspicion (and I express this very tentatively) is that this collective-consciousness is pretty powerful. And I also suspect that this may be one reason why it is very difficult to imagine a positive outcome for MC USA. Those who support greater inclusion of LGTBQ people—including affirming those with leadership gifts—are not going to be leaving MC USA. Clearly their numbers are growing, and I can see from my own students at Eastern Mennonite University that the support for inclusion is getting ever stronger among younger Mennonites.

THREE LIKELY CHOICES

The people who oppose such inclusion seem to have three choices—(1) they can learn to live with the diversity and even with likelihood that their views will increasingly become minority views in MC USA, (2) they can simply leave (which obviously is difficult and painful for those with long ties to the denomination and the Mennonite identity) or, (3) they can try to stem the tide of change by using threats to leave as leverage to keep denominational policies as restrictive as possible (this clearly has been

effective, at least in the short run—for example, I have heard it said that the main reason that the restrictive Membership Guidelines that shaped the formation of MC USA fifteen years ago were as extreme as they were was due to threats by some large conferences not to accept the merger otherwise) with the intent that at some point they will leave if the tide isn't turned satisfactorily.

Option one is the only choice that would leave MC USA essentially intact. However, if I am right about the strength of this sense of collective-consciousness, it seems quite unlikely that many will be able to take this option. For those with leadership responsibilities in MC USA, I wonder if the main choice is between focusing on clarifying and pursuing a vision for an inclusive church that can place its best energies on embodying the gospel of peace that the Anabaptist tradition has been entrusted with in distinctive ways or focusing on scrambling around as best they can to prevent those who are taking option three above from departing the denomination.

I'm not one who decries the emphasis on these divisive issues in denominational life. They are simply the cards MC USA has been dealt by the cultural moment we exist in. And struggling with these issues is an opportunity for growth. What will be sad, though, is if these challenging times do not lead to greater self-understanding, deeper theological awareness, and a clarification of the core convictions that we want to animate our faith communities. We have a chance to learn a lot from our stressful circumstances—will we have the courage and wisdom to do so?

THE "END" OF MENNONITE CHURCH USA

At the very beginning of my first permanent pastoral assignment, the congregation faced a difficult decision. Two young men who were in a relationship with each other had begun to attend the congregation. One was a new Christian and the other was from Baptist background and deeply interested in the Mennonite approach to Christian faith. And they had felt at home in the congregation. It made sense to take the next step and formalize their commitment to the congregation.

The congregation broke into three groupings in response to the request. A fairly significant majority affirmed the membership request and were delighted with the involvement from these two men. A few people had left the congregation in the months leading up to the membership request and a few others who remained were likely to leave soon. To folks in this second group, it was unacceptable for the congregation to welcome these two men. The third group was made up of people who did not voice opposition to the idea of the two men

becoming members based on theological grounds. Rather, they were concerned that the congregation would get into trouble with the conference to which it belonged if we took this step.

In the end, this third group won the day. The congregation decided not to accept the two men as members, but to affirm them as "active participants." (In this particular congregation, small and informal, formal membership did not accord any direct benefits, though it carried significant symbolic weight.) The congregation thus avoided a conflict with the conference.

As a new pastor, I understood my own role to be mainly to facilitate. In our congregational meeting, I made the call, suggesting that we weren't ready to take the step of formalizing the membership given that probably about one-third of the members opposed doing so. Virtually everyone at the meeting (including the two prospective members) agreed that that seemed right. One family who opposed even the "active participant" designation left the congregation, but otherwise life went on fairly well. The couple continued to feel a part of the congregation for a number of months before (for unrelated reasons) they moved away.

I got mostly positive feedback from the congregation for my role. However, I felt pretty bad as, over time, I thought about what happened. It felt to me that we had been willing to sacrifice the spiritual wellbeing of these two men for the sake of maintaining a kind of peace with the broader conference. I resolved to resist such a possible sacrifice in the future as much as I could. There have been a few occasions when I did do so at least somewhat effectively.

THE MERGER

The merger between the Mennonite Church (MC) and General Conference Mennonite Church (GC) denominations happened when it did due to the creation of the Membership Guidelines. Initially in 1999, the Guidelines that were approved by the GCs and accepted by the newly formed Mennonite Church Canada included nothing about "homosexuality." The American MCs, however, could not agree at the point to merge and create Mennonite Church USA. As a consequence, a revised version was created with a "Part III" that established "homosexuality" as the defining issue of the new denomination.

Part III of the Guidelines committed the new denomination to a discriminatory stance in relation to sexual minorities. The presence of the this addition to the Guidelines proved decisive in garnering adequate support two years later to approve the merger. I found this process distressing. It seemed a prime example of what I had come to see as

deeply problematic—for the sake of the "peace" of the larger institution, the spiritual wellbeing of a vulnerable minority would be sacrificed. I was especially unhappy with the knowledge that numerous delegates who themselves would support non-discrimination nonetheless voted in favor of the Guidelines in order to "hold the church together."

As it turned out, the stopgap measure that made the merger possible did not create peace in the denomination. Many congregations and clusters of congregations left MC USA anyhow, even with the Guidelines in place. And the presence of restrictive Guidelines did not eliminate the presence of many in the new denomination who did oppose discrimination based on sexual identity. So the same dynamics that led to the acrimonious dynamics at the time of the merger continued. Exacerbating the tensions, American culture at large has experienced a sea change in relation to the acceptance of same-sex marriage and other manifestations of a desire to end discrimination against sexual minorities.

Leading up to their 2015 general assembly, the MC USA Executive Board (EB) decided to address the Guidelines.[1] However, rather than acknowledge that the Guidelines were "a temporary agreement written solely for the purpose of launching the new church in 2001" (the language here comes from the introduction to the EB Resolution, though the resolution itself treats the Guidelines as "a binding covenant for ongoing relationships in the church"—this description as a "temporary agreement" seems to be accurate given that there were no Part III to the Guidelines in 1999 and the formation of MC USA was delayed until Part III could be added), the EB has decided to double down and actually strengthen the discriminatory elements of the 2001 Guidelines.

One of the main effects of the Resolution may be to expand the focus of the Guidelines from prescribing certain activities by pastors (no performing of same-sex marriages) to determining who may or may not be credentialed as ministers. Ironically, the background statement to the EB's Resolution asserts that they "hope to use the next few years in delegate assemblies to focus on the mission that draws us together rather than arguments that push apart." However, by doubling down on the boundary maintenance underwritten by the Guidelines, the EB likely is assuring that the "pushing apart" will only be exacerbated.

TWO WAYS COMMUNITIES WORK

One way to characterize how communities function is to suggest two general approaches—core-oriented and boundary-oriented. The core-

[1] This section of the present essay was written before the General Assembly.

oriented approach focuses on what people share in common, what they see as central to their identity as a community, what is at the heart of who they want to be. This core tends toward being invitational—"join with us if you share these convictions, but we won't impose them or require them or police them." With the core-oriented approach, those who perhaps are a bit farther from sharing many of the convictions may slip away, voluntarily. The boundary-oriented approaches focuses more on what differentiates those inside the community from those outside. Effort is put into maintaining clarity about those differences and to make sure that those on the inside have correct views. There is more of a tendency to define and police the boundaries in order to make sure that the differences are sustained. There is more likelihood of people being pushed out if they are not suitably committed to the correct views.

One of the big problems with the boundary-oriented approach is that all too often issues that are not inherently important to the purpose of the community and that are not necessarily at the core of the shared convictions become magnified in importance. These issues are important not so much because they are life-giving and purpose-enhancing but more because they can be policed and enforced.

The elevation of sexuality issues to the stature of essential "Membership Guidelines" that made the merger possible clearly reflects MC USA's decision (made by leadership and confirmed by delegates) to take a boundary-oriented approach. Such an approach is inherently conflictual and coercive. It tends not to enhance the sense of purpose and identity that the core convictions emerge from. To take the deeply flawed Guidelines and enhance their stature in the denomination seems like exactly the opposite of the kind of approach that MC USA leadership should be encouraging in a very stressful and anxious time.

THE "VIOLENCE" OF SIMPLY BEING THERE

I had an experience not long after my congregation's membership discernment process I described above. Our decision to refuse membership did create a sense of peace in the congregation—partly also because the most conflictual people left the congregation because the refusal was not strict enough. And it meant that the congregation itself would not face disciplinary actions from the conference.

However, some in the conference remained suspicious of me. As I moved into my second year of ministry, with support from the congregation, I decided to request to be considered for ordination. I certainly felt some uneasiness about this (as did many in the congregation) due to a sense of suspicion toward hierarchies within the

church. However, we decided that if we were indeed to remain in the Mennonite Church and I was to function as a pastor in the Mennonite Church, we should proceed with denominational expectations concerning leadership credentials.

Powerful forces within the conference opposed my ordination. Even though I had led the congregation as it had decided against welcoming two partnered gay men as members, that I would have even considered accepting them raised suspicions. I was pushed pretty hard in interviews with the Leadership Committee on my views concerning the negative view regarding "homosexuality" expressed in the denominational "Purdue Statement on Sexuality." I expressed that I was uncertain about that—not that I was sure I disagreed with it. My uncertainty was enough to cause my ordination to be held up for several years.

I didn't fight back, but I refused to go away. I wanted to be a Mennonite. I was serving in a Mennonite Church congregation. I couldn't lie and say that I did agree with the Purdue Statement (as one conference leader encouraged me to do). And I wasn't going to give up (in fact, through this process I came to value ordination a bit more).

For many months, the process was at an impasse. A majority of the Leadership Committee supported my ordination, but one holdout kept the process from proceeding. It became a bit of a spectacle. The two top leaders of the Mennonite Church, the Executive Director and the Moderator, both consulted with the Conference. They both worried that the Conference was at an fragile place and should proceed carefully.

In the midst of this, I was part of an difficult meeting with several pastors in the conference. One of them said with great feeling that he just wasn't sure what to think. He hated the idea of losing me, and he hated the idea of losing "Al" (the Leadership Committee member who opposed my ordination). I was too uncomfortable to say much (in part because I felt so young and marginal at that time). But I thought, wait a minute. There's a big difference here. I'm not trying to do anything to "Al." But he's trying hard to hurt me. This felt like a false equivalence—like there were two more or less equally legitimate sides to this dispute instead of one person unjustly attacking another person for no legitimate reason.

A SIMILAR DYNAMIC

This kind of dynamic has seemed present throughout the past thirty-plus years that Mennonites have dealt with the issue of opposition to the presence of sexual minorities in the denomination. Back in the 1983 Mennonite Church General Assembly in Bethlehem, PA, the newly formed Brethren and Mennonite Council for Gay and Lesbian Concerns

(BMC), made up of church members who wanted to be involved in the church gained approval to have a display. In the middle of the convention, denominational leaders came to the display and physically dismantled it and forced the BMC people to leave.

Ever since, the dynamic has been similar. On one hand, you have people who simply want to be part of the church, and have been almost completely peaceable in relation to others in the church. And on the other hand, you have those who want to keep those people out, to make them feel like second-class Christians (or worse), and who single the sexual minorities out as the problem. And then you have people framing this dynamic as two more or less equally legitimate sides in conflict with each other. BMC and, more recently, Pink Menno have been seen as equal belligerents in this conflict even though they are simply trying to be present while those who oppose them have been harsh and coercive.

So, when I read recently of what seems like an admirable effort by some leaders in a Mennonite conference to find space in the middle for a "radical center," I fear their efforts have little chance of helping much because of their false way of framing the situation. The document released by this group calls for strengthening unity in a way that "does not require a solution in which congregations must decide which 'side' of the split they will follow." This implies an equal effort from each "side" to, as it were, break the wishbone.

However, the actual situation seems more akin to one-sided aggression where those who cannot even abide with the presence of LGBTQ Mennonites and their supporters in their conference or denomination are pushing for exclusion with the threat of leaving if they do not get their way. As long as this aggression is treated as just one side of a two-sided conflict, those in MC USA have little chance of moving forward in redemptive ways.

WHERE TO, THEN?

It is possible that there is no way to avoid massive defections from the denomination by those who cannot live with diverse views and practices concerning the treatment of sexual minorities. However, I believe the health of what remains would be greatly strengthened by a self-conscious effort to focus on our purpose (the "ends" we seek) in ways that enhance our sense of our core—and that we give up on boundary policing.

A prerequisite for life-enhancing discernment in MC USA must be a decision to no longer scapegoat or be willing to sacrifice the spiritual wellbeing of a vulnerable minority for the sake of the "peace" of the larger institution. I believe that that kind of sacrifice is what the EB's

Resolution is asking for as it doubles down on the scapegoating dynamic of the Membership Guidelines.

Clearly the issue with "homosexuality" is not LGBTQ Mennonites and their friends who are simply trying to remain part of a church and a tradition that they identify with. The problem, I'd suggest, is more that some Mennonites have not learned how to respect and live with difference and other Mennonites have not learned to let those who can't live with differences self-select themselves out of the fellowship.

Mennonites within MC USA are being given an opportunity within the stresses and anxieties of the current difficulties. We can draw on our peaceable tradition, on the experiences of those LGBTQ Mennonites who have gained clarity and wisdom about their Christian identities in a hostile world, and on the insights of those who raise cautions about the rapidity of changes in relation to sexual mores and the sense that some of these changes at least have not been driven by gospel imperatives.

We could have a conversation with a diversity of views that is characterized by mutual respect, sensitivity to the tradition, and the dynamism of new experiences and imaginings. The more diverse the better, certainly, but the conversation must not be held hostage by the kind of boundary policing the EB's Resolution calls for. It is much more important that the conversation happen with those who want to be part of it than that every possible point of view be represented. If some threaten to remain in the conversation only if others are excluded, they should be allowed to self-select themselves out. That's the only way I can see MC USA facing the future with hope and vitality.

NOT REALLY AN "IMPASSE"

One part of MC USA going forward, I think, is to find a way more accurately to describe what has and is happening around these issues. A key element of this description is to realize that terms such as "impasse" are not particularly accurate. Some commentators have sought to spread the responsibility for the current distress evenly across the spectrum.

My sense is that were we to seek accurately to name the situation, and not insist on being "even-handed" and accepting of the more pleasant myth that this is a situation equally caused by all the stakeholders, we would be led to characterize it in different terms than "impasse." We face a struggle over defining the identity of MC USA. But it is an interesting kind of struggle. To the extent we can, in a general sense, identify two "sides"—recognizing that many people are not identifying with either "side"—what we have had is a dynamic where the two sides are saying very different kinds of things.

One "side" has said: We want to define MC USA with those of you on the other side (LGBTQ Mennonites and allies) not being part of it, at least not as full participants. The other "side" has said simply we are part of this community and want to remain and we hope that you who are more restrictive in your views are part of it as well. The threat causing the fellowship to fragment has always been only from one side. The pro-inclusion people have wanted to contribute to the community's life and strengthen its sense of wholeness. The pro-restrictive people have been the only ones threatening to fragment—by working to exclude LGBTQ Mennonites and those who advocate for inclusion, by threatening to leave if restrictive policies are not implemented, and by actually leaving and taking along with them as many as possible.

We maybe should even go so far as to acknowledge that the core issue in this "conflict" is the issue of exclusion not sexuality (or, perhaps a milder term that I try often to use is "restriction"—as in restricting the participation of LGBTQ Mennonites in the church as well as restricting the participation of supporters of inclusion). One key moment in the story of exclusion came back in 1983 at the Mennonite Church's Bethlehem, PA, General Assembly. The newly formed Brethren and Mennonite Council for Gay and Lesbian Concerns had been granted display space at the convention. Then, after the convention began, denominational leaders personally informed the BMC folks that the permission had been rescinded and the BMC booth was physically dismantled. Since then, BMC has been excluded from General Assemblies.

In the years since, over and over again, various congregations, conferences, and parts of the larger Mennonite denominations have practiced exclusion. For most of this period, not only have LGBTQ Mennonites themselves faced exclusionary dynamics, but also those who have advocated for the churches being non-exclusive.[2]

THE EROSION OF THE EXCLUSIONARY DYNAMIC

More recently, though, the excluding dynamic has become less successful. This change is partly because of the gradual self-removal of many restrictive congregations from MC USA. For example, in Virginia Conference, even with the expulsion of Broad Street Mennonite Church

[2] The examples are manifold. See Roberta Showalter Kreider, *The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Brethren and Mennonite Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been* (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2004). See also the appendix to the present book below, Kelly Miller, "Behind Mennonite Same-Sex Sexuality Debates: Kathleen Temple and Virginia Mennonite Conference, 1998-2002," the story of my wife, Kathleen Temple's loss of ordination in Virginia Mennonite Conference.

from the conference due to its being non-exclusionary, numerous congregations have left the conference. Now, a large Virginia Conference congregation, Community Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, has taken a public non-exclusionary stance and remains in good standing in the conference.

More famously, Mountain States Mennonite Conference has licensed a married lesbian pastor. Other conferences (for example, Central District Conference and Western District Conference) have shown great tolerance toward inclusive congregations. At least three MC USA congregations have openly LGTBQ pastors. The college where I teach, Eastern Mennonite University, owned by MC USA, has gone through a widely publicized process of discernment that concluded with the permanent discontinuing of discriminatory hiring practices, a policy now affirmed by three of the other four MC USA colleges.

None of these developments can be described (at least not accurately described in my view) as "fragmenting" the fellowship. They have all been undertaken in the context of affirmation of the church fellowship and wanting to make MC USA a more welcoming place. The problem arises because those who support a continuation of the excluding dynamic are resisting the evolution of the MC USA community toward a more welcoming community.

As discussed above, those who tend toward exclusionary practices seem to have three choices in face of this evolution. (1) They could accept the new environment, recognizing the need for people in a healthy spiritual community to be able to live with diversity. (2) They could strive to retain and perhaps strengthen the former exclusionary practices. (3) They could leave. The formation of a new ecclesial entity, the Evana Network (for "evangelical Anabaptists"), apparently has the purpose of being a landing place for congregations that leave MC USA.

The second of these three options surely is inherently unstable and temporary. The evolution of MC USA from more exclusionary to more inclusive seems irreversible. The main issue is how large a part of the current denomination will remain as that evolution continues.

SECTION FOUR: Critiques

11. The "homosexuality" debate: Two streams of biblical interpretation

[This chapter comes from the Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation, Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality *(Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008), 21-45. An earlier version was published in C. Norman Kraus, ed.,* To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality *(Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2001), 187-208.]*

In discernment within the controversy over same-sex relationships, we must learn better to different understand points of view. This essay is my attempt to do so. I will describe the main arguments of several recent scholars who, in general, may be seen as reflecting two different understanding of biblical teaching. I use terms "restrictive" and "inclusive" that I hope are value neutral for each of these viewpoints. By "restrictive," I mean views that support restricting the participation in the church of gay and lesbian Christians who are in intimate relationships. By "inclusive," I refer to those who support church inclusion with no restrictions based related to homosexuality per se.[1]

THE "RESTRICTIVE" CASE

Thomas E. Schmidt. *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

In Thomas Schmidt's view, the basic message of the Bible stems from and elaborates on the teaching of the creation story in chapters one and two of Genesis. Our understanding of appropriate human sexual

[1] This essay is written in a similar spirit as a recent book: L.R. Holben, *What Christians Think About Homosexuality: Six Representative Viewpoints* (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1999). However, whereas I have elected to focus in some depth on a few representative writers, Holben offers a more synthetic approach drawing upon many different writers.

expression should follow from Genesis. The creation account makes four crucial points regarding sexuality: (1) Reproduction is good. (2) Sex is good. (3) Marriage is good. (4) Male and female are necessary sexual counterparts (43).

For Schmidt, same-sex sexual relationships are problematic in a basic way. They reflect an implicit rejection of the order of creation—and in doing so they reflect a rejection of God. Same-sex sexual relationships undermine the sanctity of opposite-sex marriage. They declare that a different expression of sexuality outside of the God-created intent for human beings is good (48). Such a rejection of God's will has to be unacceptable for all Christians who accept the authority of the Bible.

The biblical teaching against same-sex sexual intimacy in the rest of the Bible all presupposes the Genesis portrayal of normative marriage and is consistent with that portrayal. The main reason the Bible speaks so clearly about sexual activity outside opposite-sex marriage is because illicit sexual activity is understood to be a threat to the very social foundations of the Bible's faith communities.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 give us the most direct teaching in the Old Testament proscribing same-sex sexual relationships. These two verses have normative force, even though they are surrounded by other commands that present-day Christians no longer consider binding. The normativity of the anti-same-sex sexual intimacy verses follows from their rootage in the creation story. The sexuality commands have the force of abiding moral law, not simply temporal purity regulations that Christians understand to have been superseded in Jesus (90).

Paul's writings reflect the creation ordering of human sexuality. A key text is Romans 1:18-32. This passage begins with a reference to idolatry as the root cause of the immorality addressed in the verses that follow (53). Paul points here to an inherent connection between idolatry and homosexuality. He singles out same-sex sexual activity because he seeks a vivid image of humankind's primal rejection of the sovereignty of God the creator (67). Since God's intent for opposite-sex marriage as the only appropriate context for sexual relationships, the denials of the exclusivity of this context implicit in same-sex relationships means rejecting God.

Schmidt understands Paul to teach in Romans 1 that homosexuality is a paradigmatic case of human being's sense of their identity being distorted due to idolatry. Living in a same-sex relationship is to be in revolt against God. When people live in revolt against God, inevitably their lives will be corrupted, with the consequent consequences of alienation and brokenness (85).

Paul's teaching against same-sex sexual intimacy also found expression in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Paul uses a term

here that he likely coined himself in condemning same-sex sexual intimacy. The Greek word *arsenokoites* clearly comes from the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 that Paul would have used. The Leviticus verse uses two words (*arseno* = "men" and *koiten* = "lies with") that are combined by Paul, presumably to evoke memories of the teaching of Leviticus that forbids "a man laying with another man as he would with a woman" (95-96).

Schmidt concludes that the biblical teaching is being confirmed in our present day as we observe the self-destructiveness of same-sex sexual activity that Paul's teaching in Romans one would lead us to expect. Idolatrous behavior is invariably self-destructive as God "gives up" idolaters to the consequences of their rebellion versus God (100-30).

Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics.* San Francisco: HarperSanFranciso, 1996.

Richard Hays admits that the Bible rarely refers directly to homosexual behavior; however, he asserts, we must recognize that each of these rare references is totally negative and needs to be taken seriously. The two references in the book of Leviticus (18:23; 20:10) establish the basic tone. Their unambiguous prohibition of same-sex sexual intimacy founded the universal rejection of such relationships in Judaism (381).

Hays focuses most of his attention on pertinent New Testament texts, especially Romans 1:18-32. Romans one plays a special role in Christian sexual ethics because it is the only place in the New Testament that explains the Christian condemnation of homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological framework (383). Underlying Paul's theology here is his reference to God as creator. This reference grounds Paul's discussion of sexuality in the story of creation in Genesis one and two (i.e., the portrayal of male/female sexuality as the norm, 386).

The practice of same-sex sex may be understood as a type of "sacrament" for the contra-faith of those who reject God as creator and ruler of the universe (386). Faith in God includes, by definition, an acceptance of the order God has created. Blatantly to deny the exclusive normativity of male/female sexuality, hence, is par excellence an expression of the refusal to honor God as God that Paul sees as the core problem with pagan idolatry.

When Paul writes that same-sex sex is "against nature," he means it goes against the order of creation, as "nature" for Paul means the created order. Those who engage in sexual relations with people of the same sex are acting against nature in defiance of the Creator (387).

Why does Paul single out homosexual intercourse here? According to Hays, Paul does so because it so graphically reflects the way in which human rebellion against God is expressed in ways that blatantly distort the way God created things to be. When rebellious human beings "exchange" their created sexuality for same-sex intimacy, they manifestly show how sinful human beings have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Romans 1:25, 388).

The created order, the "natural" pattern, points toward the exclusivity of heterosexual marriage as the context for appropriate sexual intimacy. The entire Bible supports this understanding. This normativity of heterosexual marriage provides the context for the Bible's univocally negative explicit mentions of same-sex sexual activity (390).

The fact that some human beings might feel a strong sexual attraction toward people of the same sex is not to be understood as necessarily good and trustworthy. That these desires and impulses happen to be involuntary is not evidence that they are appropriately acted on. Due to the depth of the power of sin in the human heart, even our involuntary impulses may well be corrupted (390).

Stanley J. Grenz. *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998.

Stanley Grenz's position rests on his interpretation of biblical texts of two sorts, the handful of texts that he understands directly to address the issue of same-sex sexual intimacy and the overall understanding the Bible gives of marriage as rooted in the creative intent of God. He believes that the fundamental issue in the debate ultimately boils down to how much respect one is willing to give to the teaching of the Bible. For those who uphold the authority of the Bible in the church, Grenz asserts, rejecting the moral validity of all same-sex sexual intimacy is the only option (89).

Grenz understands Old Testament morality concerning sexual relationships to be reducible to one basic principle. The overarching focus of Old Testament sexual ethics is to defend family and married life. The Holiness Code in Leviticus 17–26 argues that any sexual activity outside of the context of heterosexual marriage is a threat to the institution of marriage and hence is an abomination (46).

The extremity of the punishment in Leviticus 20:13 for same-sex sex reflects the seriousness of such a violation of God's intent for human sexuality. Even if we do no longer use the death penalty for such offenses, we nonetheless should recognize the seriousness of the violation that evokes it in Leviticus. The prohibition remains normative for us today, even if the punishment does not (47).

In the New Testament, Grenz argues that in Romans 1 Paul echoes the concerns of the Levitical holiness code in rejecting same-sex sexual intimacy as contrary to God's intentions for human beings. For Paul, only the model of male/female marriage as the one legitimate context for sexual expression is natural and fits with creation's design. Sex outside of this context is "against nature" and brings upon itself God's anger (56).

In responding to claims by inclusivist thinkers, Grenz rejects the idea that understanding the core Christian ethical criterion to be love should lead the church to affirm same-sex covenant relationships as expressions of the ultimate Christian value—love. For Grenz, love must be understood in the context of the overall biblical message of God's intentions for human social life. If God's order is being violated, it is not a loving response to condone that violation.

Genesis 1–2 provides us with crucial information in relation to these questions. Our direction as human beings may be seen in how God created humanity as male and female (Gen 1:27, 103). Furthermore, Genesis 2:18 tells us that the first human being was incomplete. To be complete, human living must include both sexes, different from one another yet complimentary. Grenz understands the creation stories to provide the normative model for marriage—male and female, complimenting and completing each other. From this portrayal, he concludes that sexual intimacy is meant only for people in an opposite-sex marriage. Sexual intimacy addresses our incompleteness that God resolved by creating women to join with men (104).

Sexual intercourse has profound symbolic meaning for Grenz. It is always a symbolic act, with three central messages at its core: (1) Sexual intercourse symbolizes the exclusive bond between husband and wife—reflecting the biblical confession that the person of faith has an exclusive bond with God. (2) Sexual intercourse symbolizes the mutuality of the marriage relationship—each partner finding pleasure in the intimacy and seeking for foster the other's pleasure. (3) Sexual intercourse symbolizes the married couple's openness to new life emerging from their relationship through the birth of children (108).

Grenz argues at length that same-sex covenant relationships simply cannot share in the richness of this symbolism. He believes that legitimate sexual intimacy must always be symbolic in these ways and that the institution of marriage is meant to foster such rich symbolism. In doing so, marriage serves as a crucial element in the life of the faith community.

For Grenz, probably the most fundamental reason same-sex covenant relationships among Christians should not be affirmed is that they devalue marriage (141). He understands monogamous, male-female marriage to be the foundation for Christian communal spirituality.

Willard Swartley, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment.* Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003.

In his introductory chapter, Swartley asserts that unlike his previous writing on issues such as war, male/female relationships, and slavery, there is clarity and uniformity in the biblical witness regarding homosexuality that do not allow for movement away from a more "status quo" view towards a more "liberative" view. "Homosexual practice is not related to grace-energized behavior in a single text," he writes (18).

The three main points Swartley draws from the Old Testament in developing his case for opposing same-sex sexual intimacy are: (1) Genesis 1 portrays God's intention with creation being that sexuality is a good gift, with great power and subject to misuse (27-28). The only appropriate context for sexual intercourse is male/female marriage. (2) The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is rightly understood as focusing on threatened rape as an expression of inhospitality, not on "loving homosexual relations." Nonetheless, it is significant that in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 "it is precisely (homo)sexual lust that precludes hospitality" (31-32). (3) Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 regard same-sex relations as an abomination in the same category as idolatry and child-sacrifice (33). "The fact that same-sex male relations and Molech worship, which involved sacrificing offspring, are linked may be 'telling' of the seriousness of the same-sex offense" (35).

While acknowledging that Jesus did not overtly speak of homosexuality, Swartley draws a number of points from Jesus' teaching that are relevant for our ethical discernment. He believes that Jesus combines a commitment to holiness (e.g., a condemnation of *porneia* [fornication, defined by Swartley as "as sexual genital relations outside heterosexual marriage," 40]) with mercy (e.g., be loving toward even those you must critique for transgressing holiness requirements, 47).

In relation to Paul, Swartley focuses on Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9. He proposes that the Romans passage is particularly important because it links same-sex practices with idolatry—a rejection of the God-ordered normativity of heterosexuality. For people to turn to others of the same sex as sexual partners, according to Paul, reflects a substituting of worship of creation for worship of the creator (51-52).

Paul also condemns female-female sexual intimacy in Romans 1:26-27, so he cannot have in mind only specific sexual practices peculiar to males (i.e., pederasty) but means to make a categorical judgment of all same-sex sexual intimacy (57). Paul grounds this general condemnation on the normativity of Genesis 1–2 and its portrayal of male/female sexual intimacy as the exclusive norm. All exceptions as "unnatural" (57).

Swartley understands 1 Corinthians 6:9 in the context of Paul's concern with sexual libertinism that is reflected in 1 Corinthians 5 and the critique of *porneia* (fornication). Because of the general level of unrestrained sexual behavior in Corinth, Paul and his readers likely knew of all kinds of same-sex relationships, including long-term stable partnerships. Hence, his writing against same-sex sexual intimacy is to be seen as all-encompassing (70).

Paul is best understood, in Swartley's view, as being unalterably opposed to same-sex sexual intimacy simply because it involved people of the same sex. Hence, it is misleading to focus on particularly "problematic" types of sexual expression as if that might make room for Paul accepting "less problematic expressions" (70).

Robert A. J. Gagnon in Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexuality: Two Views*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.

Robert A. J. Gagnon is the most prolific and influential writer who supports a restrictive view. His arguments are developed at great length in his massive volume, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*.[2] A more concise and accessible summary may be found in a more recent book he co-authored with Dan Via, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views.* It is from the latter work that I will draw for this summary of Gagnon's argument.

Gagnon's opposition to the acceptance of homosexual practice stems from his sense of clarity concerning the thrust of the Bible's core values. These core values point unequivocally against homosexual practice (42). As Gagnon develops his argument, he draws on materials from throughout the Bible to support this assertion.

Most arguments in favor of a welcoming stance toward gays use various analogies that devalue explicit anti-homosexual practice texts. Gagnon discusses several (e.g., Gentile inclusion as reflected especially in the book of Acts; the Bible's apparent support for slavery, which is rejected by modern Christians; the recent acceptance of women's leadership in the church; and the acceptance of remarriage after divorce for church members). He argues that none of these analogies holds much weight (43-47). By far the clearest moral analogy, in Gagnon's view, is the parallel between the Bible's perspective on incest and its perspective on homosexual practice. For Gagnon, just as the Bible's prohibition of incest remains normative for contemporary Christians, so too does the parallel prohibition of homosexual practice (48-50).

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[2] Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001. For a critique of this book see below, chapter 12.

Contrary to the argument that Jesus, in his love command, provides warrant for the churches to practice toleration toward gays and lesbians, Gagnon asserts that Jesus' love command most certainly does not underwrite modern-day notions of tolerance (50-53). Jesus' call to love neighbor and God is fully consistent with ethically rigorous convictions concerning moral purity and practices of church discipline that challenge Christians to separate themselves from sinful behaviors.

Gagnon believes that the Bible as a whole explicitly condemns same-sex sexual intimacy. The Old Testament has a large web of texts that directly and indirectly indict same-sex intercourse as unacceptable (56). One key part of this "web of texts" is the story of creation that portrays "one-fleshness" as requiring a male and a female (61). The creation account, Gagnon states, establishes for all times the significance that God has created males and females for each other. This complementarity of the sexes establishes the exclusive normativeness of heterosexuality as the only morally acceptable context for sexual intimacy.

A second key part of the Old Testament's stance may be found in the Leviticus holiness code. Leviticus 18 and 20 single out male-male sexual intercourse as uniquely problematic and in direct violation of the norm of the complementarity of the sexes as the only acceptable context for sexual intimacy (65). The on-going significance of the Leviticus laws for Christians is seen in how Paul directly draws on Leviticus to articulate his own negative views about same-sex sexual intimacy (67).

Gagnon understands Jesus' "silence" on these issues not to be evidence of him having an accepting or affirming view of such practice. To the contrary, that Jesus did not speak directly to this issue much more likely reflects his acceptance of the traditional view that judged all same-sex sexual intimacy as inherently wrong. The best explanation of Jesus' "silence" is that Jesus assumes the "anti-homosex" assumptions of his day and age and simply found no need to articulate those assumptions since they were so commonly shared. As support for this view, Gagnon mentions Jesus' general concern with sexual purity (68-74).

Unlike Jesus, the Apostle Paul did write directly about same-sex sexual intimacy. He articulates the normative New Testament view. In Romans one, Paul links idolatry and same-sex intercourse. He asserts that each problem absurdly denies the clear and natural revelation that leads a person away from authentic life and toward self-destruction. Paul widens the net by also condemning lesbianism, providing the basis for making the biblical condemnation of homosexual practice equally applicable to all same-sex relationships. Paul's comments reflect awareness on his part of all sorts of possible same-sex relationships; hence, his negative conclusions apply to all (75).

In 1 Corinthians six, Paul links back with the judgments of Leviticus in what seems clearly to be a direct allusion to the language of the Levitical prohibition. Here Paul obviously has in mind the biblical presumption about the creation norm of heterosexuality (81).

A third text, 1 Timothy one, while in Gagnon's view not necessarily written by Paul himself, does reinforce Paul's thinking concerning same-sex practice. This passage echoes the Ten Commandments in condemning every conceivable type of male-male intercourse. (87)

As a consequence of the clear message of the Bible—and the centrality that biblical ethics should have for Christians—Gagnon concludes that the church must explicitly oppose homoerotic acts in order to remain faithful to its Lord (91).

THE "INCLUSIVE" CASE

Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott. *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994.

According to Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Mollenkott, the core message of the Bible is Jesus' command to love one's neighbor as oneself. With the love command as central, we will then be impressed with a passage such as Acts 10–11, the story of the change in which the early Christians began to welcome non-Jewish Christians as full members of the church. With Acts 10–11 as our model, they assert, we will realize that we may be called to transcend rules and simplistic readings of scripture in order consistently to live in light of the love command (17).

Scanzoni and Mollenkott believe the gospel calls upon Jesus' followers to be partisans and advocates of marginalized people (39). When the love command is the starting point in approaching the Bible, we will place the highest priority on biblical texts that call upon us to welcome the lowly and outcasts. This benefit of the doubt toward compassion for the outcast challenges followers of Jesus to overcome the social gap between themselves as heterosexual Christians and homosexuals. This gulf is necessary for objectifying and excluding (51).

Scanzoni and Mollenkott do turn to the traditional texts that overtly refer to same-sex sex. They begin, however, by emphasizing that the context for the mention of same-sex sexual activity in scripture is always that of other negative acts—for example, adultery, failure to propagate, promiscuity, violence, idolatrous worship. The sexual acts themselves are not condemned in isolation from the other problems (56).

For example, the story of Sodom in Genesis 19 tells not about same-sex sexual orientation and intimate loving relationships. The story there

is about heterosexual males who were bent on gang rape (58). A second example, Leviticus 18–20, reflects a deep concern for ritual purity as a means of showing Israel's distinctiveness as a people set apart for God. Activities that reflected conformity with surrounding cultures, particularly their religious practices understood by Israelites to be idolatrous, were strictly forbidden. It appears that Israelites associated male/male sex with such practices.

A third example of the Bible's references to same-sex sexual activity being connected with other problems is seen in Romans. In chapter one, Paul says nothing about homosexual *love*; rather, the focus is on sexual activity in the context of lust and idolatry (68).

The final examples of the Bible's mention of same-sex sexual activity come in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. In both of these cases, Scanzoni and Mollenkott argue, the writer is referring to particular types of sexual abuse, not homosexual orientation in general (76).

Another central issue in discussions from the Bible, according to Scanzoni and Molenkott, is the argument that the story of creation establishes male/female sex as the only acceptable type of sexual expression. However, they argue that the core concern in Genesis 1–2 is to tell us how we got here (hence, the allusion to procreation)—not to indicate that this is the only valid type of sexual expression. To say that procreative sex is the only morally legitimate form would not only condemn same-sex sex but also any opposite-sex sex from which procreation is known ahead of time not to be a possibility (81).

Daniel A. Helminiak. *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1994.

Daniel Helminiak argues that we must not draw strong conclusions about the applicability of biblical texts to present-day issues when we do not have adequate historical background to determine what the texts meant to their writers and first readers (32). This uncertainty applies to the small handful of texts that appear to address issues of same-sex sexuality. As well, Helminiak argues, from what we can tell about the biblical teachings concerning same-sex sexuality, it appears clear that the Bible did not address the same types of relations that are under scrutiny in today's context. The Bible did not know of homosexuality as a sexual orientation; only of homogenital acts. Hence, it gives no answer "about spontaneous affection for people of the same sex and about the ethical possibility of expressing that affection in loving, sexual relationships" (33).

In Helminiak's view, an action is not wrong simply because a Bible verse seems to label it as such. "A thing is wrong for a reason. If the

reason no longer holds and no other reason is given, how can a thing still be judged wrong" (33)?

Genesis 19, the story of Sodom, tells of a violation of hospitality—not of a society that is judged because of its tolerance of loving same-sex intimacy (40). The second Old Testament passage commonly referred to in discussions of sexuality, Leviticus's double mention of the prohibition of "men laying with men as with women" (18:23; 20:10), stemmed from concerns about idolatry—not from scruples about sex per se (45). The prohibitions in the Holiness Code include a wide variety of actions with the common theme of being actions that were characteristic of those outside of Israel. Many of these actions were not understood to be wrong in and of themselves, but because they were connected with Gentile, and not Jewish, identity. Hence, Helminiak asserts, "no thought is given [in Leviticus] to whether the sex *in itself* is right or wrong" (46-47).

Male/male sex is called an "abomination" in Leviticus 20:13. By abomination is meant "impurity," Helminiak argues, or the violation of a taboo. It is not called something wrong in itself, a "sin." It is a ritual violation (52). Helminiak concludes that the focus in Leviticus is on practical, historically particular concerns. The prohibition against male/male sex here must not be seen as a timeless, absolute prohibition. Rather, it is time and context bound.

Helminiak argues that Paul's concern in Romans 1 centered on people engaging in sexual practices of the type that was not normal for them—that is, people who normally were heterosexually oriented having sex with people of their own sex. He refers to Paul's use of "against nature" in Romans 11:24 (cf. it is "against nature" for Gentile "branches" to be grafted on to the "tree" of Israel) to support the argument that when Paul uses that phrase in Romans one he has in mind simply that which is unexpected (65).

In Romans 1:27, Paul is concerned not with same-sex sex as the key issue but with idolatry, people worshiping that which is not God. Paul makes a point about idolatrous practices among Gentiles, including people having "unexpected" sex—sex of a sort that they do not normally practice (77). If this is an accurate reading of Paul's intent, then the point of Romans 1 is not to provide a basis for present-day rejection of the moral legitimacy of loving, mutual, committed same-sex intimate relationships. Rather, Paul's words apply more to people engaging in sexual practices that are obsessive, out-of-control, promiscuous, and directly refuting godly values of commitment, mutuality, and respect.

Helminiak understands the other brief references to same-sex sexuality in Paul's writings (1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10) to be similar in meaning. The key term, used in both verses, is the Greek word

arsenokoitai. According to Helminiak, Paul uses this term (translated "sodomites" in the NRSV) to indicate a type of male/male sexual activity that is "wanton, lewd, and irresponsible." Paul is not meaning to focus on the fact that this activity happens between people of the same sex so much as on its nature as exploitative and obsessive (85). That is, Paul is concerned about the harm done to people when they are out of control sexually, *not* about mutually edifying intimate relationships.

Martti Nissinen. *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

Martti Nissinen argues that the Levitical holiness code reflects a perspective on sexual activity that understood regulations in terms of strengthening the identity of society, its integrity and growth. For the ancient Israelites, social cohesion was linked with strong sex roles and protection of family relationships. Anything that challenged sex roles or family relationships would have been seen as a terrible threat to the viability of the Israelite community. Taboos related to sex roles and sexual expression arose to protect this identity (41-42). The regulations on sexuality, including the prohibitions of male/male sex, must be understood in light of this quest of community survival.

Nissinen links sex roles with the prohibition of male/male sex. The code focuses exclusively on males because it would have been impossible for female/female sex to challenge male domination (the domination being symbolized by the active, penetrating role males played in sex). What made male/male sex an "abomination" was one of the males taking the female role (being penetrated), thereby transgressing sex boundaries and confusing sex roles (43-44). The holiness code prohibits such sexual activity because of a desire to maintain distinct sex roles and because of a specific concern about rejecting non-Israelite religious practices. Neither of these concerns applies to modern-day Christians; hence, the prohibition has no direct application for us, Nissinen writes.

In Genesis 19, the story of Sodom is a story of inhospitality, not of sexual behavior. The story makes this point by presenting two positive examples of hospitality, Abraham (18:1-5) and Lot (19:1-3), that contrast with the inhospitality of the Sodomites. The story of the murdered concubine in Judges 19 parallels the Sodom story in important respects and reinforces the point that the mob's concern was the expression of dominance and inhospitality, not same-sex sexual desire (51).

Moving to 1 Samuel, Ninissen calls the relationship David and Jonathan had "homosocial" (a close friendship between men that may or may not have erotic expressions, 17). He suggests that their kind of

friendship, based as it as on love and equality, may be "more comparable with modern homosexual people's experiences of themselves than those texts that explicitly speak of homosexual acts that are aggressive, violent expressions of domination and subjugation" (56).

Regarding Paul, Nissinen states that in the Hellenistic world of Paul's day, same-sex sex was considered "against nature" for two reasons: first, it did not lead to procreation, and, second, it signaled a violation of sex roles wherein the male always was "active" and the female always "passive" (88). Paul himself uses the phrase "against nature" several times in his letters as "a matter of the common order of things as Paul had learned it." For Paul, "unnatural" or "against nature" means something beyond normal experience—good or bad. When he uses the term in Romans 1:19-32, he is not using it as a technical term with specifically Christian content. "Against nature" means "unusual" or "not what one would expect" (105). Paul does not have "the created order" in mind when he uses "against nature." He is not alluding to Genesis 1–3. He simply echoes the Hellenistic sense that those he speaks of in Romans one are not practicing the kind of sex one would expect (106-7).

Paul's central concern in Romans one is not sexuality at all. Paul uses the references to idolatrous sexual activity in order to raise the ire of his readers and to gain their approval of his condemnation of what his readers would have seen as typical Gentile sinfulness. Paul does this, though, not in order to add to the sense of righteousness that his readers may have had in reading these words but actually to turn the tables. Paul's use of Romans 1:18-32, as it turns out, is to drive home his point about the problematic self-righteousness of his readers. Paul, in the end, is challenging his readers not to be judgmental (111).

The specific meaning of the terms used in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 that are often translated as referring to same-sex sexuality is actually quite obscure. In both passages, though, the context makes it clear that both *arsenokoites* and *malakos* are examples, along with numerous other terms used in these verses, of the exploitation of persons. Paul is concerned with the wrong that people do to others, not with non-harmful intimate relationships (118).

David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni. *What God Has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage.* HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

David Myers and Letha Scanzoni address, as their fundamental concern, the issue of marriage among gay and lesbian Christians. Human beings thrive best in life-giving intimate relationships, as our most basic human drive is for loving connections with other people (11). Human

happiness tends to be linked with the possibilities of covenanted attachments in marriage partnerships. Married people tend to be happier than unmarried people (16-17).

Myers and Scanzoni assert that we do not yet know why people end up attracted to others of their same sex; we do know, though, that for some people this attraction is irreversibly fixed. Hence, to forbid people with such attraction to enter into possibility of marriage is highly problematic. In doing so, we may be consigning a significant number to people to lives that will be less fulfilling and fruitful than they could be. We face, in the authors' perspective, a major benefit of the doubt against so limiting the options of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

So, Myers and Scanzoni ask, do we have clear bases in Scripture for taking a stance that seems, in face of the life-enhancing possibilities of marriage, to be morally problematic? They do not think so. The Bible does not use the word "homosexuality." The few references to same-sex sexual acts all seem to have in mind other kinds of problems—e.g., lust, idolatry, violent rape, exploitation, promiscuity. The Bible has no awareness of today's understandings of homosexual orientation or the possibility of covenanted same-sex partnerships (84-85).

Regarding the New Testament, Myers and Scanzoni point to the story in Acts about how Peter gave up his long-held assumptions and came to a more open view concerning Gentiles. Peter's change of heart stemmed in part from his personal contact with Cornelius and recognition that Cornelius truly was a person of faith. Peter ultimately stated, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). This experience of Peter's sheds light on how Christians today might approach issues related to homosexuality. As heterosexual people get to know devout gay and lesbian people of faith, they may well be "forced to reconsider long-held assumptions and interpretations of Scripture" and come to see God as showing "no partiality" (102-3).

Jesus himself did not directly speak to homosexuality. However, Myers and Scanzoni believe that Jesus' general orientation of compassion and care should mark the churches' approach to same-sex relationships(103-4). They reject the argument that Jesus established an exclusive norm for heterosexual marriage in his comments about marriage in Mark 10:6-9. He was responding to a direct question about the permanence of marriage, not making a philosophical statement about sexual differences and about the idea that human wholeness requires the merging of two incomplete halves. As did Paul, Jesus spoke positively about singleness with no hint that single people were not whole human beings (109).

The notion of innate sexual differences and the need for heterosexual marriage to provide the context for a needed "complementarity" that uniquely allows for human wholeness fosters a continued dependence of women on men for their completeness. According to Myers and Scanzoni, such an approach hinders everyone's call to "be whole persons who can develop both their active and affective sides" (111).

They cite Hosea 2's characterization of the marriage covenant as including "justice, fairness, love, kindness, faithfulness, and a revelation of God's personhood," asserting that these characteristics can just as likely be part of a same-sex marriage as a heterosexual marriage (113).

Jack Rogers. *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church.* Westminster John Knox, 2006.

Jack Rogers starts with an affirmation that discriminating unjustly against anyone in the church is a terrible problem (x). He argues that discrimination against gays and lesbians in the churches is an important example of such unjust discrimination. Rogers links the present-day movement for full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in the churches with earlier movements in which the church, "guided by the Holy Spirit in understanding the Scriptures," affirmed the full inclusion, including ordination, of African Americans, women, and divorced and remarried Christians. In each case, Christians moved from a literalistic reading of the Bible to one that centered on the life and teaching of Jesus (15-16).

Following the way of Jesus should empower Christians to show love for all, including especially the "outcasts of society." Rogers believes it is unthinkable that Jesus would turn away people who had been treated harshly by society, including those whose treatment had pushed them to attempt suicide. (56-57) If we read the Bible in light of Jesus' compassion toward those labeled as outside of the boundary lines of "pure religion," we will question the applicability of biblical statements that in their context spoke against same-sex sexual behavior as expressions of idolatry and unbridled lust to present-day instances of monogamous, covenanted intimate partnerships among Christians whose lives reflect fruitful relationships with God. That is to say, the "plain sense" of the "anti-gay" texts requires consideration of the contexts of those texts—and such consideration will make it clear how different the biblical contexts are from the present context of 21st-century North American churches (58).

According to Rogers, the Bible's condemnation of sexual contact between two men reflects cultural assumptions that saw such conduct as a confusion of sex roles—assumptions totally ignorant of what we understand today to be the innate sexual orientation of many who are

attracted to those of the their same sex (65). The cultural embeddedness of these assumptions renders them non-normative for present-day Christian ethical discernment.

The Bible's strongest prohibitions of male/male sexual relationships are found in the book of Leviticus. The cultural context for those statements is the need Israelites felt for strong cohesiveness as a means of sustaining their identity as a people in relation to the Egyptians and Canaanites. A key aspect of maintaining this separation was to avoid "mixing" in any way with Canaanites and their social and religious practices. This priority on the avoidance of "mixing" came to apply to a wide range of behaviors, not having more than one kind of seed in a field and not having more than one kind of fabric in one's clothing. For two men to have sex would be to mix sex roles, one taking on the role of a woman, thus crossing a cultural boundary in intolerable ways (72). Thus, the condemnation of male/male sex in Leviticus applied to a specific cultural context. It was not a timeless, absolute directive.

Rogers also does not believe that Paul's writings that are often cited actually support exclusionary approaches to gays and lesbians in the church. Partly, this view is based on his understanding of the meaning of the words Paul uses, *arsenokoitai* and *malakos*. He concludes that *arsenokoites* is best understood as alluding to economic exploitation, likely related to sexual activity—not as a general condemnation of all same-sex sexual intimacy (73-74). *Malakos* likely refers to effeminacy and/or general lack of self-control (74). In both cases, accurately to understand Paul's meaning, we must think much more in terms of specific cultural contexts and not general, meant-for-all-time ethical prescriptions (75).

In discussing Romans 1:18-32, Rogers again emphasizes reading the text in its cultural context, arguing once more that the meaning of the text when read thus does not have direct relevance to present-day same-sex intimate partnerships. Paul's main concerns here are with idolatry as expressed in excessive, lustful sexual behavior. When Paul uses the idea of the behavior he is referring to being "unnatural," he is not speaking about "homosexuality" versus "heterosexuality." Rather, he means to say that the excessive, lustful aspects of the behavior are "unnatural" (that is, unconventional, out of the ordinary, contrary to social expectations). Hence, his point does not address same sex relationships per se (77-78).

Finally, Rogers also rejects the argument that the biblical understanding of creation (male and female as the exclusive norm for covenanted partnerships) provides a basis for discriminating against gay and lesbians in the churches. He points out that nowhere in the Bible is creation used as a supporting motif in the formulation of norms for sexual relations and marriage. Genesis 1–2 is not about homosexuality or

marriage; that passage is not intended to speak to present-day questions concerning homosexuality (85).

WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES?

In this essay I have summarized diverse theological and biblical perspectives on the issues related to "homosexuality." In conclusion, I will identify some key questions that arise from this comparative report.

APPLICABILITY OF BIBLICAL MATERIALS

Our two groups seem clearly to differ on how we should apply biblical materials, though not necessarily on the authority of the Bible per se. One of the basic issues here is how clear do we understand the Bible to be? Is it possible categorically to equate the biblical teaching with a certain present-day position? One side seems fairly comfortable with such an equation; the other seems more to say that when studied carefully, the Bible does not yield a clear position. These latter writers do not dismiss the Bible out of hand but rather come to a different understanding from what is found in the Bible.

Another issue concerning the applicability of the biblical materials may be framed as a question of how directly these materials should be applied to the present day. How seriously do we take the distance in time, geography, language, and culture between the Bible times and ours? What are the implications of this distance? One crucial text where this issue is central is the one direct biblical prohibition of male/male sex, the holiness code in Leviticus. One side says that, carefully considering the distance, the Levitical prohibition provides us with directly applicable directives; the other side tends to understand Leviticus as part of an entirely foreign context that at most has general relevance for Christians.

MEANING OF CORE REFERENCES.

The handful of biblical texts that speak directly of same-sex sex lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. A central difference can be seen in opinions about whether these texts refer to relationships that are analogous to present-day same-sex intimate relationships. The differences in relation to this question may be the most substantial in this controversy among the writers I have summarized here.

For progress toward rapprochement in the controversy, it is crucial to focus some serious energy on the extent to which legitimate analogies may be drawn between biblical cases and present-day cases. I actually

believe that some progress could be made, but that progress requires careful work in constructing criteria for what constitute legitimate analogies—followed by applying those analogies to the biblical materials.

Differences related to specific texts are also obvious. Four of my restrictive writers do not draw upon the Sodom story in Genesis 19 as central to their arguments, though certainly others do, including Robert Gagnon.[3] The inclusive writers all reject such an application.

The three texts whose interpretations are the most conflicted are Leviticus 18–20, Romans 1, and 1 Corinthians 6. Is Leviticus reflecting an underlying, universal, creation-based principle as the basis for the prohibition of male/male sex, or is it reflecting instead time-bound contextual concerns that no longer are directly relevant for Christians? Is Romans one relevant to all same-sex relationships or only same-sex sex that is practiced by people who are heterosexual in orientation? Does its critique of the sex as "against nature" rest on an understanding of a God-ordained created order in which male/female sex is the exclusive norm or does it rest on a more practical view that this is sexual activity that is "unexpected"? How certain may we be about the meaning of the Greek terms in I Corinthians 6:9 that have in recent years been translated in English as "homosexuals" and similar terms? Are these terms referring to same-sex sex per se or rather to exploitation and moral laxity?

"CREATION" AND MARRIAGE

The restrictive writers understand the creation account of Genesis 1–2 and its later use by Jesus to be crucial for establishing the exclusive normativeness of male/female marital sex. People on the other side reject that interpretation and application. What is the significance of human beings being portrayed as "male and female"? Is this simply a descriptive statement centered on saying that we come from procreative sex without the implication that such sex is the only morally legitimate type? Or is it more a normative statement meant to establish that male/female marital sex is all that God endorses? How should we apply Jesus' use of the creation story in a passage such as Matthew 19? Does he echo a normative portrayal of the only appropriate type of sexual intimacy? Or is he merely focusing on male and female relations because that was the specific concern he was addressing in speaking on divorce?

Even if one understands the Bible to affirm the centrality of male/female marriage to human community lived before God, does it

[3] See also Donald Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998).

follow that same-sex intimate relationships must be rejected as morally inappropriate? Does seeing male/female marriage as the norm mean that any exception is a threat to the norm? Or are these actually two separate issues, with the small minority of Christians who live in same-sex intimate relationships no more a threat to male/female marriage and procreation than are singleness and childless male/female marriages?

"SIN" AND PURITY

The basic question under the rubric of "sin" is how one interprets the basic biblical moral message. Are the sins that Christians should be most concerned about threats to the purity of the community and direct violations of biblical law codes? Or is the sin problem best understood to be centered on mistreatment of marginalized and vulnerable people? That is, should the church be focused on the sin of the alleged misbehavior of homosexual people—or should the church be focused on the sin of the alleged misbehavior toward homosexual people?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

To the extent that the controversy over sexuality lends itself to rational resolution, we would do well to devote more energy to trying to find common ground in relation to biblical interpretation. I do not believe the differences are so much based on different understandings of biblical authority as they are simply on different people finding different meanings in the texts. Hence, in theory we should be able to progress toward some common ground.

To do so, we need to take each other's good faith attempts to grapple with the Bible seriously. Perhaps our biggest challenge is to make the effort to understand one another before launching into our critique. Rather than treating this controversy as an argument to win or lose, we would do much better to think more in terms of a puzzle to solve—and that we all have a contribution to make to such a solution. No one benefits from the acrimony of the current impasses in which the churches find themselves.

12. A critical response to Robert Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*

[These are notes from a 2004 reading of this book; posted on PeaceTheology.net, February 10, 2009]

One takes up Robert Gagnon's book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice,* with some hopefulness given the wide-ranging laudatory blurbs on the dust cover and inside from a variety of prominent biblical scholars. We certainly need careful biblical and theological scholarship that treats the issue of "homosexuality" as a problem to be solved and not as an argument to be won. The old scholarly virtue of objectivity—writers carefully, respectfully, and accurately considering all relevant points of view—has been sadly lacking in most of the reading I have done.

Gagnon's book emerged during the first decade of the new millennium as the go-to book for the "traditional" and "restrictive" view of homosexuality. It is extraordinary thorough, but it will require a careful reading to see if Gagnon actually advances the discussion. In what follows I will stick closely to the development of his argument.

INTRODUCTION

Gagnon's introduction signals that he will not likely provide a careful, respectful, and aspiring-to-objectivity approach. His unwillingness or inability to provide a level playing field for the various perspectives he will consider may be seen in his juxtaposition of the two general approaches he sees being followed in relation to the issue of homosexuality and the Christian churches.[1]

The one side appeals to explicit statements in Scripture regarding same-sex intercourse, the structures of God's creation, principles of

[1] Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 26. In what follows, page numbers will be given in parenthesis in the text of the essay.

sexual holiness, two millennia of church tradition, the influence of the environment on the development of homosexuality, the dearth of long-term and monogamous homosexual relationships, and the negative health effects of homosexual behavior. The other side appeals to genetic causation, the fruit of caring homosexual relationships, the antiquated worldview and obsolescence of other parts of Scripture, and such Christian virtues as tolerance and inclusion.

It seems that he sets up this polarity in order to refute the pro-gay viewpoints. In what follows throughout this long book, Gagnon will always understand the approach of the anti-gay side to be based on solid methods and the approach of the pro-gay side to be based on faulty methods. He gives no sense of what problems with anti-gay assumptions and methods might be and no sense of any validity resting with pro-gay assumptions and methods.

In these early pages, where one would hope for careful definitions of terms to provide some standard with which to hold usage accountable (and to provide stability and clarity concerning what is being discussed), we find no attempt carefully to define terms such as "homosexual," "homosexuality," and "homosexual practice." This lack weakens Gagnon's argument that follows because he does not carefully construct a position based on solid reasoning for each piece in the argument.

Gagnon uses the term "homosexual practice" in an all-inclusive sense of both males and females. In so doing, often he refers to evidence that has to do only with males (e.g., later when he uses incidents of health problems gay men have as a basis to condemn "homosexual practice"; also just about all the biblical references are to males). This uncritical lumping together of "same-sexer" (his preferred term) males and females ignores huge differences between the experiences of the two sexes.

Gagnon seems eager to make global generalizations that apply to all possible same-sex intimate relationships. In order to do, he must minimize the specific contextual factors that shape both the particular biblical references and the actual experience of "same-sexers." When, for example, Leviticus 18 and 20 speak of the "abomination" of "males lying with males," the more one focuses on the specific concerns likely reflected in that legislation that surely relate exclusively to issues related to males in ancient Israel, the more difficulty one will have in directly applying this prohibition to lesbians.

It would seem that a condemnation of same-sex sexuality as inherently wrong should apply to all types of same-sex relationships. If not, then the problem with the particular behavior is better seen as specific to that behavior (e.g., promiscuity, anal sex, rape, pedophilia), not a general condemnation of same sex partners.

Gagnon often seems to reduce "homosexuality" to sexual intercourse, or at least to focus on that aspect. It is important to note that for heterosexual couples in intimate long-term relationships, sexual intercourse is a relatively small (though, of course, often extraordinarily important and meaningful) element of their relationship. Surely this is also the case for those in long-term same-sex partnerships. This point underscores a key point Gagnon ignores—there are logically just as many "homosexualities" as there are "heterosexualities" (e.g., one-night stands, coercive relationships, long-term monogamous partnerships).

Throughout the introduction, the only references that Gagnon makes to his opponents' views are pejorative and dismissive. He makes statements such as the motivation of people who are pro-gay stems from a desire to wear "a badge of intellectual open-mindedness and membership among the avant-garde of cultured society" (26).

Gagnon does mention that he supports vigorously denouncing "anti-homosexual violence." However, he does not develop this point. He cites no cases and "denounces" no specifics. He also immediately qualifies this "denouncing" responsibility by calling "incidents of violence against homosexuals…isolated and relatively rare." In contrast, he cites as more dangerous how these supposedly isolated and rare cases are used in "stifling" and "coercive" ways to pressure people in the churches and broader culture to endorse "homosexual practice" (30). The only allusion Gagnon makes to specific cases of people being persecuted over issues related to homosexuality is to the persecution of people like himself who oppose "homosexual practice" (35).

Hence, Gagnon apparently does not see the tradition and on-going present-day experience of violence and hostility that many "same-sexers" testify to as a significant part of the churches' discernment processes. He presents the issue of persecution and oppression as essentially a wash between "same-sexers" and their opponents. Consequently, persecution and oppression are not part of what we need to factor in to our discussions now. He seems to say that we simply need focus on the sexual practices of "same-sexers" as our main morally significant issue.

In his introductory comments about "homosexual practice," Gagnon brings up the emotionally evocative but essentially ad hominim examples of AIDs, "pick-up murders," and "domestic violence and sadomasochism" (30, 37) as if these are intrinsically part of the discussion of "homosexual practice." However, these problems have nothing to do with "homosexuality" per se, no more than men raping women and male/female domestic abuse have to do with "heterosexuality" per se. In fact, these problems could be seen as bases for arguing that the churches should support same-sex unions and offer their resources to provide

support for covenanted, monogamous, loving relationships as a means of overcoming the problems of AIDs, "pick-up murders," and "domestic violence and sadomasochism."

Gagnon writes as if sexual behavior is the central issue determining whether believers' lives are characterized by holiness. He implicitly defines "holy living" in terms of following "rules" for sexual purity and living free from sin—"sin" defined in terms of breaking rules (34). Certainly the Bible does convey concern about sexual morality when it addresses holiness. However, ironically in light of Gagnon's later use of Leviticus, when we look at one of the core Old Testament texts that elaborates on the call to holiness (Lev 19), we find at the core of concern there a definition of "holy living" in terms of caring for the neighbor, especially vulnerable and marginalized neighbors (orphans, widows, aliens). Throughout this book, Gagnon refuses to factor in the Bible's special concern for vulnerable, marginalized people as relevant for our discernment concerning "same-sexers."

Gagnon, though he is a biblical scholar and focuses his energies on expositing the Bible, nonetheless does draw heavily on assumptions about what is "natural" that are based more on "common sense" (or cultural biases) than on biblical theology, though he asserts (without explicit evidence) that the Bible bases its perspective on these sense of what's "natural." "The Bible presents the anatomical, sexual, and procreative complementarity of male and female as clear and convincing proof of God's will for sexual unions" (37).

As we will see below, Gagnon's basis for what the "Bible presents" on these themes is far short of clear proof; he argues based mostly on silence and the tenuous linking of weak allusions. "Same-sex intercourse constitutes an inexcusable rebellion against the intentional design of the created order" (37). This is an assumption Gagnon brings to the text and then claims to have established as a biblical concern. "It [same-sex intercourse] degrades the participants when they disregard nature's obvious clues" (37). Here we are getting at what appears to be some of Gagnon's energy concerning this issue—he finds same-sex intimacy to be "degrading" and "unnatural" but does not reflect on how these gut feelings might be quite vulnerable to being shaped more by cultural biases than careful reasoning shaped by the good news Jesus embodied.

From the start, Gagnon is imprecise in his use of his central term, "homosexual practice." Because of this imprecision, Gagnon is able to make broad generalizations and, especially problematically, to use emotionally evocative examples of obviously problematic "practices" as if they are characteristic of all "homosexual practice." He never carefully defines what he means by "homosexual practice." It appears that he

means sexual intercourse, but he does not explain what he means by "intercourse" or explain why he calls it "practice." He does not speak to where the line is to be drawn between morally acceptable physical and emotional connections and unacceptable ones. By citing obviously destructive sexual practices in this context without qualification, he seems implicitly to deny a moral distinction between obviously destructive practices and non-obviously destructive practices. However, part of his overall argument will be that "homosexual practice" is destructive, the destructiveness seemingly inherent in the same-sexness of this practice.

THE WITNESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Gagnon's argument from the Old Testament begins with his discussion of Genesis's creation account. Without warrant he smuggles in an "only" when he asserts that the writer recognizes that the "parts fit" male to female *only* and complementarity is achieved *only* in opposite sex unions (63). I would say that one may recognize that Genesis 2:24 ("Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh") is about complementarity, but that there is no logical (and certainly not textual) basis to infer the "only" from this.

Likewise, Gagnon's assertion that Genesis one and Genesis two are "in complete agreement over the *exclusive* claim to complementarity possessed by heterosexual unions" (63, emphasis added) is unwarranted. The affirmation of the male/female union says nothing about exceptions one way or the other, with no necessarily assumption about exclusivity.

Genesis 2:24 is clearly anachronistic (did Adam leave his parents to be with Eve?! – for that matter, was the male leaving his own family ever the norm in biblical cultures?). The notion of "one flesh" is not the norm in the entire Old Testament. What major Old Testament male character was not a polygamist? That is to say, in considering a text such as Genesis 2:24, one must seek to figure out the context and purpose of such a statement. It will not due simply to take the verse out of context and set it up as the basis for timeless norms.

Gagnon presents a creative reading of the story of Ham and Noah in Genesis 9:20-27. He takes an ambiguous story and reads into it antipathy toward "homosexual practice," revealing the single-minded intensity of his agenda. The passage literally refers to Ham "uncovering Noah's nakedness." This could be a euphemism for raping his father in order to gain dominance. Gagnon provides a plausible circumstantial argument for this reading. It is possible and makes some sense, but it is not the obvious or commonly-held interpretation. But Gagnon then concludes "*it can hardly be doubted* that the element of same-sex intercourse was an

important compounding factor leading to the curse" (69, emphasis added)! He has not provided any clear evidence to suggest that this interpretation is the best way to read the text—and certainly not that it "can hardly be doubted."

Though the Bible nowhere mentions "homosexual incest," Gagnon concludes from the Ham story that "incestuous homosexual practice counted as two heinous acts, not one: incest and homosexual practice" (70). Notably, Gagnon uses his all-encompassing term "homosexual practice" here. Even if the Ham story is about the son raping his father, this can hardly be seen as the moral equivalent to a present-day, covenanted same-sex partnership. As well, Gagnon's assertion that Ham's "curse" would have been linked with his "homosexual practice" suffers from a lack of support in any biblical reference or allusion.

Gagnon seems to equate "homosexual orientation" with "depraved, same-sex lust" (70). He apparently does not feel that he has to establish why this linking is valid; he simply asserts it. He states, "the question of homosexual orientation was *surely* irrelevant to the denunciation of same sex intercourse" (70, emphasis added). We are still dealing with the Ham story here. Gagnon now states it as a fact that this story "denounces same-sex intercourse" and that he is certain that orientation is irrelevant to the condemnation of Ham's "homosexual practice." All this in relation to an extraordinarily obscure allusion that has no obvious connection with "homosexual practice."

Gagnon also argues here and throughout the book, that orientation is morally irrelevant in the biblical materials; what matters is "the act" (70). Of course, he infers way too much thickness to the precious few and almost totally cryptic allusions to males having sex with males in the Bible. That is, he assumes much more clarity about what the Bible has in mind concerning "the act" than the Bible actually provides. However, we may grant his point that the Bible is not concerned about orientation. How to apply that point, though, is part of the contested terrain in present-day discussions. It is troubling that Gagnon shows so little respect toward those on the other side of this issue, with no indication that he is open to taking their arguments seriously as part of a dialogue meant to foster greater understanding by all parties. Rather, he simply ignores, or at most mentions in order to dismiss, perspectives different than his own.

Gagnon's view concerning the orientation issue seems to be that if the Bible was not concerned with orientation we should not be either. Others would say that it is precisely at this point that we bump up against the limits of the biblical moral guidance. Present-day understandings of sexual orientation are the result of the work of the human sciences just over the past century or so. They may provide insights that go beyond

those available to biblical writers concerning human behavior. That the Bible teaches nothing about sexual orientation, then, would not be an indication that we should minimize the relevance of orientation but rather would be a reason to complement the Bible's teachings with other more recent understandings.

When Gagnon turns to the Sodom and Gomorrah story, we see his methodology illustrated again. Rather than considering the evidence for why Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, thereby acknowledging that this is an issue over which people disagree, Gagnon asserts that only something as heinous as attempted "homosexual" rape could explain why God would wipe the cities out. His logic seems to run, we all know that "homosexual practice" is extraordinarily evil and thus when these cities are punished it must be because of their homosexuality.

Gagnon minimizes the possibility that the violation of hospitality could be in itself a serious enough problem (it couldn't be "merely inhospitality or even attempted rape of a guest," 75—we all know that those problems couldn't be serious enough; it had to be the element of homosexuality). This ignores the significance of the beginning story in this section of Genesis 18 and 19—where Abraham models authentic hospitality and sets the standard for hospitality that will grievously not be met by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Gagnon seems to assume the worst about same-sex partnerships, taking it for granted that homosexuality must have been terrible and repulsive to the biblical characters. Yet, we have no clear evidence of this in the texts (beyond the cryptic commands in Leviticus to be discussed below). We have no stories comparable to David's adultery with Bathsheba or Amnon's rape of Tamar to illustrate what is so problematic about such behavior. On the other hand, the Old Testament is quite clear about the problematic nature of mistreatment of vulnerable people.

The stories of Ham (who had descendants) and of Sodom (where "all the men" were involved in the threatened gang rape, including presumably the male spouses of Lot's daughters) are about heterosexual men doing sexual violence, not about anything remotely akin to present-day same-sex covenanted partnerships. Gagnon seems committed to denying that there is a meaningful moral difference between these two types of phenomena—though he does not justify this denial.

Gagnon cavalierly uses terms such as "undoubtedly" often, with little or no justification for why there can be no doubt. For example, how can we say without doubt that the Yahwist, who never elaborates on same-sex relationships at all, would undoubtedly see "consenting homosexual intercourse" as a matter of the "participants willingly degrading themselves" (78)?

Throughout the book Gagnon seems to assume that "a man lying with a man as with a woman" is strictly about "penetration" (i.e., anal intercourse). However, few of us would associate "lying with a woman" with anal sex! This reflects his preoccupation with sexual intercourse and his reducing the issue of "homosexual practice" to that of genital sex—ignoring that possibility that "same-sexers," like heterosexual couples, tend to experience sexual intercourse in the context of a much wider experience of intimacy (physical and emotional) and commitment.

Gagnon infers a strong claim by inclusive thinkers when he writes, "rather than argue that the narrators of the twin stories of Sodom and Gomorrah would have changed their perspective on homosexual intercourse had they only had a modern understanding of sexual orientation, it is more plausible to say that it probably would not have made any difference to them" (97). Besides imputing a "perspective on homosexual intercourse" in these biblical texts and drawing a speculative conclusion about how the ancient writers would "probably" have responded to modern views of sexual orientation, Gagnon creates a straw man concerning the inclusivist argument here. There is no need (or no attempt made by anyone I know of; Gagnon cites no examples) to argue that those writers would "change their perspective" if they only had a modern sensibility. That argument is an anachronism. The point for inclusivists need only be, at most, that there is no relevant connection between those stories and the present-day acceptability of same-sex covenanted relationships. In part, this point is based on a distinction that Gagnon refuses to make between violent, dominating sexual behavior and mutual, loving sexual behavior (a distinction that everyone accepts for heterosexuals). Gagnon's argument regarding the Old Testament depends upon the moral equation of homosexual rape and homosexual temple prostitution with same-sex covenanted relationships, a moral equation no one would make concerning heterosexuals.

THE KEY TEXTS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: LEVITICUS 18–20

In his discussion of Leviticus 18:6-23, Gagnon concludes that the key point here is that the prohibitions listed here do, as a whole, provide direction that remains normative for Christians concerning sexual behavior. However, he ignores the prohibition that does not have anything to do with sex. That one prohibition is not about sex (vs. child sacrifice) would indicate that the commonality among all these prohibitions is not that they are "forbidden sexual relations" (113). And that at least one of the prohibitions is not considered a taboo today by

most Christians (sex during menstruation) would indicate that simply being on this list does not in and of itself mean a prohibition has "universal validity in contemporary society" (113).

One concern that does seem to apply to all the items on the list and to make sense in the context of Leviticus, is the concern for adding children to the community. The ancient Israelites needed children—and the children needed to be "legitimate"—to carry on their community life (which is the core concern of Torah as a whole). The problem with these various types of sexual behavior is that they could not result in "legitimate" offspring—and, obviously, child sacrifice also would be a problem in terms the community adding children to its midst. As well, that especially incest, adultery, and child sacrifice are condemned in other settings in the Bible, with reasons and stories, would seem to indicate that the prohibition of male/male sex has more in common with the prohibition of sex during menstruation (neither is given a rationale elsewhere in the Bible) than the other prohibitions.

That male/male sex (not "homosexual intercourse" as Gagnon states, implying that this is reference to all "homosexual practice," 113) is the only specific act called an "abomination" in all the priestly corpus is interesting—but almost proves too much. That is, how can "abomination" be such an important category if this is the only act directly so labeled? How can male/male sex as abomination be so significant when the meaning of this prohibition is so obscure, never discussed elsewhere in the Old Testament?

The call for death to violators of the male/male sex prohibition must be noted. Since we, including Gagnon, do not call for using the death penalty for "homosexual practice" today, we admit that Leviticus 20:13 is not to be applied literally in our setting. What are our bases for qualifying its application? Why would the death penalty be prescribed and what might this prescription tell us about the context of the prohibition and its meaning? Gagnon simply says that the provision for the death penalty means "homosexuality" is especially bad (114-5). However, he does not probe into what clues that prescription might offer to help us understand the meaning of the condemnation of male/male sex in Leviticus.

Might it be possible that Gagnon's failure to address the issue in this way reflects his quest for a general, universalizable basis for his assumption that "homosexual practice" is wrong? That is, looking more closely at what in the particular context of Leviticus would have led to linking the death penalty with the prohibition against male/male sex might actually lead us to see the concern as something quite specific to that particular context and not universalizable (as also seems to be the case with the prohibition against sex during menstruation).

Gagnon argues that the most meaningful parallel within the list of prohibitions in Leviticus is not sex during menstruation but adultery and incest (114-5). However, this parallel seems less than obvious, since in the cases both of adultery and incest there are New Testament stories underscoring their problematic nature and providing bases for Christian prohibitions. There are none such in relation to male/male sex.

Gagnon asserts that the laws in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are "unqualified and absolute" (115). One could just as easily say, based on what the texts themselves actually say (and do not say) that these laws are cryptic and merely formal (i.e., not applied). Gagnon asserts that "homosexual acts" are portrayed as "intrinsically evil" in Leviticus 18, 20 (118). Yet this assertion is difficult to sustain given the lack of supporting evidence (no elaboration in Leviticus beyond the bare prohibition and no stories illustrating the prohibition elsewhere in the Old Testament).

Gagnon states that because many Old Testament "abominations" are still seen as evil by Christians, "homosexuality" should also still be seen as evil, since it is called an "abomination" (120). He conveniently omits mention of sex with a menstruating woman, as it is an "abomination" that most Christians no longer see as evil. This example, though, shows that simply being named as an "abomination" in Leviticus does not make something wrong for us. All the examples Gagnon cites have generally-accepted reasons to be seen as wrong. The challenge for his position is to provide independent reasons for labeling sexual intimacy in the context of a covenanted, healthy, loving same-sex partnership is evil.

In his discussion of Leviticus, Gagnon anticipates his later argument by discussing what he sees to be the link between Leviticus and Paul. He begins by stating as a fact that Paul "formulated…opposition to same-sex intercourse." This is his assumption at this point, not an established fact (and is, of course, strongly contested by many writers on these topics). Then Gagnon gives "evidence" for his assertion that Paul self-consciously links his argument with Leviticus.

Gagnon's evidence that Paul self-consciously draws on Leviticus consists of four main points (121-2). First is that Paul alludes to the "father's wife" in his proscribing incest in 1 Corinthians 5 using terms close to the LXX of Leviticus 18:7-8. The problem here is that neither of these texts having anything to do with "same-sex practice."

Second, Gagnon connects Paul's warning in Romans 1:32 that the wicked behavior there (including "homosexual practice") is "worthy of death" with the warning in Leviticus that men laying with men will be executed. However, unlike Leviticus 20:13, Paul in Romans 1:32 is not addressing the behavior of people in the community of faith and many, many other examples of problematic behavior are mentioned between

1:32 and the allusion to "homosexual practice" several verses earlier. In fact, the entire discussion in Romans 1:18-32 is not focused on giving rules for Christian behavior, whereas, of course, Leviticus 20 is about setting forth rules for the behavior people within the community of faith.

Gagnon's third basis for linking Paul with Leviticus is that Paul uses a couple of the same words in Romans 1:24, 27 that are common in the LXX version of Leviticus 18, 20. However, a basic principle in interpreting the Bible is to recognize that words do not convey meaning nearly as much as sentences do. Gagnon cites no parallel sentences. Besides, theologically, it would seem unlikely that the Paul who critiques legalistic uses of Torah and summarizes Torah in Romans as consisting of loving the neighbor (13:8-10) would want his readers to see parallel words as a basis for reading him as reiterating a literalistic application of a cryptic command from Leviticus.

Fourth, Gagnon asserts that Paul's term in 1 Corinthians 6:9 that means "men who take other men to bed" (*arsenokoitai*) comes from combining two words from the LXX of Leviticus 18, 20 (the words for "men" and "laying"). However, he reads too much into a possible parallel. It could be that Paul got those words from Leviticus, but it is just as likely he knew them already and created a new compound word from them for his own purposes that may or may not have anything to do with Leviticus. We simply cannot know. If the verses in Leviticus are cryptic, Paul's use of *arsenokoitai* is even more so since as far as we know Paul's use of it in 1 Corinthians 6 is the first time it was ever used. As well, Paul uses the term in a list with no other explanation of what it might mean.

Gagnon concludes that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are best understood as "banning all homosexual intercourse" (131). However, it seems much better to recognize that those verses are cryptic more than universal and categorical. All we have are short commands that speak only of men with no explanation or supporting stories elsewhere in the Old Testament. The lack of explanation as to what the laws have in mind argue for a more limited application than for a broader application. Gagnon's analogies with incest, adultery, and bestiality (131) break down because the Old Testament has much more detail on those three problems than on same-sex intimacy. If all we had in the Old Testament concerning those three was what we are told in Leviticus 18, 20, then we would have much less confidence in their applicability to our present as well.

Gagnon sees the underlying concern behind the proscriptions being a concern about the profanity of "mixing that which was never intended to be mixed" (135). But we are not really told why this is so bad. It won't do to say only that they should not be mixed because they were not intended to be. Chances are if we could answer this question, we would find that

the underlying reasons are not applicable to our context today. To use the idea of "maintaining pure categories" (136) as the key concern and then to use not breeding two kinds of animals, not planting two kinds of seeds in one field, and not wearing two kinds of fabric at once as supporting evidence for this concern being central in Leviticus would seem to reinforce the idea that rejecting male/male sex because it violates this need for "pure categories" is context specific and not a timeless absolute. We must ask why this need was central to the text.

THE WITNESS OF JESUS.

Gagnon begins his discussion of the New Testament with the assertion that "no first-century Jew could have spoken of *porneiai* (plural) without having in mind the list of forbidden sexual offenses in Leviticus 18 and 20 (incest, adultery, same-sex intercourse, bestiality)" (191). One missing piece of evidence for Gagnon's assertion is the lack of the use of the term *porneiai* in the New Testament in relation to same-sex sexual behavior. That is, Gagnon's assumption is only an assumption.

Gagnon makes this point in service to his effort to undermine the pro-"same-sexer" arguments that focus on Jesus' spirit of inclusiveness and care for vulnerable people. For Gagnon, since it is certain that "no first century Jew" (including Jesus, of course) could have spoken of *porneiai* without very self-consciously having homosexuality in mind, Jesus in Mark 7:21-23 "undoubtedly would have understood homosexual behavior to be included among the list of offenses" (191-2). Furthermore, when Jesus refers to the prohibition of adultery (Mark 10:19), given his Hellenistic Jew contemporary Philo's linking of this prohibition with pederasty, incest, and other matters pertaining to sexual intercourse, "it is probable that implicit in Jesus' embrace of the seventh commandment against adultery was a rejection of all same-sex intercourse" (192).

THE WITNESS OF PAUL AND DEUTERO-PAUL.

Gagnon sees in Paul's cryptic statements in Romans 1 about same-sex intercourse deep "visceral feelings…of disgust toward same-sex intercourse" as "the zenith of detestable behavior" (269). We do not have much evidence of Paul's "deep visceral feelings of disgust" here, especially since it seems from the passage of Romans 1–3 as a whole that Paul's concern is not so much the behavior to which he refers in Romans 1 as the attitudes of the religious people he challenges in Romans 2.

One must ask why same sex intimacy would be so bad. Why would it, per se, be the "zenith of detestable behavior"? Gagnon's argument seems

to rest on the notion of the created complementarity of males and females. However, why would having a quite small part of the population construct intimate relationships that do not reflect that complementarity necessarily be such a threat to the basic norm for the vast majority of the people to such an extent that it would warrant this intense hostility? In reflecting on this question we must remember that Paul himself never actually explicitly expresses either the intense disgust for same-sex intimacy per se that Gagnon claims nor does Paul directly link his antipathy toward whatever it is he has in mind in Romans one and 1 Corinthians 6 with the idea of the complementarity of the sexes.

Gagnon asserts, "the evidence is quite clear that Paul considered same-sex intercourse to be sin" (277). However, one needs carefully to unpack this "evidence" and not simply assume that it is obvious (even if Christians have long tended to think it is). The reason this issue is so contested is because this evidence is not clear. Gagnon's argument is actually weakened by his unwillingness to grant any ambiguity here.

In Romans one, Paul mentions "unnatural sex" (1:26-27) with other forms of *adikia* (often translated "wickedness" or "unrighteousness" but arguably more accurately translated "injustice"). Is to link men being "consumed with passion for one another" (1:27) with *adikia* an indication that all same-sex intimacy is intrinsically *adikia* or is it when same-sex intimacy is *adikia* that it reflects the idolatry/wrath dynamic? What is Paul's implied critique here, against *adikia* or against same-sex intimacy per se? We have evidence in Paul's writing that he is much, much more concerned with injustice than with same-sex intimacy per se—reflecting the clear emphasis in Torah, the prophets, and Jesus.

The list of other phenomena that manifest *adikia* in Romans 1:29-31 includes activities that are perversions and distortions of aspects of life that are not inherently *adikia* (e.g., rebelliousness toward parents is a problem of *adikia* within the context of relationships that are not inherently wrong). It could be that Paul tries in Romans 1:18-32 to speak to the strongest biases his readers would have had in order to set them up for his further argument that he develops in chapters 2 and 3. He does not necessarily agree or disagree with these biases, so much as imply that they are dangerous because they blind his readers to their own *adikia* and their total need for God's mercy.

So we ask, what are most likely to be the kinds of biases Paul alludes to. Is it anti-"homosexuality" (in which the basic problem is the same-sexness of the partners) or is it anti-lustful debauchery? It seems crucial to note that Paul only mentions same-sex relating here in the context of people being "consumed with passion" (1:27) and being "filled with every kind of injustice" (1:29). We must remember, too, that Paul writes to

Christians in Rome who would have been aware of the notorious debaucheries associated with emperors such as Caligula and their arch-nemesis Nero. And Paul mentions numerous times in other of his writings that he is concerned about his readers being "consumed with passion" in heterosexual contexts.

The New Testament provides no evidence apart from one cryptic allusion in 1 Corinthians 6 (discussed below) that homosexuality per se was of interest or concern. We also note that Romans 1 is not meant to be direct guidance for Christian sexual ethics. Paul does not address Christian behavior in these verses. He rather taps into the biases of his readers to make a very different kind of point: In your self-righteousness you are as bad as these idolaters and you run a great risk of separating yourself from the mercy of God found in Jesus. So Paul's agenda here is not to provide bases for some Christians to be judgmental toward other Christians; it is rather to clear the ground for a fresh and transformative appropriation of God's healing mercy for all people expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Gagnon gets the point almost exactly wrong when he writes that "the point of the discussion [in Romans 1:18-32] is that God is wholly justified in judging" (280)—with the implication that we, too, should be judging. No! The point is that even though God would be justified to do so, God does not condemn (Rom 3:21). God's non-condemnation in 3:21 is the punch-line for the entire section 1:18–3:20.

Gagnon begins his discussion of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 with a translation of those individual verses in their immediate context—1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10. He does not consider, crucially in relation to the 1 Corinthians text, the broader paragraph in which this verse is found. By starting with 6:9, Gagnon gives the impression that Paul's point is about people not "inheriting God's kingdom" with the implication that he is warning Christians that they will not find salvation if they engage in same-sex intimacy. However, this focus ignores the actual context of 6:9 that is found in the eight previous verses. Paul's concern here is with Christians taking other Christians to secular courts as a means of settling their differences.

The difference in translating *dikia* as "injustice" rather than "wickedness" seems especially significant in relation to the context for Paul's use of two terms often linked with homosexuality here. Paul's concern is with the justice system of the secular courts and strongly criticizes Corinthian Christians for using it—quite possibly in part because this was a matter of wealthy people in the church using the courts to enforce their exploitation of poorer members (see Richard Hays's commentary on 1 Corinthians).

So when Paul gives his list of "vices" in 6:9-10, we need to be aware that the context for these vices is his concern with injustice, not sex. Plus, as with Romans 1, Paul describes non-Christians with this list. He does not give commands for Christian behavior. This context makes it almost certain that whatever Paul means by some of these cryptic terms, he is thinking of them in terms of overt injustice, not a general statement about all forms of same-sex intimacy (overtly unjust or not).

Gagnon does not mention any of these points from the context for 6:9 (6:1-11). Rather, he focuses on the meaning of the individual words *arsenokoitai* and *malakos* (306). He does not even address the immediate reason why Paul would give his list in 6:9-11, giving us the idea that Paul provides this list to answer the question of what happens to all "same-sexers" rather than answering the question of why those exercising authority in the secular courts are not suited to judge between Christians in conflict. By focusing on the sex issue, Gagnon presents the key point here being that the "*malakoi* are sandwiched between adulterers (people who commit an act of immoral sexual intercourse) and *arsenokoitai* (people who have something to do with an immoral act of same-sex intercourse)" (308). That is, in Gagnon's interpretation, the key issue is sexual behavior per se, not sexual behavior insofar as it is an expression of injustice.

The term *malokoi* literally means "soft" and is used both of sexual and non-sexual behavior and characteristics. However, Gagnon relies solely on its being placed between "adulterers" and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and one passage in Philo where the context is "homosexual behavior" as if these points tell us all we need to know about what Paul had in mind. Gagnon ignores all other non-sexual uses of *malakos* in the New Testament and elsewhere. If we think of the context of 1 Corinthians 6:9 being concern about injustice more than sexual misbehavior, we would have no reason to assume that *malakoi* referred to "same-sexers" instead of more generally referring to moral softness in a broad sense (a meaning *malokos* did have in uses elsewhere in the first century).

The term *arsenokoitai* looms large in Gagnon's discussion. He agrees with others is speculating that this term is likely a neologism created by Paul. However, he takes a step further in assuming that the meaning of this neologism is obviously the sum of the two parts (312-3). However, that need not be the case. Sometimes a neologism can take on a new meaning at least somewhat unique (a modern day example would be Gandhi's joining of "truth," *satya*, and "force," *graha*, to create a new term, *satyagraha,* that had its own special meaning).

The two words joined in *arsenokoitai* are *arseno* ("male") and *koite* ("lying"). *Koite* is indeed in the masculine form. However this need not necessarily mean, as Gagnon seems to assume, "men lying with men [in

order to have sex]." It is possible that *koite* is masculine simply in echo of *arseno*. The word could have the sense, that is, of males having problematic sex with women. Gagnon flatly asserts that since *arsenokoitai* means "men who take males to bed" it could hardly be referring to heterosexual intercourse (323-4). He could be correct, but the basis for his assertion is mostly speculation. He seems to assume that a word's presumed etymology determines its meaning—and that the meaning of biblical texts is primarily determined by the meaning of individual words.

Of all possible readings of this text (and Romans one), Gagnon's is one plausible reading. However, he cannot overcome the paucity of clear evidence illumining the meaning of these texts and the high level of ambiguity surrounding the bits of evidence that we do have. That one offers a plausible reading is not a basis for acting as if one's reading is an established fact. Gagnon takes small pieces (e.g., the use of the word *arsenokoitai*) that could be support for his position and treats them as certainties with global ramifications.

Gagnon time after time generalizes concerning what "most ancient Jews" must have thought (e.g., 350). These generalizations, though, are based on very minimal written documentation (imagine that Gagnon's book is the only documentation that survives our current discussion on homosexuality 500 years from now; how reliable a reflection would it be on what "most early 21st century Christians" think?). He may be right about "ancient Jews," but the most he can say with any confidence should be that "the few written pieces of evidence we have indicate…"—not that "everyone believed…."

Even if Gagnon is correct in his assertion that Paul, Jesus, and "all biblical writers" utterly condemned all same-sex intimacy (369), does it automatically follow that this unanimity creates an imperative for present-day Christians? For example, we arguably have similar or more clear evidence of a consensus among biblical writers concerning the acceptability of slavery, the view that wives were their husbands' property, that polygamy is fine, that usury is sinful, that we live in a three-story universe, the Genesis one is literal history, that Jesus would return within a generation of his death, that masturbation is sinful, and that God sometimes orders some people to kill others. Each of these points of "consensus" are denied to be normative for present-day Christians by at least a significant part of the present Christian church.

Thus, even if Gagnon is correct in his reading of the Bible's view of homosexuality (though, as I have written above, I don't think he is), does that reading of the Bible appropriately lead to the kind of certainty concerning present-day Christian ethics that he manifests?

CONCLUSION

Overall, this comes across to me as a fearful book. Gagnon's refusal to allow for ambiguity, complexity, and the possibility that his opponents might be at least partially correct reflects this apparent fearfulness. As does Gagnon's approach of making absolute and global statements based on what turns out to be, upon examination, tentative evidence.

Gagnon leaves a number of important issues unaddressed. He offers no reflection on the significance of the Bible's liberative emphases, even if only to explain why these emphases should not be applied to the issue of homosexuality—given how central this theme is for most inclusive writers. Nor does he consider arguments based on the validity of the spiritual experience of gay and lesbian Christians. He does not reflect on whether the biblical materials being so male-oriented would have any significance for how we might apply them.

Perhaps most surprising from someone with Gagnon's credentials, he spends little time discussing the cultural and historical distance between today and the time of the Bible. He obviously believes that this distance does not negate the normative guidance of the Bible for this one specific ethical issue, but he does not explicitly justify this belief. Many educated Christians today would assume that this distance renders the Bible's guidance less than obviously normative. Gagnon does not explain why he can so readily overcome the benefit of the doubt against normativeness.

Most problematic, Gagnon seems to welcome a power struggle, a fight to the death over the soul of the church. It is simply a fact that those on the opposite from him constitute a significant portion of the mainline Protestant community. The only way his take-no-prisoners approach will succeed is by defeating those he disagrees with. One wishes for a much more irenic spirit that conveys the negative convictions concerning "homosexual practice" while also affirming the need for Christians with different views to work together for the wholeness of the church.

Gagnon's long hermeneutical chapter, instead of an honest and vulnerable treatment of key hermeneutical issues such as the reality that we all approach the Bible with biases, as fallen, finite human beings, instead focuses simply on refuting pro-gay arguments.

Gagnon seems to misunderstand the significance of the argument by many pro-gay writers that the Bible's paucity of references to "homosexuality" is an important piece of evidence. This point of this argument is not that therefore the Bible must think "homosexuality" is okay. Rather, the point is that the Bible does not tell us what to think about this issue. We must construct our own response based on our own reflection on various factors. And, if one is going to argue against

acceptance of covenanted, same-sex partnerships being blessed by the churches, one needs to find grounds in addition to "the Bible tells me so."

Gagnon mentions anti-gay violence a few times in his book, but pretty much simply in order to dismiss it as carrying any counter-weight to his arguments. However, should not we all be asking where such violence comes from? Should we not all be attentive to the causes of this violence as we reflect on this issue in general? Ultimately, it seems difficult to take with moral seriousness any extensive discussion of "homosexuality" that does not take very seriously this violence.

13. A critique of a Mennonite articulation of the restrictive position

[These are notes from a 2003 reading of this book; posted on PeaceTheology.net February 16, 2009; a review based on these notes was published in DreamSeeker Magazine*, 4.2 (Spring 2004).]*

I am happy that Willard Swartley published his book, *Homosexuality* because we have had so few materials of a scholarly nature to interact with concerning one of the most difficult issues Mennonites have ever faced. I am hopeful Swartley's book will open the door a bit for the sake of much needed conversation. However, as will be clear in my comments to follow, I am not happy with what Swartley has actually produced.

PREFACE

Swartley states we "need to distinguish between exegetical work and the hermeneutical task."[1] Perhaps, but I find Swartley's notion of hermeneutics to be impoverished. He has little to say about what are probably the most significant issues concerning using the Bible for ethics; implicitly assuming, it would appear, that our task is simply determining what the text means and then this meaning takes care of itself. This Preface and Chapter One would have been good places for Swartley to interact with the excellent essay by Norman Kraus on "the two 'H' words" in the book, *To Continue the Dialogue*.[2] That Swartley is familiar with that book—he cites several of its essays throughout his book—and yet ignores probably the most important essay in the book indicates to

[1] Willard Swartley, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 11. For the rest of this essay, page references will be given in the main text.

[2] C. Norman Kraus, "The Two 'H' Words: Hermeneutics and Homosexuality," in C. Norman Kraus, ed., *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2001), 25-44.

me that he is reluctant to wrestle with the complexities of these issues. This failure to work with what I understand to be the key hermeneutical issues is a significant problem.

While I appreciate Swartley's assertion of how important it is that we "speak in love" (11), I am troubled with his failure to engage the testimonies of gay and lesbian Mennonites in this book. Roberta Showalter Kreider's two edited collections of such testimonies, *From Wounded Hearts* and *Together in Love*, are resources he should have interacted with.[3] This failure to include gay Mennonite voices in his discernment process leads me to find his quote from Miroslav Volf at the end of his Preface exhorting us to listen carefully to the voices and perspectives of those with whom we disagree to ring a bit hollow.

CHAPTER ONE: MY JOURNEY ON HOMOSEXUALITY

Swartley uses the term "homosexuality" without defining it or recognizing how contested of a term it is. This creates a problem when he states that with regard to "homosexuality one encounters at the level of the 'plain sense' of the text only prohibitions, and strong ones at that" (16). He already contradicts himself since, as he himself acknowledges later almost in passing, "homosexuality" is a modern term—so the "plain sense" of an ancient text can tell us nothing about "homosexuality."

Swartley assumes that the basic issue that we have to deal with is "homosexual practice, i.e., same-sex genital intercourse" (17). However, this is not self-evident. Maybe the basic issue is, instead, the treatment of vulnerable, oppressed people in the community of faith. Or, maybe, the basic issue is intimate relationships more broadly understood, including friendships and the other elements of committed intimate relationships besides sexual intercourse. It would have helped if Swartley would have recognized this uncertainty and given some explanation as to why he should be focusing simply on sexual intercourse.

When he writes that "homosexual practice…always appears in prohibitive language" in the Bible, Swartley makes both a meaningless and an inflammatory statement. It is meaningless in that the Bible cannot possibly be talking about "homosexual" practice, since the concept of "homosexuality" is modern. This is important partly because the statement "homosexual practice," though not clearly defined by Swartley, seems clearly to be meant as an all-encompassing term

[3] Roberta Showalter Kreider, *From Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People and Those Who Love Them,* 2nd edition (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2003) and *Together in Love: Faith Stories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Couples* (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2002).

including any conceivable expression of sexual intimacy between two men or two women. But the Bible never has this in mind. What the Bible portrays, at the most, in "prohibitive language" includes male-on-male threatened rape (Gen. 19; Judg. 19), male-male cult prostitution (Lev 18; 20), male-male orgies (Rom 1), and exploitative male-male sex (1 Cor 6). However, the Bible also uses "prohibitive language" of male-female sex in parallel situations (rape, cultic prostitution, orgies, exploitation). Hence, it seems inappropriate (and inflammatory) to label these prohibitions as having to do with "homosexual practice."

CHAPTER TWO: THE OLD TESTAMENT AND EARLY JUDAISM

In general, I found Swartley's approach to the biblical materials disappointing. He focuses primarily on citing various scholars, playing them off one against another, dismissing the one's he disagrees with as "unconvincing" without giving enough data to help the reader draw one's own conclusion. Surprisingly, he spends little time delving into the texts themselves and virtually no time talking about the broader literary contexts for the passages he does discuss. So, he simply (briefly) discusses Genesis 19 without, for one thing, noting the broader context beginning in chapter 18 of the story setting a contrast between Abraham's receptivity to the angels and Sodom's hostility. Swartley does not address what the point of the Sodom story is in its broader literary context, treating it instead in narrow isolation.

Swartley makes the point (31) that the Bible speaks of "acts," not of "orientation" (nor, I would add, of "homosexuality" as an element of a person's identity). True enough, but this fact makes it crucial for us then to be quite attentive to the particular "acts" that are mentioned—and to why these particular acts are problematic. If we focus on particular acts, it is not clear that we may automatically move from these acts to make generalization about all possible acts. We would never conclude from stories of problematic heterosexual acts (e.g., rape, sex with prostitutes, involvement in orgies) that sexual intimacy in the context of committed, mutually caring, monogamous heterosexual relationships is immoral.

Swartley argues that in Genesis 19 it matters that the "lust" leading to attempted rape was "*homo*sexual lust" (31-32). It seems to me, in reading Genesis 19 together with Judges 19, that these two stories are not differentiating between whether the people being threatened with rape or actually raped are male or female (that is, whether the "lust" was homosexual or heterosexual), but between whether the victims are guests or not. The daughters are rejected by the mob in Genesis because they

are not guests; the concubine is accepted by the mob in Judges because she was a guest. That is to say, neither of these stories are relevant to current discussions concerning same-sex intimacy.

Regarding Leviticus (33-36), Swartley does not discuss its broader context nor questions about the use of the Old Testament law codes for present-day Christian ethics. He mostly cites various scholarly opinions, some of what have little to do with the actual text we are considering. This entire chapter on the Old Testament wastes the opportunity to actually look in some depth at several fascinating texts and try to figure out what the texts are actually saying in their broader contexts.

CHAPTER THREE: JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

Swartley states, "Jesus nowhere condoned the sin of the sinners to whom he graciously related. Rather, he empowered them into a transformed status in society" (44). I believe the gospels present things in as more complicated. In some cases (e.g., poor people, sick people, bleeding women), Jesus indicates that what society sees as "sinful" (or "unclean") is not sinful in God's eyes. In other cases (e.g., his followers violating the Sabbath in order to eat), Jesus critiques those who label others' life-enhancing actions as sinful because they violate the alleged letter of some law. In yet other cases (e.g., the "woman who was a sinner" who anointed Jesus' feet with ointment), Jesus offers acceptance with no sense of critique of the "sin." Perhaps in some sense in all of these cases Jesus could be seen as "condoning" sin.

In general, Jesus focuses his critique of sinners on those who hurt others (e.g., the Pharisees) and offers unconditional acceptance for vulnerable and oppressed people. He desires to help people to live whole lives, challenging them to make changes that would help them to do so. But he is not bound by the letter of the law to support people in power using rules to hurt vulnerable people—that is what has all too often in the church in relation to sexual minorities. Indeed, as Swartley insists, the Gospels portray Jesus as "not soft on judgment" (45). But who generally are seen as the likely recipients of this judgment? Isn't it almost always those who try to block entry to the community of faith due to their legalism, not those allegedly guilty of "unrepentant sexual sin"?

CHAPTER FOUR: UNDERSTANDING PAUL ON "HOMOSEXUAL" PRACTICE

Swartley begins his discussion of Romans by zeroing in on 1:24-27, and he asserts, "its function is to describe theologically the nature of

humanity's condition outside salvation in Jesus Christ" (50). In contrast, I would say, the "function" of these verses needs to be understood in terms of their larger context. In light of that larger context (most immediately, Paul's argument in Romans 1:16–3:28), the function of these verses seems to be to set up Paul's readers for Romans 2:1ff (as you judge others, you are just as sinful) which sets the readers up for Romans 3:21 (reconciliation with God for all who trust in Jesus Christ). That is, Romans 1:24-27 is misread when it is not read as part of Paul's message of God's unconditional mercy, a message that, to be understood, must be heard as shattering the kind of self-righteousness that Paul's readers are prone to when they point fingers at the sins outlined in chapter 1.

Swartley asserts, "same-sex desire and practice are regarded as the result of a God-disowning culture" (51). Here his failure to recognize that there are many types of "same-sex practice" (as there are many types of "opposite-sex practice") is problematic. The broader section running through 1:32 makes it clear that Paul has in mind extreme behavior. It is a misuse of this text to draw general conclusions concerning same-sex affectional orientation from it—just as the story of David with Bathsheba tells us nothing about opposite-sex affectional orientation or the morality of healthy opposite-sex relationships.

Swartley writes on page 66: "I prefer—and it seems to me to be more honest—to not attempt to rework what the texts say and mean with or by tenuous interpretations." In my opinion, Swartley himself may be "reworking" what the Romans text actually says. He takes what Paul intends as a description of non-Christian behavior and turns that into the basis for normative ethical prescriptions for Christians. As well, he turns the meaning-in-context of this passage on its head, taking what is used by Paul as part of his argument against judgmentalism (2:1ff.) as a basis for his being judgmental against gay and lesbian Christians.

Swartley ignores several aspects of this text that are important for correctly understanding it: (1) The whole of 1:16-32 picks up the theme of justice/injustice (unfortunately often translated "righteous," "wickedness," et al), which in the Bible are relational terms concerned with people living in harmony with or harming others. If we consider the sexual allusions as in some sense being linked with the vices mentioned in 1:28-31, we see that the sexual behavior problem likely has to do with the behavior being unjust and causing harm. Swartley does not mention the parallel of Romans 1 with Wisdom 13–14, a connection that supports the idea that Paul was drawing on some stereotypical attitudes among his readers for rhetorical effect more than developing an original argument.

Swartley also does not address the paucity of material in the Bible concerning women's same-sex "acts." The only possible reference in the

whole Bible is here in Romans 1, but this text is irresolvably ambiguous. The reference in 1:26, "their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural" could be saying the consequences of this "exchange" was "female/female" sex or, on the other hand, it could be saying that the consequence was simply being overwhelmed with lust in general. One's conclusion on this issue follows from how one sees Paul's general concern, same-sex sex or out-of-control orgiastic sex of various kinds.

Perhaps Swartley's most problematic textual discussion is his treatment of 1 Corinthians 6:9. He starts with a single, ambiguous word (67)—as if the meaning of a passage of the Bible is centered on individual words. The conclusions Swartley draws about this word, *arsenokoites*, are problematic enough. We simply do not have enough evidence to ascertain with certainty that this word (used nowhere else in the New Testament except for 1 Tim 1:10 and nowhere else in other surviving first-century Greek writings) simply means the sum of the two Greek words from the LXX translation of Lev. 18:22; 20:13, "male" and "laying." The similarity between the one word *arsenokoites* and the two words in Leviticus certainly is suggestive, but compound words are not always simply the sum of their two parts.

The bigger problem is Swartley's failure to be attentive to the context of this verse. He presents the context as being centered on the *pornoi* (the "fornicator") who is discussed in 1 Corinthians 5, ignoring the context of chapter 6 immediately preceding 6:9. Paul's concern in chapter 6, as in Romans 1, is justice/injustice, not "fornication." Paul confronts the Corinthians for taking their disputes to secular courts (with the possible subtext that these were wealthier church people using the secular courts to help them exploit poorer church people). Paul's punch-line here is that you can't get true justice from these courts because they are run by unjust people, people characterized by the vices listed in 6:9-10.

Included in this list of vices are terms with uncertain meanings—possibly having sexual aspects. *Arsenokoites* likely does have some sense of male/male sex as part of its meaning. Given Paul's concerns with his vice list here, and given the context for the word's later use in at least a few early second-century instances, this male/male sex seems linked with injustice, not with all male/male intimacy in all cases. The second term, *malakos*, literally means "soft" (see Mt 11:8) and could easily here in 1 Corinthians 6 simply have the sense of "morally lax."

Swartley seeks to resolve the ambiguity in 1 Cor. 6:9 concerning the possible allusions to male/male sex not by reflecting on the immediate context in the preceding verses, which points toward a justice-oriented concern (implying that it is unjust expressions that Paul has in mind) but by jumping over to Romans one and using that as a basis to conclude

that Paul's main concern in 1 Corinthians 6 was a general condemnation of "homosexual practice" per se (70).

Another problem with Swartley's approach to 1 Corinthians 6, echoing his treatment of Romans 1, is that he takes what is a descriptive statement of non-Christian morality serving rhetorical purposes that have nothing to do with sexual ethics (in Romans 1 challenging the judgmentalism of his readers, in 1 Corinthians 6 challenging the use of non-Christians courts by his readers) and twists that into a prescriptive statement for Christian morality. Swartley, it seems to me, must resort to doing this because in the New Testament we actually have no such prescriptive statements concerning same-sex intimacy.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Swartley combines a condemnation of what he sees to be morally reprehensible about Western culture with a refusal to differentiate among "homosexuali*ties*." There are surely parallel types of sexual behavior among gays as a group and among straights as a group—in each group ranging from fidelity in life-long partnerships to crass promiscuity. By failing to make distinctions here Swartley lumps all who are open to same-sex marriage together with the worst advocates of "free love," and in this way undercuts the possibility of making common cause with people who would share much of his critique but make a distinction between sexual behavior that is morally inappropriate (for both same and opposite sexual relating) and morally appropriate same-sex relationships.

I wish Swartley had interacted with a book such as Didi Herman's *The Anti-Gay Agenda*.[4] I believe that this book helps us see a more central cultural dynamic that drives Mennonites' (and other denominations') hostility toward gay members. Herman helps uncover political forces from the New Right that fuel the anti-gay movement. Doug Ireland's article "Republicans Relaunch the Antigay Culture Wars" in *The Nation* (Oct. 20, 2003), shows this dynamic is still going strong. I am sorry that Swartley, who has long been exemplary in his peace work, would even implicitly make common cause with such cynically reactionary forces.

There are several problematic assertions and assumptions in this chapter:

(1) "The sexual revolution of the 60s is a paramount factor in understanding why the homosexual issue has become a cause in Western

[4] Didi Herman, *The Anti-Gay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

society" (76). This statement reflects Swartley's assumption throughout that "the homosexual issue" is primarily about sexual behavior rather than human rights. One could just as easily argue that the core dynamic bringing the quest for human rights among gays to the surface were parallel quests for human rights for colonized peoples, African-Americans, women, disabled people, et al. Given Swartley's own work for peace, he would likely face cognitive dissonance should he admit that the key issue here is human rights, which is possibly why he is so quiet about the horrific persecution vs. gays in our culture and the churches.

(2) "Western culture is founded on human autonomy" (76). This seems like an over-simplification. But granting at least some of Swartley's point, it seems wrong-headed to imply that the hope for acceptance in the churches and support for intimate partnerships among gay Mennonites is a problem of individualism![5] This hope seems to stem from the exact opposite inclination—a recognition of the need for and value of Christian community.

(3) "It is striking that from Ezekiel 16:49 through the church fathers, wealth and especially greed and injustice, are linked to homosexuality" (78). Besides the fact that Ezekiel 16:49 most certainly does not refer to "homosexuality," this is a prejudicial and illogical statement. The people I know of who are greedy and unjust are almost uniformly heterosexual.

(4) "The route to be included in God's salvation and the body of Christ is through repentance and confession of sins, baptism, God's free justification, and the gift of the Spirit [not on the basis of some 'human right' based on some form of justice]" (83). This statement actually points precisely to the issue within the Mennonite Church: We have individuals and churches who are excluded from the fellowship even though they have followed this "route to be included."

CHAPTER SIX: HERMENEUTICAL ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION

I expected this chapter to include some reflections on our starting points in approaching biblical texts related to sexuality issues. I was disappointed that it turned out simply to be a series of justifications for

[5] See the collections of stories from Mennonites and other Christians that Roberta Showalter Kreider has gathered in three volumes: *From Wounded Hearts: Faith Stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People and Those Who Love Them*, 2nd edition (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2003); *Together in Love: Faith Stories of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Couples* (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2002); and *The Cost of Truth: Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been* (Perkasie, PA: Strategic Press, 2004).

particular interpretations, focusing only on internal biblical concerns. Insofar as our presuppositions shape our interpretations, it becomes even more important to surface these presuppositions and justify them. Swartley fails on this score. For example, what we receive from the Bible will be largely determined by which of the following two questions we begin with as we approach biblical materials. Are we looking for clear bases to exclude gay Christians from full fellowship in the church (with the assumption that they are in unless it is proven they should be put out)? Or, are we looking for clear bases to include gay Christians (assuming they are out unless proven otherwise)? Swartley does not address this issue at all that I could see.

Swartley writes of "the homosexuality issue" as being in the same cluster of "sexually related sins" as "incest, bestiality, adultery, prostitution, and soliciting prostitutes" (103). I would tend to argue that "the homosexuality issue," instead, is best seen as being in the same cluster of sins of injustice as oppression of vulnerable people in the community of faith such as widows, orphans, and strangers. I don't think Swartley adequately justifies his choice here.

As an Anabaptist, I am not as persuaded as Swartley that the practices of medieval Christendom, Calvin's Geneva, and New England Puritans of making same-sex illegal and of Paris executing "homosexual offenders" are evidence for how Christian Tradition provides support for present-day anti-gay perspectives within the church (112). Given that all these people were so wrong about warfare, violence, and capital punishment, why would we assume they were right about sexuality?

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE CHURCH'S BELIEF AND RESPONSE

Swartley writes, "institutional and congregation leaders must be alert to the way homosexuality tends to stop everything else and becomes an all or nothing bargain" (119). I think it would be more accurate (and honest) to say that opposition to "homosexuality" tends to stop everything else.

I'll give one example from my experience. A couple of years ago, Broad Street Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia, existed pretty much out of sight and out of mind, a tiny congregation on the margins of the Virginia Conference's Harrisonburg District. At that point, the congregation had no gay members or attendees. One of the members had a lesbian friend looking for a location for her commitment ceremony, and offered the church building for that use. Somehow word got out to a pastor in the conference who contacted the district leaders

demanding that Broad Street be stopped from allowing their building to be used in this way. Broad Street resisted the demand, and in the course of a conversation with district leaders admitted that the congregation would be open to the participation of gays in their church life. The first challenge to Broad Street's decision to allow the ceremony came in December 2001. In February 2003, the congregation was formally kicked out of Virginia Conference.

One of the main arguments I heard for acting against Broad Street was that many people in the conference were threatening to leave if such action didn't happen. District leaders even openly stated that they saw themselves faced with a no-brainer—either Broad Street or the many, many on the other side who were making the threats. (Ironically, the original pastor who raised the complaint did not even wait around for the abbreviated process that led to Broad Street's expulsion. He led his congregation out of the conference only a few months after raising his initial complaint.)

To me this story illustrates that the initiative in "stopping things" in the churches due to controversy almost always comes from the anti-gay people. Broad Street, like other Mennonite congregations in Germantown, Pa., Ames, Iowa, and Calgary, Alberta, simply wanted to exist within its Conference and be allowed to follow its own discernment processes. The conflict arose not because of "homosexuality" but because of those activists opposing the presence of a congregation in their conference that had a different perspective.

CHAPTER EIGHT: A MODEL FOR CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT

Swartley's rejection of allowing experience to play a central role in the churches' discernment processes (126-7) strikes me as self-defeating theologically and practically. From the beginning, we in the church are involved in open-ended conversations in which we draw on our experiences as the basic elements of our "horizon." The only way we can hope truly to understand (each other, scripture, tradition, et al) is to accept that we each bring a unique "horizon" to the conversation, a "horizon" shaped by our own unique experiences. Our only hope to live together in community is to respect these various experience-shaped "horizons," to seek to learn from our differences, and to work together to find common ground that we can build our life together on.

Swartley is, of course, correct to point out the messiness of allowing experience in as a central element of our discernment processes. However, this is precisely where our peace theology should help us

understand that the only way to find genuine peace is to learn to respect each other and genuinely listen to each other.[6]

It could be that the Mennonite churches are basically facing a crossroads right now. Either we commit ourselves to an ecclesiology that genuinely seeks open discernment where all members listen respectfully to one another in expectation that the Spirit of God guides the churches through such discernment or we commit ourselves to holding the line on the "traditional" view of "homosexuality." It seems increasingly clear to me that it is one or the other. So, contrary to how Swartley presents the issues, this is not about sex. It is about how the churches understand their basic identity and way of being. What does it mean to be followers of Jesus today? One of the best indications of how the Mennonite Church is answering this question is how the Church processes differences within the fellowship. What I have seen in my many years among the Mennonites does not leave me very encouraged.

CONCLUSION

Though I am critical of Swartley's book, and I am especially disappointed that as a biblical scholar he does not do more engaging directly with the texts in their literary contexts, I still am glad that he has published this book. He seeks to be irenic, and that is to be appreciated. Though he is quite dependent upon the work of Robert Gagnon (to Swartley's detriment, in my opinion[7]), he does not share Gagnon's negative tone in discussing gay people—and that is so be appreciated. Most of all, Swartley's book took courage for him to publish, knowing he would be open to critical responses (and worse).

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[6] See Ted Grimsrud, "Pacifism and Knowing: 'Truth' in the Theological Ethics of John Howard Yoder," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77.3 (July 2003), 403-15, where I use the churches' discussions on sexuality as an example of how a genuinely pacifist epistemology might help us proceed.

[7] See my critique of Gagnon in chapter 12, pages 140-57, above in this book.

14. Reflections on recent writing: The restrictive approach

[These three review essays were posted on ThinkingPacifism.net. The response to Washed and Waiting *was posted November 10, 2014;* Same-Sex Marriage *was posted January 5, 2015;* People to Be Loved *was posted March 31, 2016.]*

I. GOD AND THE (CELIBATE) GAY CHRISTIAN

We are in the middle of an extraordinary moment in the United States with regard to the acceptance of same-sex intimate relationships. The Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, a reality undreamt of just a few years ago. At the same time, significant resistance to such acceptance remains, mostly under the name of "Christian values."

The ferment on these issues is seen quite vividly among evangelical Christians. Wesley Hill's book, *Washed and Waiting,* takes a distinctive stance. I wonder if the impressive popularity of Hill's book (it's still one of Amazon's best selling books in its "Gay and Lesbian" category even though it was published in 2010) reflects a bit of desperation among those evangelicals opposed to gay marriage. They may be thinking, we need some kind of effective counter to the tide toward acceptance. What better counter than a thoughtful, first-person account from a self-acknowledged gay Christian who recognizes that he has a fundamental and seemingly irreversible attraction toward other men but still affirms the view that leaves him with no option but to embrace a celibate life?

THE CHANGING TERRAIN

It used to be common for evangelical Christianity to offer gays full healing from what was categorized a fundamental disorder. A person with sufficient faith, and perhaps some help from a praying community, Christian therapist, and/or spiritual healer could have their same-sex attraction taken away and live a "normal heterosexual lifestyle." Numerous ministries, the best known of which probably was Exodus International, promised to help this "reparative therapy" process.

As it turned out, such "reorientation" was never as easy or permanent or widespread as claimed by its supporters. In time, even many of those who believed "homosexual practice" is always wrong came to accept that for some same-sex attracted folks, change was not a realistic option. Exodus International is now defunct and one of its former leaders has issued a public apology for the trauma the organization visited upon many of those who turned to it for "healing" their "disorder."

Once one accepts that for some people, a sexual identity as one attracted to those of the same sex cannot be changed, it seems that there are two options. One option (taken by Jeff Chu and Matthew Vines, the gay evangelicals who wrote inclusive books discussed in the next chapter of the present book) is to come to a belief that same-sex attracted Christians may follow the path taken by most opposite-sex attracted Christians: marriage. That is, to accept that this attraction is not actually a disorder but simply a morally neutral disposition characteristic of a minority (say, 5-10%) of the human race.

The second option, taken by Wesley Hills, is to accept that one is indeed likely irrevocably attracted to people of the same sex but to continue to affirm the standard account's assumption that the rejection of "homosexual practice" includes rejecting the possibility of same-sex marriage. Hence, the requirement that the gay Christian remain celibate. The attraction may be irreversible, but it is still a disorder that must not be acted upon.

A NEW VIEWPOINT

Emphasizing this celibacy expectation actually seems like a fairly new trend in evangelical Christianity. The expectation before was that a person could change, become "normal," and enjoy an intimate heterosexual covenanted partnership. On the one hand, it would seem that for a young Christian such as Wesley Hill to accept that his affectional orientation is part of who is might be more humane than to always be trying to change something that seemed in time to be utterly resistant to change. Yet, in reading Hill's book, it's hard to see that this new understanding really signals much progress.

What Hill seems to offer is a life of struggle, loneliness, frustration, and suffering. His agenda is to take this life of suffering and present it as a life of costly discipleship. He honestly describes his own hard times. To his credit, he doesn't try to whitewash the difficulties he faces.

> The temptation for me is to look at my bent and broken sexuality and conclude that, with it, I will never be able to please God, to walk in a

> manner worthy of his calling, to hear his praise. But what if I had a conception of God-glorifying faith, holiness, and righteousness that included within it a profound element of struggle and stumbling? What if I were to view my homosexual orientation, temptations, and occasional failures not as damning disqualifications for living a Christian life but rather as part and parcel of what it means to live by faith in a world that is fallen and scarred by sin and death? (144-5)

Such honesty seems admirable on a certain level, but it begs the question—why is it necessary for a gay Christian like Walls, seemingly a person of strong faith and integrity, to pay such a cost for an aspect of his personal identity that he had no role in establishing? Though he seems to accept that being gay was not at all a choice for him, he at the same time seems to accept that he deserves to suffer the consequences for such a way of being that dishonors God. Hill describes his prayer:

> "God, help! I would love to say thanks for my sexuality, but I don't feel like I can. Every attraction I experience, before I ever get to intentional, willful, indulgent desire, seems bent, broken, misshapen. I think this grieves you, but I can't seem to help it." For many homosexual Christians, this kind of shame is part of our daily lives. Theologian Robert Jenson calls homoerotic attraction a "grievous affliction" for those who experience it, and part of the grief is the feeling that we are perpetually, hopelessly unsatisfying to God. (137)

For a self-affirming gay Christian such as Matthew Vines, the presence of the attraction he feels even "before … [getting] to intentional, willful, indulgent desire" is a good reason to see it as innate, even God-given. Vines then concludes that what God cares about are hurtful expressions of that attraction in behaviors that are also immoral for heterosexual people. And that God affirms same-sex committed relationships in the same way God affirms opposite-sex committed relationships. That is, he believes that gays—as gays—can be just as "satisfying to God" as straight people.

Hill, on the other hand, seems to double down on the "unsatisfying to God"—it's not only actions but the attraction that is "grievous." Yet he offers no way out, really. The older view—now discredited—was that the attraction could be taken away. Since it seems to be unimaginable to him that the attraction could be affirmed (as left-handedness is now affirmed for the 5-10% with that mysterious disposition), what is left is a fairly grim life. It seems like a kind of heroic ethic—you know you are doomed to suffer and struggle, so let's turn the suffering and struggle into a virtue.

Hill seems to be growing into this acceptance of struggle: "With patience and openness to the good that may come even from evil, we can

learn to 'hear' the voice of our sexuality, to listen to its call. We can learn to appreciate the value of our story and the stories of others, because God is the 'potter' or 'storyteller.' Slowly, ever so slowly, I am learning to do this" (150). Hill comes across as an impressively bright and committed young man in his late twenties. Perhaps he is suited for such a heroic existence (though one wonders a bit at the wisdom of writing such a book at such a young age). It's hard to see the path he marks out as being very attractive for more run of the mill Christians.

And where does this end up? Not that happily in this life, it would appear. "I am waiting for the day when I will receive the divine accolade, when my labor of trust and hope and self-denial will be crowned with his praise. 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' the Lord Christ will say. 'Enter into the joy of your master'" (150). It surely is comforting to have such a hope for the end of one's life—but not so comforting to think that between now and then life is basically a matter of struggling along with little hope for joy and a sense of wholeness.

BUT WHY?

The very experience of life as a gay Christian that Hill describes—the loneliness, shame, and sense of discouragement—has pushed many to scrutinize more carefully the theological bases for forbidding same-sex marriage. It seems so clear. Hill could accept that his orientation is simply part of who he is and is not itself a disorder. Then he could be open to finding a life partner and experiencing the same kind of wholeness that other people—gay and straight—have found in healthy marriages. But perhaps not. Perhaps there is still a theological firewall that would forbid such a move.

If there is such a theological firewall, though, it would seem to require some clear rationale that faces the many challenges that have arisen in the past generation, challenges both on the experiential and exegetical level. This is where I find myself most troubled by Hill's book. He seems simply to take it for granted that there is such a firewall that he must not even entertain the possibility of breaching. So he doesn't even try.

For a person who does not assume that such a firewall is present, Hill offers very little by way of justification for his assumption. He simply cites the standard few texts in the Bible and accepts without question the interpretations that those texts are "condemning homosexual activity" (62). He does not interact with various challenges to those interpretations. He quotes Robert Jenson with approval: "After all is said and done, Scripture is brutally clear about homoerotic practice: it is a moral disaster for anyone, just as adultery is a crime for anyone" (65).

Like so many others, Hill refers to "homosexual or homoerotic practice" in the singular as if there is only one kind of "homosexual" sexual activity—as opposed to the obvious sense in the Bible that some kinds of heterosexual sexual activity are good and some are immoral. That is, there are numerous "heterosexual practices." What basis do we have to assume that there is only one kind of "homosexual practice"?

One big problem with this "homosexual practice" assumption is that it removes the responsibility from those who would discriminate against gay people actually to scrutinize the texts that are used to justify such discrimination. It's enough to quote an English translation of, say 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: "Neither the sexually immoral, … nor men who practice homosexuality, … will inherit the kingdom of God," and then move on as if this clearly establishes that all possible same-sex intimacy is being condemned—even when we don't assume that "the sexually immoral" reference condemns all opposite-sex intimacy. A careful reading of Romans 1:18-32 (which Hill simply cites as "condemning homoerotic practice" [63]) and 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 makes it clear that both should be read as contextually embedded statements that refer to specific practices, not to a generic "homoerotic practice."

THE COST

One could read Hill's book as the sincere personal testimony of a Christian young adult who deeply hopes to live a life honoring to God. One might feel profound sadness that Hill seems to paint himself into a corner of regret and discouragement with his negative anthropology and anti-gay ideology, but still admire his honesty and commitment to the path that seems right to him.

However, this book is not simply a personal testimony. It is a book that obviously has reached a much wider audience than simply those few Christian gays who may share his commitments about Christian faith, celibacy, and "homosexuality." This book surely is being used to pressure other gay Christians to take on the same kind of burdens Hill assumes for his own life. I don't really have a problem with his choosing the path he has for his own life, but by writing this book he provides a tool that likely is being used in hurtful ways on other young Christians.

The problem of the book is exacerbated by the thinness of Hill's theological justification for his stance. He perpetuates the shallow bases for strictures that not only contradict the tone of Jesus's own ministry but hinder the broader Christian world's ability to wrestle productively with the genuine differences in our approaches. His admittedly powerful personal witness seems more quixotic than prophetic given the lack of

justification for its underlying theology. But, sadly, even more than a quixotic witness, his story easily serves as a tool of oppression and repression—when, as I read the Bible, it need not do so.

II. DOES GOD HAVE A "DESIGN" FOR MARRIAGE—THAT EXCLUDES GAYS?

In their book, *Same-Sex Marriage: A Thoughtful Approach to God's Design for Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), Sean McDowell and John Stonestreet make the case that Christians should *reject* same-sex marriage. The main reason for this rejection is that God has an ironclad "design" that allows only for male/female marriage. This "design" is revealed in scripture and in the nature of human intimate relationships, most importantly in the possibility for procreation that only male/female partners have. How persuasive is this book's argument?

One of the main strengths of the book is that it strives for and largely achieves an irenic tone. While it is hard to imagine the main argument of the book being persuasive to someone who doesn't start out agreeing with it (which to me is not necessarily a flaw; I don't think the authors are necessarily trying to convert same-sex marriage supporters), those who don't agree with the book's argument might, nonetheless, well find the book readable and interesting. If someone who accepts same-sex marriage wants to understand the arguments against it, this book would be a good choice. And certainly those who don't like same-sex marriage will find in this book strong bases for their opposition.

McDowell and Stonestreet (henceforth, M&S) recognize that evangelical Christianity faces a public relations problem with its opposition to same-sex marriage. So they want to counter the impression that "anti-homosexual" is an accurate description of present day evangelical Christians while nonetheless making the case for opposing same-sex marriage. This is a delicate balance to try to achieve, and they are not particularly successful in doing so. But in their effort, they do mute the typical negative rhetoric a great deal.

As well, they (fleetingly) make a number of concessions that earlier evangelicals on the restrictive side (most notably Robert Gagnon in his widely circulated book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*—tellingly not referenced in *Same-Sex Marriage*) were loathe to. For example, they write: "Many Christians insensitively repeat over and over that [homosexuality is a choice], but to many of the men and women we have talked with who struggle with same-sex attraction, it isn't. They look at their lives and say, 'I would have never have chosen this. I can't choose *not* to feel this way. I've tried to feel straight, but nothing has changed.' We believe

them." (118). M&S don't actually wrestle much with the implications of this concession, but it is progress that they have made it.

THE CORE ARGUMENT

The basic argument the book makes against the acceptance of same-sex marriage seems pretty straightforward. The basic rationale for M&S opposing same-sex marriage is clear and hence can be wrestled with. This is what M&S present as the heart of their concern: Christians should reject the notion that people of the same sex can enter into a marriage relationship. Churches should not bless such marriages, and the state should not recognize them as legal unions (there are a couple of hints that M&S would not oppose "civil unions" as long as they are not called marriages; it's too bad they don't address that issue more thoroughly).

Why should we reject same-sex marriage? Ultimately because God has "designed" marriage to be reserved for only male/female couples. This "design" is revealed in scripture, for sure. However, it is also revealed in nature. In the end, the natural revelation (or "natural law"—though this term is not used in the book) basis for saying no to same-sex marriage is the most decisive. Partly, what nature shows us is that a man and a woman fit together in ways that two men or two women don't. More importantly, though, procreation is only possible for male/female couples. This is M&S's bottom line.

Despite being couched in a kinder, gentler tone, the case that M&S make is deeply problematic in its immediate application concerning same-sex marriage and also deeply problematic in terms of its theological assumptions and method.

SPEAKING FOR GOD

How capable are we as human beings of speaking with certainty about God's "design"? One of the key assumptions that M&S make is that we have certain revelation directly from God that tells us what God's once-for-all time design for marriage is. They don't acknowledge that this "revelation" is mediated through human agents at numerous places along the way—a dynamic that renders any message we might think we have from God about marriage tentative and culturally shaped.

I believe that the Bible itself was written by human beings and when read straightforwardly reflects that humanness from start to finish. And when read straightforwardly, the Bible does not present itself as the source of absolutely certain revelation directly from God. It presents itself as a collection of stories that when seen together provide a generally

coherent picture of God working with human beings to bring wholeness to a broken world. As well, the Bible we use is the product of a long series of human translations from the original languages to our modern English. No matter how careful and scholarly and collaborative these translations are, they still are the product of human interpretations about what contemporary words best approximate the meaning of the original text, realizing that this can never hope to be exact.

Then, we who teach, write about, and discuss the biblical materials are fallen human beings who must make our own interpretive choices in discerning and applying what the text is saying to us. It is interesting to me that people with the theological perspective reflected in *Same-Sex Marriage* often have a lot to say about the power of sin in our world and how we human beings are fallen. Yet, they seem at the same time to be very comfortable in assuming that their human interpretations of the Bible are a direct message from God.

This problem is exacerbated when writers such as M&S use their authoritarian language about "God's design" and apply it in such definitive ways in relation to an issue (same-sex marriage) that the Bible does not even directly speak to. Their use of the creation story and its echo in the teaching of Jesus as definitive on marriage are at most based on inference and extrapolation. There is no direct command in the Bible that addresses same-sex marriage. That, of course, does not mean that we shouldn't go to the Bible for help in our discernment processes. But, I think, it does mean that we should not act as if the Bible gives us clear and definitive directives—nor should folks like M&S dismiss those who don't agree with their *human* interpretation based on inference and extrapolation as simple deniers of biblical authority.

THE CHARACTER OF MARRIAGE: DIVINE REVELATION OR CULTURAL ARTIFACT?

What makes "marriage" marriage—and where does this come from? At the heart of *Same-Sex Marriage* is the claim that there is "an essential nature to marriage" (22). The authors present marriage, based in part on their interpretation of Genesis 1–2, as something that was established by God to be a certain way and that this is universally the case and has always been the case.

However, the actual portrayal of marriage in the stories of the Bible itself seem to reflect the particular culture within which they take place, not some timeless, set in concrete "design." Polygamy (which isn't taken seriously enough as an implicit biblical "norm" by M&S) and patriarchal dynamics where the wife is, in essence, the property of the husband, are

both central to the accepted practice of marriage in the Bible—as if the biblical people themselves were not aware of God's "design" for marriage.

If we recognize that views of marriage do vary in significant ways from culture to culture and from one time period to another time period, we will be much more reluctant to claim that we have been given an explicit "design" for marriage by God. And again, this "truth" is used by M&S as if it has at its core the forbidding of same-sex marriage, an issue that most certainly was not in the mind of the author of Genesis 1–2.

"NATURAL MARRIAGE"

This "design" for marriage is drawn from Genesis 1–2 (and reinforced by Jesus). But M&S also draw heavily on their own sense of what is "natural." Throughout the book they refer to "natural" marriage as being a practice that excludes same-sex couples. The two main elements that make up "natural" marriage are "the dual, gender-distinct nature of humanity" (32) and, more importantly, "because sexual intercourse is the only biological process that leads to procreation" (40).

One big problem with arguing from "what is natural" is that this is an imprecise standard that lends itself to being shaped by cultural biases. And it does not answer the question of what to do about exceptions. If something is "natural" must it allow for no exceptions? Though M&S present procreation as the core reason for why marriage must be only for male/female couples, they actually acknowledge that there are exceptions where marriages that do not produce children are nonetheless to be recognized as valid marriages. "Clearly, not all families have children. Some marriages are barren, by choice or by circumstance…. The natural marriage/procreation connection is not nullified because in some cases children are not intended or even possible" (159-60).

Likely no one doubts that the "marriage/procreation connection" is the most typical element of marriage. However, this isn't the issue. The issue is that M&S argue that the "marriage/procreation connection" is *the* reason to reject same-sex marriage. Their argument for rejecting same-sex marriage actually depends on there being no exceptions to this "marriage/procreation connection." If we allow for some exceptions, then we should have to demonstrate why we would not allow for others.

Why is it a valid marriage for a man and a woman in their fifties to get married when the two of them are not capable of producing children themselves but not for two women in their twenties to get married when they are not capable of producing children themselves? And, actually, with recent advances in reproductive technology, it is easier for gays and

lesbians to have biological children. It seems that the argument in this book for discrimination against same-sex couples is, despite their assertion to the contrary, based on what the authors call "arbitrary" rather than "essential" qualities (26).

They assert that the essence of marriage includes three elements: "(1) Two human beings becoming one in every way possible…. (2) Oriented toward procreation…. (3) It comes with an expectation of permanence" (40). Elements #1 and #3 seem to be as equally possible with same-sex marriage as with opposite-sex marriage. That leaves #2 as the central element for their argument. But they allow for some exceptions to this element—valid opposite-sex marriages being "barren," recognizing that procreation may not be possible for some. How is allowing this exception for some (say, a male and female in their fifties) and not others (say, two females in their twenties) not "arbitrary" discrimination? One could argue that if we are secure in what we understand to be "natural" we should recognize that exceptions do not threaten the "norm." If it truly is "natural" for men and women to want to marry each other and have children, then the vast majority of men and women will continue to do so even if those few who are more deeply attracted to partners of their same sex also marry each other.

I puzzle over why M&S (and so many others of their persuasion) single out the one exception (same sex couples) as inherently and profoundly wrong and threatening but do not seem nearly so concerned about other exceptions (childless marriages and remarriage after divorce—admittedly M&S say some negative things about divorce but they don't propose forbidding remarriage for divorced people). One has to suspect that there is indeed bias working here.

M&S are defensive about the charge that those who oppose same sex marriage do so out of hostility toward LGBTQ people. They state, "Clearly, there is no reason to think that mere opposition to a view is driven by hatred, bigotry, intolerance, or any other vice" (159). But they don't argue with evidence to show why there "is no reason" to think this. They acknowledge that historically and in the present many Christians act hatefully toward LGBTQ people. The book as a whole fuels a sense of fearfulness about the threat same-sex marriage posses to the well-being of American culture and to the institution of marriage—though they never do explain why the movement toward embracing marriage by gays should be seen as a threat to marriage. And, as discussed above, the reasons M&S give for being so absolute against same-sex marriage are not actually very strong and seem mostly to follow from assumptions that same-sex marriage must be wrong rather than evidence from the actual phenomenon of same-sex marriage that shows it is bad.

THE ARGUMENT FROM "ICKYNESS"

In a fascinating passage of the book, M&S quote a young person who used to be an evangelical Christian who left Christianity altogether due to changing her mind concerning same-sex marriage. This person refers to what she calls "the argument from ickyness." "Being gay is icky, and the people who are gay are the worst kind of sinner you can be…. The moment ickyness no longer rings true with young believers, their faith is destroyed" (128). Such a loss of faith probably is not uncommon when Christians who base their opposition to gays on "ickyness" personally learn to know gay people and realize they aren't actually "icky."

M&S take this comment as a prod for evangelicals to develop a more rigorous and profound theology of marriage so that their opposition to same-sex marriage is based on theology rather than on "ickyness". However, I think they fail to respect the significance of this critique. In my reading, their own argument still largely boils down to "the argument from ickyness." They are careful not to prey on the sense of "ickyness," but how else to explain, for instance, their arbitrary commitment to making exceptions for "barren marriages" but not same-sex marriages when they define the essence of marriage being procreation? Or when they constantly allude to same-sex marriage being "unnatural"?

Sadly, it seems that M&S may still be constructing a kind of pinprick theology where evangelical Christians who become convinced that LGBTQ people are not "icky" and hence become accepting of same-sex marriage will feel that they have to abandon their faith. The implied link, portrayed by M&S as quite strong, between being a Christian (in the narrow sense they use that term) and being unalterably opposed to same-sex marriage seems certain to lead to some people leaving their faith behind. You let that one "pin" loose, it is bound to deflate the entire balloon.

It seems to me that it should be easy for Christians who believe in the importance of marriage to welcome the advent of same-sex marriage. I sense that M&S and like-minded folks themselves create the crisis they find so alarming. Their notion of God's "design for marriage" is their own construction. It wouldn't take much to expand a thoroughly Christian understanding of marriage (that would include elements such as love, commitment, fidelity, mutuality, shared faith convictions, and even children) to include same-sex marriage. It's too bad M&S don't devote their energies to enhancing the health of the institution of marriage for *all* Christian couples who want to commit themselves to it.

III. A KINDER, GENTLER MACHINE-GUN HAND?

Back in the early 1990s, Neil Young recorded a song, "Rockin' in the Free World," that protested social circumstances in Reagan/Bush America. It included this line, referring to the language of the Bush campaign calling for a "kindler, gentler America" and pointing to "a thousand points of light" that reflect the goodness of the country: "We've got a thousand points of light for the homeless man, we've got a kindler, gentler machine-gun hand." Young called out the Bush campaign for its misleading message, its claims to seek a more humane country that was contradicted by the actual policies that only exacerbated the dynamics leading to homelessness and that sought expanded militarism.

I'm a little uneasy with using this rhetoric in relation to the current discussion in evangelical Christian circles about whether and how to be welcoming toward sexual minorities. However, I think the question raised by remembering Young's critique applies.

Is the effort Preston Sprinkle makes in his book *People to be Loved: Why Homosexuality is not Just an Issue* (Zondervan, 2015—echoing numerous others, such as the authors of the two books discussed above) to emphasize the call to love gay people actually a signal of a "kinder, gentler" evangelical community—or is it only reflecting a façade of "kindness" that does not actually signal much of a change at all? I'm afraid my reading of the book me with a strong impression of a deeper-seated "machine-gun hand" that remains solidly in place.

DO ACTUAL PEOPLE REALLY MATTER MUCH?

Sprinkle is a New Testament scholar with a PhD from the University of Aberdeen and currently an administrator at Eternity Bible College (Boise, ID). He has written several widely circulated books. He begins and ends *People to be Loved* with attractive reflections on the need to "love the sinner." But he also spends the majority of the book focused on how the Bible supposedly describes and condemns the "sin" that must be hated. These dual foci, "love the sinner; hate the sin," widespread in evangelical writing on these issues, are difficult to reconcile. Sprinkle does not spend much time reflecting on the tension in the "love the sinner, hate the sin" approach. As a consequence, the "love the sinner" element plays little appreciable role in Sprinkle's biblical discussion—and the hopes engendered by the book's title (to emphasize the people aspect and refuse to reduce "homosexuality" to an "issue") remain unfulfilled.

The first chapter, "My Name was Faggot," is humane and humble in tone. Sprinkle tells the story of a gay Christian whose rejection by his

family led to suicide. "I am disheartened to say that the Christian church has often played an unintended yet active role in pushing gay people away from Christ. Sometimes away from Christ and into the grave" (14). Indeed. Then, "If the gospel is good news, and the church is to be the light that warms the world with this good news, then why are gay people leaving the church in search of better news? If the gospel is not good news for gay people, then it's not good news" (15). Again, indeed.

Sprinkle goes on to propose some changes that would make our language more respectful. Don't use the word "*homosexual* as a noun to refer to a person who is gay" (22). "I would also recommend ditching the term *lifestyle*, as in 'the gay lifestyle' (23). So far, so good. Might it be that this will be a path-breaking evangelical book that actually lets the violence and disrespect of evangelical churches shape the entire agenda of the book, including reading the Bible in light of these realities?

As it turns out, no, this book is not actually very path breaking. It could have continued in the mode of taking the actual experiences of LGBTQ Christians seriously as a central part of how we interpret the Bible. However, Sprinkle essentially abandons the stories of such people when he turns to the Bible. What this means is that the stories are useful for him insofar as they are negative stories that strengthen his call to be kinder and gentler. But he's not interested in positive stories of successful and Christ-honoring marriages and other committed relationships. Such stories would throw into question Sprinkle's easy use of the scattered negative biblical allusions to same-sex sexual intimacy as a basis to reject the moral legitimacy of same-sex marriage.

FINDING WHAT ONE WANTS IN THE BIBLE

Sprinkle does not take up the issue of the relationship between the Bible and present-day experience of LGBTQ Christians. He doesn't discuss the experiences of those (whose number grows daily) who have found fulfillment in church-blessed marriages. He doesn't explain why these isolated and cryptic snippets from the Bible trump without discussion the actual present-day experiences. This failure to justify what will prove to be a profoundly unkind and ungentle appropriation of the Bible throws into question Sprinkle's claim to be taking a more humane and respectful approach in this book.

Right away, in chapter two, "Holy Otherness: Is Male and Female Sexual Difference Necessary for Marriage?" Sprinkle suggests that Genesis 1–2 teaches that the essence of marriage is that God created it to be exclusively for one male with one female. He applies this teaching literally to today and assumes it should determine what we believe about

marriage. So, if I know Christians in life-giving same-sex marriages, I should deny that such could possibly be God's will based on Genesis 1–2. However, even if Genesis 1–2 presents the "norm" for marriage being one male and one female, why should we assume that no exceptions to that normal pattern are acceptable? After all, Jesus allows for exceptions to the permanence of marriage when quoting Genesis (in Matthew's version, 19:9) and refers to the exceptions Moses allowed for (Dt 24:1).

Another part of the picture of marriage in Genesis 1–2 is the expectation of having children ("be fruitful and multiply," Gen 1:28 follows right after the "male and female" clause). Yet, we allow for exceptions for people unable to have children. Why could Genesis 1–2 not be read as reporting the norm for most people, with the sense that a few might not fit into the "for life," the "fruitful and multiply," or the "male and female" elements of the norm?

Taking account of the experience of married same-sex couples from recent years could encourage Sprinkle to move toward a more humane reading of this passage. Yes, the Bible teaches that it is normal for men to marry women. In part, this is because marriage is understood as a good thing, a way to encourage human beings to find a lifelong companion to meet our intimacy needs. But for a few, male/female marriage is not an option. We now know that something like the lifelong, conjugal partnership established in Genesis two when Eve was created is also possible in God-honoring ways for same-sex couples. To affirm these partnerships is not a threat to the normativity and value of opposite-sex marriage; in fact churches should see the affirming of both types of marriage as a mutually reinforcing commitment that will strengthen human community.

However, Sprinkle clearly has as his agenda the invalidating of same-sex marriage for Christians. Hence, the ease with which he takes a passage that simply describes the early history of humanity and turns it into a statement that the essence of marriage is the joining together to two clearly and permanently differentiated genders. He doesn't take into account contemporary understandings that our gender identities (masculine and feminine) are varied and somewhat fluid and not irrevocably tied to our sexual identities (male and female).

Sprinkle places a great deal of weight on the two cryptic commands in Leviticus 18 and 20 that forbid men having sex with other men. And he finds there the clarity he looks for: "Leviticus 18 or 20 don't appear to have a specific form of male-male sex in view. The verses use general language, which includes all forms of homosexual sex. There's no concern over the status of the male partners. There's nothing about prostitution, rape, or men have sex with boys. The commands most

naturally include all forms of male same-sex intercourse—thus including consensual sex between two men in love" (48).

That is, for Sprinkle, the cryptic nature of these commands—they simply show up in the lists of prohibitions with no explanation—becomes a basis for asserting that they have the broadest possible timeless application. He dismisses several attempts to situate the no male-male sex in the specific context of the time of Leviticus that would show that these prohibitions are limited to a certain time and place. One option he doesn't address—the one I find most likely—is the idea that the prohibitions here have to do with the importance for the community of children. This seems like the only explanation that makes sense of each of the prohibitions in the series in Leviticus 18:19-23, which speak to non-procreative sex, sex between family members, and child sacrifice.

DOES JESUS'S SILENCE MEAN HE WOULD OPPOSE SAME-SEX MARRIAGE?

Sprinkle asserts that think that Jesus would affirm same-sex marriage would be to "rip him out of his Jewish context"—because, according to Sprinkle, "the Judaism that existed for 500 years on either side of Jesus unequivocally condemned same-sex behavior" (70). This is quite a strong statement considering how little we know about the views of the Judaism of the centuries around Jesus's time.

"The fact that Jesus' authoritative Bible prohibited male same-sex intercourse suggests that Jesus would have believed the words of Leviticus had the question come up" (72). This is a great example of how Sprinkle, like many other evangelical writers on this topic, constructs certainty out of silence. It seems just as plausible that Jesus would have been aware of the intimacy of such biblical same-sex relationships as Naomi and Ruth or David and Jonathan, so had he encountered a same-sex couple who were committed to a permanent, monogamous, mutually up-building, God-centered partnership, he would have used those biblical precedents as a basis to bless such a relationship. Even without insisting that those two Old Testament intimate friendships were sexually consummated, he could have believed that they reflected the same life-giving dynamics of the partnership he encountered.

Another problem with Sprinkle's argument concerning Jesus's Jewish context is how he assumes that on these kinds of issues we should see such ancient cultural assumptions as normative for us today. If Jesus's Jewish world was unequivocally opposed to same-sex partnerships we should be too. However, this is problematic on many levels. For one thing, we by the nature of the case cannot know much about those supposed cultural

assumptions; our data is sparse and often cryptic. We are surely liable all too easily to read our own biases into such incomplete information.

By ignoring the present-day experience of LGBTQ Christians in intimate relationships, Sprinkle gives those ancient, weakly ascertained cultural assumptions much more weight than present day data. Instead of imagining how the Jesus of welcome to vulnerable people would respond to the fruitful lives of present-day people of faith, Sprinkle asks us to assume that Jesus's silence on same-sex relationships is evidence for how he would reject all possible present day relationships.

HOW *NOT* TO READ PAUL ON SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

According to Sprinkle, "Romans 1 is probably the most important passage in the debate about same-sex relations" (87). The Romans text and one other brief mention in Paul (1 Cor 6:9) receive extended attention in the two longest chapters of the book. However, in his discussion of both the Romans and 1 Corinthians texts, Sprinkle makes a fundamental mistake that renders much of his discussion of particular words irrelevant.

He starts his discussion of Romans with an important observation: "The entire context of Romans 1–3 is important for understanding [1:26-17]" (89). However, after a brief, accurate summary of the theological argument Paul makes in these three chapters, Sprinkle focuses on the few verses in chapter 1 with little attention to how Paul's discussion there fits with the larger argument. This leads him fundamentally to misrepresent Paul's point in writing about sexuality in 1:26-27.

In my interpretation, beginning in 1:18 Paul portrays the dynamics of idolatry that characterize pagans. They trust not in God but in created things, which leads to their abandonment by God. This misdirected trust sets off a spiral of injustice ("wickedness") that leads to "degrading passions" (1:26) and culminates in "every kind of injustice" (1:29); hence they deserve death (1:32). Clearly, Paul presents here a caricatured version of pagan idolatry. He sets his readers up when he gives a account that would evoke their disgust at pagans. What follows is a turning of tables that echoes the prophet Nathan's trap of King David after Uriah's engineered death. David condemns the king Nathan tells about who takes away the poor man's precious sheep. Then Nathan springs his trap. That's what *you* have done! Paul's says something similar. You self-righteous insiders to the covenant, when you point your fingers at those terrible pagans you forget that you are just as guilty. He goes on by the end of chapter 3 to provide a message of hope and healing.

It is crucial for understanding Romans 1 to see that it is not a considered statement about human sexuality (contrary to Sprinkle's inference when he writes about Paul "prohibiting same-sex eroticism," 123). Paul simply describes in an exaggerated way what pagan Romans do that reflects the problematic dynamics of the spiral of idolatry at its most extreme. And he does this not to condemn the pagans, but to spring a rhetorical trap on his readers in their judgmentalism. It is ironic how this passage then becomes the most important text for Sprinkle (and many others) to be judgmental about same-sex marriage.

In other words, the purpose of Romans 1:18-32 (which includes the reference to same-sex "shameless acts" in 1:26-27) is not a considered statement concerning how Christians should not endorse same-sex marriage. It's not even a considered statement concerning any kind of should or should not. It's an exaggerated caricature meant to confront the self-righteous religiosity among Paul's readers that leads to judgmentalism. And this confrontation is not itself a form of Paul's own judgmentalism, but a move toward the core goal of his letter to the Romans: Affirmation of the healing love of God in Jesus that reconciles sinners with God and in community with each other.

So Sprinkle's labors to show how Paul articulates a theology of marriage here that justifies a rejection of same-sex marriage as "against nature" are misspent. There are many problems with the specifics of what he reads into Romans 1:26-27, but his failure to read the passage in its context points to the biggest problem. In his eagerness to find biblical material to support his disposition against same-sex marriage, Sprinkle reveals how flawed the case for discrimination is. His "most important passage" does not even speak to the issues he tries to address.

In his eagerness to find materials that support his view that what is "wrong with same-sex relations transcends cultures," he imagines in Romans 1:26-27 an argument for "God-given gender boundaries [that are] universal and absolute." Sprinkle asserts that Romans 1 teaches that these boundaries "go against the way God created males and females and intended them to relate to each other" (93). If Paul did believe that there were such a thing as God-given gender boundaries that are universal and absolute, we would have to say, based on the evidence from life, that Paul was wrong. However, Paul surely had nothing of the kind in mind here. He simply repeats stereotypes about pagans in order to stimulate the kind of response that will allow him to make his anti-judgmentalism critique.

We see the same problem in Sprinkle's lengthy interpretation of the second text where Paul allegedly addresses same-sex sexual behavior, 1 Corinthians 6:9. Once again Sprinkle ignores the context for his key verses and imagines that they speak directly to his agenda of rejecting

same-sex marriage. However, in fact, Paul describe pagan behavior in a way that supports his point concerning something totally other than sexual ethics. Sprinkle doesn't even bother this time to mention the broader context for his key verse. He simply jumps in with the one verse and narrows the focus even more closely to two specific words mentioned in his verse—as if all we need to do here is establish the meaning of these words, something that he seems to think can be done without considering the literary context for Paul's use of these words here.

Sprinkle goes to great lengths to show that in fact these two words are all about Paul's antipathy toward all possible same-sex sexual intimacy. Based simply on the meaning he constructs for these individual words based on scholarly word studies, he concludes that Paul means to "prohibit same-sex eroticism" under all circumstances and for all time (123). As with Romans 1, Sprinkle assumes that Paul intends in 1 Corinthians 6:9 to articulate authoritative direct ethical requirements for Christians. However, he can make this assumption only by ignoring that immediate context of the verse and the rhetorical role it plays in Paul's argument. Once again, as in Romans 1, Paul describes pagan behavior in an exaggerated way in order to make a point about the behavior of his readers that has nothing to do with sex.

Beginning in 1 Corinthians 6:1, Paul writes of a major problem among the Corinthians Christians. They take their internal disputes to secular courts for adjudication. Paul insists that such behavior is not acceptable. It is likely that the people who initiated these court proceedings were some of the more wealthy people in the congregation and it was a form of exploitation against poorer members (see Richard Hays's commentary on 1 Corinthians). Regardless, Paul's concern is straightforward. Christians are not to take their fellow believers to secular courts but instead are to work together to resolve their conflicts. Such a path is necessary for the sake of their witness to the wider world of the power of Jesus's message of reconciliation.

To drive this point home, Paul gives a description of those who preside in the secular courts. They are characterized by injustice (or "wickedness"), not the kind of justice needed for a healing resolution to the conflicts. Paul's description of the judges is clearly exaggerated. He is not meaning to carefully portray these people so much as exaggerate in order to make his point. Look, you Christians used to be unjust like those judges still are—and it was pretty bad as you would admit. So, don't go back to that world when you are trying to work out your problems with your fellow Christians. All of you who now belong to Jesus Christ have the capabilities of embodying genuine justice and hence are well able to work things out yourselves when you are in conflict.

Paul uses a vice list in order to describe the injustice of the secular judges. On this list he includes the two words Spinkle focuses on: *arsenokoites* and *malakoi*. Because Paul only gives a list, it is difficult to know for sure what he precisely means by these specific words. However, the meaning of the vice list as a whole is clear. Paul didn't need to explain the meaning of the particular words to convey his point, which is about the general unjust sensibilities of the secular judges. It seems likely that there is some sexual connotation with *arsenokoites* (*malakoi* was used in non-sexual contexts at times, though at times it had sexual connotations), quite possibly having to do with male-male sexual behavior. However, as with Romans 1, Paul's point is to give an exaggerated picture of pagans. The specific meaning of *arsenokoites* is both impossible to determine (as far as we know Paul made this word up and gives no explanation of what he might have meant) and basically irrelevant. The last thing Paul intended with this word is to provide a detailed and timeless instruction on how Christians should manage their sexual lives.

As with his discussion of Romans 1, Sprinkle here projects his own agenda onto the biblical text. Many of his speculative points about the possible meaning of *arsenokoites* may have some validity as possible readings—if not the most likely readings. But by missing the point of Paul's use of the words, he betrays his own anti-same-sex-marriage disposition and perhaps a bit of desperation in finding explicit biblical warrant for that disposition.

WHAT ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF THOSE IN HAPPY SAME-SEX MARRIAGES?

After his biblical exposition, Sprinkle turns to more practical and contemporary issues, and tries to explain why the clear biblical teaching against same-sex marriage can be sustained in light of present-day questions and challenges. Here again, his failure to take seriously present-day experiences of LGBTQ Christians, including not only the crucial population of those happily married but others as well, leads to many problematic assumptions and assertions. While granting, grudgingly, the possibility that same-sex affectional orientation (my term; Sprinkle uses the term "desires") is an unchangeable dimension of life for some, "this still wouldn't mean that it's okay to act on those desires" (131). Greater awareness of the experiences of LGBTQ Christians would help Sprinkle realize that "those desires" is an inadequate way to think about what motivates gay Christians to want to be married. The point is not wanting an outlet for sexual desire nearly so much as wanting to experience companionship and the broad dimension of intimacy that goes far

beyond just having sex (important as sexual intimacy is) that characterizes what is most life-giving in heterosexual marriages.

Sprinkle will go on to make the case for celibacy for gay Christians. I think it's always problematic when a happily married heterosexual person denies access a happy marriage to others. In making this case, he articulates an uncharitable put-down for those who support same-sex marriage: "[Many] affirming Christians ignore the Bible and crown human desire as the lord of right and wrong" (151). This comment seems to ignore the main argument in favor of same-sex marriage—it's not about "desire as the lord of right and wrong," but about mutual sharing of covenanted love (that same as with heterosexual marriage).

Sadly, Sprinkle shows no acquaintance with the extensive literature by Christians affirming same-sex marriage—such as David Myers and Letha Scanzoni, *What God Has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage* (HarperOne, 2005), and William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace: Same-Sex Relationships in Religion, Law, and Society*, 2nd edition (Eerdmans, 2012). I wouldn't expect Sprinkle to agree with the arguments of these books, but by taking them into account he would have a harder time reducing the issue to "desire as lord of right and wrong" and would have more likely had to address the more challenging issue for those who oppose same-sex marriage—where is the harm in the real-life practice of same-sex marriage that mirrors the ideals of Christian opposite-sex marriage?

PUTTING HOMOPHOBIA TO DEATH?

Sprinkle returns at the end of the book to where he began, insisting that evangelical Christians must be kind and loving toward those with same-sex attraction. "We need to put homophobia to death. Stab it. Kill it. And bury it in a grave" (181). However, in spite of these admirable sentiments, Sprinkle's book ultimately underwrites hostility toward LGBTQ Christians. Here are five ways he does so:

(1) The biggest failing may be Sprinkle's failure respectfully to attend to the actual experience of Christians in same-sex marriages. Though the subtitle of the book promises otherwise, "Why homosexuality is not just an issue," he does not acquaint himself or the reader with the practical experiences that would challenge his arguments that are based mainly on ideas. The book *is* about "homosexuality" as an "issue," and the key element is what he often refers to negatively as "desire": Paul "condemns the actions that result from sexual desire. 'Desire' … and 'passion' … are considered wrong in Romans 1 not because such desires are excessive … but they grow into sinful sexual actions" (100). It's doubtful that Sprinkle would reduce the connection he feels with his wife that animates their

relationship to "desire." It is a shame Sprinkle seemingly hasn't tried to acquaint himself with those who experience their same-sex marriages as life giving and good—where "desire" is only one part of a rich and comprehensive experience of intimacy and commitment.

(2) We may see an anti-gay bias at work in how Sprinkle uses Jesus's teaching. Barely noting that Jesus's teaching where he mentions marriage in terms of "male and female" is about divorce (73), Sprinkle focuses on sexual differentiation as the most relevant aspect of this teaching. It is ironic that Jesus directly speaks to the terrible problem all too many attempts at heterosexual marriage end up displaying, a problem that has reached epidemic proportions in contemporary America, and Sprinkle proceeds as if Jesus's main relevance is to forbid same-sex marriage.

(3) Sprinkle's treatment of the direct biblical texts only makes sense if he is seeking to find evidence to support his pre-existing animus toward same-sex marriage. He takes these few cryptic and brief statements and spins them into all-encompassing prohibitions. For example, the simple and unexplained command in Leviticus 18 and 20, "men should not lie with men as they do with women," becomes the definitive basis for saying that the Old Testament forbids "all forms of male same-sex intercourse" (48). And he takes similarly brief and cryptic statements from Paul's writings where Paul describes the behavior of certain pagans and spins them into broad statements that are "prohibiting same-sex eroticism" for Christians (123). These two brief descriptive comments (Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9) become the bases for Sprinkle's assertion that "the reason Paul condemns the same-sex erotic behavior—that it is against nature and creates the Creator's intention for male-female relations—shows that Paul's language applies to all forms of same-sex intercourse" (101).

These leaps that Sprinkle makes, from short, cryptic statements to all-encompassing and definitive ethical commands, are not obvious from straightforward reading of the texts. To make such leaps, he must de-emphasize the literary contexts of these verses and focus on the alleged meaning of specific words. Such a method is notoriously susceptible to the imposition of meaning onto the text. That Sprinkle draws uniformly hostile conclusions from these passages that fit his starting assumptions so well makes one suspicious that such imposing indeed is happening.

(4) Numerous times, Sprinkle makes parallels between same-sex marriage and obviously wrong, sinful, and even disgusting behavior. These links subtly poison the reader's disposition toward LGBTQ people. There is an implicit link between same-sex marriage and incest and rape: "Jesus is silent on a whole host of … ethical questions, but I don't think his silence meant that he was indifferent. Jesus never mentions incest [or] rape [or] bestiality" (71)—implying some sort of

moral equivalence among same-sex marriage, incest, rape, and bestiality. "Jesus stands in solidarity with the woman caught in adultery, taking her shame and sin, and declaring: 'Neither do I condemn you'" (85). The parallel here is that "nonaffirming Christians" should treat LGBTQ Christians in the same way Jesus treated this woman, with an implicit moral equating of same-sex marriage with adultery.

In his discussion of Romans 1, Sprinkle denies that Paul's condemnation of same-sex erotic behavior there could just be about certain types of behavior. "In a similar way, when Paul describes other pagan vices, such as murder, envy, deceit, covetousness, and slander in Romans 1:29-31, this does not mean that these acts are fine if they are committed by loving Christians" (101). That is, same-sex marriage is on a moral plane with these other types of wickedness.

(5) Ultimately, Sprinkle casts strong doubt on the possibility that being a self-affirming gay person is compatible with being a Christian. Some "use the term *gay* to describe their core identity, central to who they are, a primary aspect of their existence as a human. I have a hard time seeing how this can be reconciled with the gospel" (141). Sprinkle seems to say here that he sees a fundamental contradiction between self-identifying as gay and "submitting one's identity to Christ." I doubt Sprinkle would say that other types of self-identification (being heterosexual or male or white or a Canadian) are irreconcilable with the gospel. Certainly, we would all agree that some self-identities can become so central that they push Jesus out of the picture. But why would the self-identification as gay be more inherently problematic that these other examples? Why indeed, unless there is a special bias against self-identifying gay people.

In light of these five points, it is difficult not to question how central to Sprinkle's concerns his call to "put homophobia to death" actually is. He defines homophobia as "the dislike or prejudice against LGBT people" (181). I finish this book with a strong sense that Sprinkle, despite what might be his best intentions, has produced a work that manifests "dislike or prejudice against LGBT people."

I end up with mixed feelings about the idea of an evangelical such as Sprinkle writing a book that purports to focus on LGBTQ folks as "people to be loved." On the one hand, it seems always to be a good thing for people to try to be kinder and gentler. Yet, the various problems with this book I have identified indicate that the kindness and gentleness are pretty superficial. Making motions to be kind and gentle while the core antipathy remains is likely for many to be seen as manipulative and hypocritical. Kindness and gentleness do not seem compatible with the kind of theological argument that Sprinkle makes in this book.

15. Reflections on recent writing: The inclusive approach

[These five review essays were posted on ThinkingPacifism.net. The response to Does Jesus Really Love Me? *was posted October 6, 2014;* God and the Gay Christian *was posted November 2, 2014;* Changing Our Minds *was posted December 19, 2014;* The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage *was posted May 24, 2016;* Bible, Gender, Sexuality *was posted June 29, 2016.]*

I. GOD AND THE (CELIBATE) GAY CHRISTIAN

We Christians continue to struggle to embody Jesus's way of peace in relation to sexual minorities. Surely a necessary part of this struggle is the need to humanize the people this affects. That is, especially, to humanize those we disagree with and those who we may agree with but still perceive as strangers. Jeff Chu, a professional journalist and gay Christian, has written a fascinating book that helps with this task of humanization. The greatest contribution of the book, *Does Jesus Really Love Me? A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America* (Harper, 2013), surely is how it helps us see actual people as they struggle and advocate. Chu manages to present people across the spectrum in sympathetic ways and helps these people tell their stories.

Chu writes well and obviously is a solid journalist. He does not come across as a deep thinker and does not seem to be especially interested in the intellectual elements of our wrestling. That lack proves to be a problem, as I will discuss below. But for a look into the hearts of those on the front lines of the current ferment among many types of American Christians this book is worthwhile—and I recommend it for that reason.

POIGNANT VIGNETTES

Several times in the book Chu is especially successful in helping the reader see into the soul of the struggle. For me, one of most moving of

the stories he tells is that of Kevin Olson, a gay Christian in Minnesota who feels the call to remain celibate even as he accepts the irreversibility of his affectional orientation. Now, while we obviously are at Chu's mercy in how he tells Olson's story, I do sense a profound respect on Chu's part for Olson's commitments. Nonetheless, the picture that Chu paints seems to me to be quite sad.

Olson comes across as sincere and honest. Yet, he also seems lonely and unsettled. He has remained in a Christian subculture that perhaps is trying to accept him and support him—yet at the same time sees something deeply disordered in his orientation. Such a tension leaves Olson at loose ends. For example, he not only resists entering into a romantic relationship, he even avoids close friendships with men so as not to tempt himself or to be misunderstood.

Chu gives a perspective on Olson's story in the form of reflections on one of Olson's favorite songs by Christian singer Chris Rice: The song is "so damn depressing. It's all about wanting this life to be over and the next to begin. It describes how every minute on this earth feels like an hour and every inch of life a mile. It begs Jesus to come soon" (page 159).

However, after this, Chu concludes:

> Kevin's lifestyle was not one choice but an active and constant series of them: the choice to set aside his perceived desire for companionship and closeness with men; the choice to set aside his perceived physical wants in favor of his perceived spiritual needs; the choice to sacrifice his earthly happiness for the eternal joy that he is convinced has been promised to him by his God. To him, celibacy hasn't been act of fencing himself off; rather, it has been one of opening up, of embracing the sanctuary that he believes his Lord provides (160).

Through his reflections on his own journey that crop up throughout, it is clear that Chu, though theologically likely pretty close to Olson, has chosen a quite different path. To his credit, it seems to me, he mostly let Olson's story stand on its own terms. Olson clearly takes a courageous path, but one with great costs that are not obviously necessary.

As a counterpoint, the final portrait is of Gideon Eads, a young gay man in his mid-20s who lives in a remote and conservative Arizona town. His biological and church families are unalterably opposed to the possibility that Eads could remain, simultaneously, a Christian and self-affirming gay man. Scattered throughout the book, Chu recounts correspondence with Eads, including a deeply unsettling report on Eads's encounter with a professional counselor. Eads comes across as a remarkably bright, grounded person who has found a path to self-acceptance with virtually no help from family or church.

The book ends with a face-to-face encounter when Chu makes it out to Arizona. Eads plans to continue to live in his hometown and dreams of opening a shop where he would make and custom-decorate cakes. It's a powerful moment that captures the deep sincerity, heart-wrenching vulnerability, and inner strength of a young evangelical Christian in the belly of the beast, as it were.

In another eye-opening encounter, Chu tells of his sojourn in Topeka, Kansas, to visit with the virulently anti-gay Westboro Baptist Church. He actually meets in person with Westboro patriarch Fred Phelps, and spends extensive time with the extended Phelps family. To his credit, Chu simply tells this part of the story, highlighting the hospitality he was met with and not playing up the potentially sensational aspects of this encounter.

CHU'S AGENDA

Jeff Chu is a professional journalist. This attribute is apparent in his reporter-like tone and the impression of objectivity that he gives almost throughout the book. Yet, he does have an agenda, even if it times it may not be apparent. The structure of the book reflects that agenda. He starts with the anti-gay stories. Westboro Baptist comes in chapter 3, an account of the reactionary Harding College and its hostility toward attempts to have open conversation on campus in chapter 4, and the account of Kevin Olson's choice to remain celibate in chapter 8. Then, his report on welcoming Lutheran congregations in San Francisco is in chapter 11, the admirable Gay Christian Network in chapter 12, and the "best" church he encounters (Denver's Highlands Church) in chapter 16.

I think it would have strengthened the message of the book and increased his potential for being trusted by less than fully friendly readers if Chu had been more forthright about the book's structure. He ends up with general pleas for Christians to be more open-minded and respectful of each other, but it's a kind of weak conclusion in what feels on the surface to be mostly a descriptive rather than prescriptive book—but in reality does end up being a work of advocacy, not simple reporting.

Chu would also have served his readers better if he had been more self-aware about his own ecclesial perspective. He writes openly about his background as a fundamentalist Baptist, and seems to be most comfortable in fundamentalist and evangelical contexts. But he doesn't pay much attention to a wide swath of American Christianity. Virtually nothing about Catholicism and much less about mainline Protestantism than evangelicalism. He does mention the United Church of Christ a couple of times in passing, but does not try to connect with any UCC

congregations that have been affirming for at least a generation now. Certainly, he was free to choose the kinds of churches he wanted to visit and this is already a pretty long book. But I would have appreciated some reflection on his process of selection.

I fear that Chu may still operate with a residue of the evangelical narrowness that seems to equate "Christianity" with "evangelical Christianity." He could have helped his readers by emphasizing more the already existing settings and resources where many Christians have done extensive reflecting on the issues he raises—and put their gained wisdom into action. Or at least he could have done more to acknowledge the existence of those and challenge the stereotypes also too often held by non-Christian America that progressive Christianity simply doesn't exist.

THE BOOK'S BIGGEST PROBLEM

I, of course, read this book as a theologian. So it shouldn't be surprising that I would be troubled by Chu's lack of theological reflection. At one point, Chu quotes a leader in the Evangelical Covenant Church (a largely anti-gay denomination that he profiles in a sympathetic and insightful way): "The conservative side wants to talk about the Bible. The other side is sharing stories. You can tell stories all day long, and they're wonderful and they're valuable, but for people who think the Bible says no to this issue, it's not going to change anything" (195).

Since Chu includes this quote in his book, it seems fair to infer that he, to the contrary, thinks it is a good idea to "tell stories all day long." Perhaps this is because he thinks debates about the Bible are a dead end. Perhaps he is not expecting to "change anything" with the conservatives (though because of what I mention above about the structure of his book, I find it doubtful that he's not trying to persuade). And I do think the stories are great, as I have said.

However, what this book fails to do is give us a sense—both practically and theologically—of *why* these issues have become so extraordinarily conflictual. He presents cracks in the wall of evangelical anti-gay ideology, but he doesn't really give us clues as to what has created that wall and what keeps it largely in place. This is where theological reflection (and, probably, philosophical, psychological, and anthropological reflection) could be essential.

As it stands, Chu's book is mostly a feel-good, empathetic, respectful, and perceptive description of the terrain. But scratch the surface a bit (and it's not like Chu denies or tries to cover this up), and we see profound pain. LGBTQ Christians have suffered mightily because of churches' hostility toward them. The stubbornness, even cold-

heartedness that lurks just under the surface of many of Chu's stories on the part of the hostile ones must also be a source of great pain for those people themselves.

At some point, we need more help in understanding the sources, the on-going dynamics, the reasons for why Christians, especially evangelical Christians, have drawn such a line in the sand, a line with profound costs across the board, really, for just about all Christians in North America. I don't mean to criticize Chu for not writing the book I wish he had. What he has contributed is helpful. But he has stimulated me to imagine something more.

That Chu has an intuition about the centrality of theology is perhaps apparent in his comments at the end of his conclusion when he laments what he calls the "Hinduization" of Christianity where we all have different gods. But unlike Hindus, we Christians each insist on calling our god God. I actually think this insistence provides one glimmer of hope in the broader struggle.

I think all Christians would agree that some views of God are better than others. Such an agreement could provide the basis for a conversation about our theology, and help us identify what the actual differences are. Maybe such clarity would simply lead to an honest parting of ways—which may be an improvement over what we have now. But I would like to imagine that such clarity has at least a little potential to lead to some actual metaphysical therapy where we move together toward common understandings of deep theology that could lead to genuine healing.

II. GOD AND THE (CONSERVATIVE) GAY CHRISTIAN

I imagine that for those who most oppose the growing openness to same-sex marriage and the acceptance of LGBTQ Christians in the churches, including in leadership roles, one of the most challenging arguments would be one that argues *on the basis* of the Bible for such inclusive practices. It seems easier (maybe for both sides when the debate gets polarized) simply to assume that the debate is whether Christians should follow the Bible or not.

I suspect that it is because Matthew Vines's recent book, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case for Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent Books, 2014), is so conservative theologically that it is receiving such sharp opposition from many evangelical supporters of a restrictive approach to

these issues.[1] Writers who grant that the Bible is opposed to "homosexual practice" but then want to move the churches in a more inclusive direction based on other criteria (the experience of grace in the lives of LGBTQ Christians, for example) are easier to dismiss.

MUDDYING THE WATERS

When the debate concerning inclusiveness vs. restrictiveness can be reduced to a debate about Christian orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy, it's going to be an easier path for those on the side of maintaining the status quo. Vines's book, though, muddies the waters.

This is a book that situates itself square in the midst of the evangelical churches, claiming to argue from a conservative, orthodox, and traditional biblical reading strategy for the acceptance of "same-sex relationships." Hence, it is getting much more negative attention than earlier books that argued with more liberal, non-orthodox, and contemporary reading strategies.

It adds to the challenges raised by this book that it is published by a publisher, Convergent Books, that is a sister imprint with the Multnomah Publishing Group within the Random House conglomerate. That people who work for Multnomah cooperated with the production of Vines's book has been controversial, leading to Multnomah being pushed out of the evangelical National Religious Broadcasters trade association.

Vines gained attention a couple of years ago when he posted on You tube a lecture where he shared the fruit of his research after he accepted his own sexual identity as a gay man. The precocious Vines was still a teen-ager when he came to this clarity, and he decided to take time out of his college career to devote his full energies to research. He wanted to find out if he could be both a self-affirming gay man looking in time to find a lifetime partner and an evangelical Christian.

Vines concluded that these parts of his self-understanding did indeed fit together. He shared his conclusions in his You Tube video. The video went viral, gaining an audience of hundreds of thousands in a short time. The video led to this book. And the debate within evangelical Christianity over the acceptance of self-affirming gays who are in or seek to be in "same-sex relationships" entered a new phase—one where no longer could it be taken for granted that conservative theology inevitably led to a rejection of such relationships.

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[1] See R. Albert Mohler, Jr., ed., *God and the Gay Christian: A Response to Matthew Vines* (Lousiville, KY: SBTS Press, 2014), an e-book published by Southern Baptist Theological Seminary within days of the publication of Vines's book.

THE KEY IDEAS

Vines writes clearly and accessibly. He has done his research and spells out his argument with an admirable combination of brevity and depth. He doesn't claim to break new ground. He stands on the shoulders of various other scholars. But what Vines does that makes this book important are: (1) As I have mentioned, he connects with a much bigger audience than similar presentations have gained before. (2) He combines his unabashed affirmation for the legitimacy of same-sex marriage with his also unabashed affirmation of an impressively conservative approach to biblical interpretation ("impressive" not because I am persuaded by this approach but because he makes such a strong case for inclusion without compromising his approach).

At the heart of his argument is the image from Jesus that what matters most in evaluating people's connection with God is the fruitfulness we see (or not) in their lives—"by their fruits you shall know them." Vines realized in his own life and in the lives of people he has been close to, that spiritual fruitfulness is apparent in the lives of gay and lesbian Christians—an important clue that there is nothing inherently wrong with their sexual identities.

Vines insists, though, that the assumptions that have plagued anti-gay Christians for many years have not been because of what the Bible actually says, but because of misinterpretations of the Bible. He then devotes considerable space to showing how the "core passages" that buttress the anti-gay position should actually be read. In each case, he presents a case for seeing those passages as being concerned with particular sexual behaviors that would be problematic if engaged in by heterosexual people, too (for example, in Romans 1, Paul is concerned with excess, with "lust," not with same-sex relationships in and of themselves). The concern in the Bible is never with the sexual orientation of the people per se.

He argues that celibacy should be seen as a special gift that God gives a select few, not as a requirement to be imposed on all people who are fundamentally attracted to those of the same sex. He also challenges the notion of "gender complimentarity" that currently seems to lie at the heart of the Christian opposition to same-sex marriage.

END THE DOUBLE STANDARD

The bottom line for Vines is that the churches should quit making demands on LGBT Christians that they don't make on heterosexual

Christians—namely, that intimate partnerships are not permissible. On the other hand, Vines insists that the other side of this argument also holds true: those entering into same-sex partnerships should seek to follow the same rigorous standards for monogamy and life-long commitment that the churches call male/female couples to.

So, Vines's view should be seen to be as conservative, not liberal. He holds a high view of biblical inspiration and of the exclusivity of the gospel as the way to salvation. He has a quite rigorous and traditional view of sexual morality. He argues that his more literalistic inclinations actually are what enable him to make a case for same-sex marriage. It is *because* of the Bible, not in spite of it, that he makes his claims.

VINES'S MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

Even if I don't agree with all of Vines's arguments, and I certainly don't share all the elements of his theological method, I think this is an excellent book. I would especially recommend it to those on the conservative side of the theological spectrum regardless of their views concerning gay marriage. Those theological conservatives who are open to the possibility that God might after all be tolerant of such partnerships may find Vines's work an answer to prayer—he hopes to give them permission to make the moves they have hoped they could make without giving up their core theological commitments.

Those theological conservatives on the other side, still convinced that same-sex marriage could not be God's will, owe it to themselves to take on the challenges Vines presents them. I say that not because I think Vines will change such people's minds. Rather, I think he provides challenges that those who oppose gay marriage in the name of scripture and conservative theology should force themselves to meet for the sake of integrity and internal consistency. It's too lazy and disrespectful simply to say "same-sex marriage is wrong because the Bible says so" without actually explaining what it is that the Bible actually says that leads to that conclusion. Wrestling with Vines's arguments could provide the stimulus to do this explaining in a substantive way.

Those of a less conservative persuasion would also benefit from reading Vines's book. I think it is too bad that theological moderates and liberals, in effect, allow the conservatives to set the terms for how the Bible should be interpreted. The issue then becomes, for both sides, what we do with the "anti-gay" message of the Bible. Vines challenges those assumptions about what the Bible says. In doing so, maybe he can inspire some of those to his theological left to become more resistant to readings that place the Bible squarely on the side of discrimination. I hope so.

III. CAN AN EVANGELICAL SUPPORT GAY MARRIAGE—AND REMAIN AN EVANGELICAL?

Back in 2003, David Gushee co-wrote (with Glen Stassen) what became a standard text book on Christian ethics, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context.* Published by InterVarsity Press, this book especially has been widely read in evangelical circles. I liked the book a lot and wrote a quite positive review.[2] I didn't like the book's discussion of "homosexuality" (it affirmed the "restrictive" view—somewhat in tension with the generally liberative tone of the book as a whole), but all I said in the review was that it was "rather superficial."

Several years after the book's publication, I visited with Stassen and mentioned how much I appreciated the book. Glen told me that they were working on a revision. He said Gushee had written the section on "homosexuality" in the first edition and Glen hoped to be more involved in rewriting that part—and to move it, he implied, in a more "inclusive" direction. I don't know how close to finishing the revision the writers came before Stassen's recent death. But based on this new book by Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* (Read the Spirit Books, 2014), even if a revised version of *Kingdom Ethics* used only Gushee's views on this topic, the content would be quite different than the first edition.

The long subtitle of *Changing Our Mind* makes it clear that Gushee has shifted his views in a major way: "A call from America's leading evangelical ethics scholar for full acceptance of LGBT Christians in the Church." With refreshing directness, Gushee describes how his views on this issue have done an about face. He now affirms same-sex marriage and expresses regret about the hurt his earlier writing caused: "I end by apologizing to those who have been hurt by my prior teaching and writing on the LGBT issue. Where I have the chance to amend my written work I will do so. I ask for your forgiveness. I apologize that it has taken me so long to get here" (126).

Gushee dates his own "change of mind" to just the last few years, though obviously this change culminates a much longer process. So this short book is a preliminary expression of his new thinking. It is made up of a series of opinion pieces (blog posts) published online by Baptist News Global from July to October 2014. So the book has the advantage of being lively, current, accessible, direct, and winsome. What it's not, though, is a detailed, scholarly, in-depth analysis of the many issues.

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[2] Ted Grimsrud, review of *Kingdom Ethics*, *Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring 2004), 108-10.

I find a lot to appreciate in Gushee's book. I welcome its publication. In fact, I am delighted that a prominent evangelical leader would take such a clear public stand. The raises several questions for me though. The first is about evangelicalism—Will Gushee remain an "evangelical leader"? Will he want to? Is a book like this going to be part of a significant shift *within* evangelicalism and a movement within that arena toward more openness? Or is it more going to lead to a shift with the boundary lines of who counts as an evangelical—with Gushee now located *outside* the evangelical circle?

The Gushee of this book still wants to take an "evangelical" approach to sexual ethics in general—the only change, he would say, is that he now wants to include same-sex marriage on the "morally acceptable" side of the clear line he still affirms between appropriate and inappropriate sex. But I wonder about this approach. I also wonder about Gushee's strong effort to remain irenic and reasonable throughout. While admirable in many ways, might such a thoroughly irenic approach leave some of the key issues unaddressed? Let me elaborate on these questions.

MANY GOOD INSIGHTS

Given the brevity of this book, I think it's too bad that Gushee spends as much time as he does on "throat-clearing preliminaries" and as little time as he does on the biblical and theological issues that are at the center of the divide (especially because what he does say about the latter often is quite perceptive—it's just too bad there wasn't more). However, the (slightly longer than average) chapter devoted to Leviticus is quite good. He mainly raises perceptive questions about the "traditionalist" (his term) approach to Old Testament law.

Gushee likewise raises perceptive questions about traditionalist use of the short references in Paul's writings usually applied to the "LGBT issue." He argues how inappropriate it is to read the two key and obscure Greek words that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 6:9 as if they condemn "every homosexual person." He concludes, "Very high-level scholarly uncertainty about the meaning and translation of these Greek words, together with profound cultural and linguistic differences, undermines claims to the conclusiveness of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* for resolving the LGBT issue" (80). The bottom line in relation to these "direct" texts for Gushee seems to be that they are not actually clearly speaking against our current possible acceptance of same-sex marriage—but they have clearly been used and continue to be used in ways that cause great damage. And that damaging use is both unwarranted from the texts themselves and deeply hurtful to "vulnerable people made in God's image."

The most important texts, Gushee suggests, are the ones that speak to "the most significant theological issue: God's design for sexuality in creation" (81). I think that Gushee is correct that now the place where the rubber meets the road in evangelical theology is the issue of whether same-sex marriage violates the fundamental created order for marriage that requires that the partners be one male and one female.

I am a little disappointed that Gushee does not quite provide the decisive theological-ethical response on this issue that we ultimately need. But he does make some good progress. He suggests that one key in moving forward—and moving in a welcoming direction—is to "think differently about how to relate our Christian account of God's design in creation with the existence of a small minority of gay and lesbian neighbors, some of whom are devout followers of Christ" (102).

My reading of Gushee here is that he means to say that when we hold together (1) the reality that most of what authentic marriage relationships involve can be expressed in a same-sex marriage, (2) that some exceptions to the model are already allowed (such as childlessness, divorce and remarriage), and (3) that the small minority of people with strong attraction to people of the same sex are condemned to life without an intimate partner otherwise. Therefore, we are bound to conclude that same-sex marriage should be affirmed and that it does not threaten the institution of marriage in general.

So far so good! And it is sad to think that this quite moderate proposal would be seen as blatantly non-evangelical by many of the gatekeepers for that brand of Christianity.

WHAT ABOUT EVANGELICALISM?

I'm a little uncertain what to make of the label given to Gushee in the book's subtitle: "America's leading evangelical ethics scholar." On one level, that is the kind of unverifiable hyperbole all too common in book promotion. But on a different level, it seems to signal a challenge to those American Christians who affirm the label "evangelical." Here is one of your top academics, and he is now advocating "full acceptance"!

It will be interesting to see what kind of responses this book will get. Because of Gushee's prominence and the book's accessibility, it will surely be given attention. Will Gushee lose speaking engagements? Will he become a lightning rod for hostility like it seems that two of books endorsers, Brian McLaren and Matthew Vines, have become?

My sense from this book is that Gushee takes pains to present his general theological outlook as still being very much in the mainstream of American evangelicalism. He seems to want to reform the movement

from within, not to step outside of it and try to rally like-minded people to leave the anti-gay forces within evangelicalism to their own devices (which may be more like what McLaren has done).

I hope Gushee does stay within evangelicalism (whatever that means) and is an influence for reform. I hope LGBT folks who find themselves a part of evangelical congregations and schools and their allies will find guidance and inspiration from Gushee's work. But we'll see. Many powerful people and institutions have a lot invested in sustaining at least the appearance of evangelical certainty and unity in opposition to the "full acceptance" Gushee advocates. So it surely will be a struggle.

A TRADITIONAL SEXUAL ETHIC

Gushee takes pains to emphasize that he is not challenging the traditional Christian ethic that "bans all non-marital sex, infidelity, abandonment and divorce (with rare exceptions), making celibacy the only alternative to marriage" (103). The only change he wants to see is that our understanding of marriage be broadened at one point—to accept same-sex couples who otherwise accept the traditional approach.

I tend to agree with this. But there is something about Gushee's tone when he discusses this that troubles me a bit. It seems a bit moralistic and legalistic. And maybe a bit too certain. In his analysis, we may see three basic types of sexual ethics in our setting. (1) "Mutual consent ethic" that's basically anything goes as long as no one gets hurt. (2) "Loving relationship ethic" that is basically a commitment to serial monogamy. And, (3) the "covenantal-marital ethic" that sees sex as morally appropriate only within "a binding lifetime marital covenant" (103).

Gushee writes, "I am a covenantal-marital sexual ethics guy…. I loathe the mutual consent ethic; I think it is disastrous. I am sure the loving relationship ethic ultimately fails as well" (105). This strikes me as too simple, even a bit smug. Sure, when the marital-covenant (two people in a committed lifelong relationship) ethic works in our modern world it's great. But how well does it work for most people? Gushee cites appalling divorce rates and numbers of children born to single mothers. He implies that these problems are the result society's moral permissiveness—as if people simply turn away from commitment by choice.

I don't know how best to understand our cultural dynamics. It is certainly the case that intimate relationships are the source of a great deal of pain with deeply problematic waves that ripple down through the generations. But I don't think the failures can be explained as simply as Gushee seems to imply here—nor that making inflexible assertions about the moral rightness of this one model will solve many of the problems.

I don't think the covenantal-marital model has actually been the traditional practice of Christians over the past 2,000 years—at least not if this model assumes an essential equality between the two partners who make the covenant together. It would seem that at least one factor that has contributed to changing mores related to intimate relationships in the past fifty years has been the difficulty in actually practicing the covenantal-marital approach in life-giving ways.

As I said, I do affirm the mutual, monogamous, life-time commitment approach to intimate relationships—like Gushee (105), I can attest to the beauty of such a relationship, when successful, based on my experience. But I am a bit uncomfortable with making strong assertions about this model being the norm when it seems to be so unusual and difficult (and to have a much spottier history than Gushee seems to allow for).

TOO IRENIC?

Finally, I appreciate Gushee's success in being reasonable, respectful, attentive to possible common ground, and in general optimistic about the possibility that his own testimony might gently encourage others who think like he used to think to change their mind. And yet, this approach leaves me with some serious questions as well.

Personally, I think that "reasoning together" takes us only so far.[3] We do all need to be patient; difficult and contested conversations take time to resolve. Nonetheless, I remain pessimistic about this one being resolved in the foreseeable future. The college where I teach has been engaged in a "listening process" as part of a discernment process in relation to whether we will hire openly gay faculty and staff. One of the elements of the process was a series of 20-person roundtables last spring where the participants all shared their thoughts about the possibility of our school establishing a non-discriminatory policy.

On the one hand, the various roundtables resulted in open sharing, allowing people to hear each other's perspective. That surely was a good thing. The effect seems to have been, though, in my perception, mainly a hardening of the viewpoints of those on the restrictive side with a widespread sense that the outcome of the process was settled before it began. That perception may not be accurate (I actually don't think it is), but that it is strongly held by many in the community underscores how talk, talk, talk will not likely provide for a sense of resolution.

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[3] I allude to my own effort at irenic conversation, Ted Grimsrud and Mark Thiessen Nation, *Reasoning Together: A Conversation on Homosexuality* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2008). In retrospect, I would now say that that effort was only somewhat successful.

Why is this issue so difficult? I have some opinions, but this post is not the place for me to spin out my ideas. I do think that is the question that those such as Gushee who are passionate about helping the churches work things through will have to wrestle with more. Despite the commonly stated view that people on both sides are equally intransigent and harsh in their invective, I truly to think that the sharpness comes mainly from the "right." Which is what one would expect, in part because those on the "left" have a lot more invested in being nice and in the possibility of people coming to a common understanding through "dialogue." So, they tend to hope for the best….

I am working in Paul's letter to the Romans these days. In reading Gushee's book, I was struck with how, in some important ways, Paul's story parallels Gushee's. Paul was involved in persecuting followers of Jesus; Gushee was involved in teaching against the "full acceptance of LGTB Christians in the church." Paul had an epiphany that turned him around and he became himself a follower of Jesus; Gushee had an enlightenment experience that turned him around and led him to become an open advocate of full acceptance. Paul profoundly regretted his earlier violence; Gushee profoundly regrets his earlier harshness.

However, there is a big difference, at least for now, it seems to me. Though there admittedly is a lot of debate about the dynamics of Paul's thought in Romans (as well as the earlier letter to the Galatians), one way to read Romans is to see that Paul is engaging in a deep and thorough deconstruction of his earlier theology that had led him to his hurtful actions. In this view, the "opponent" Paul sharply argues against in Romans and Galatians, at least in part, is Paul himself before he met Jesus. He explains why he did what he did and why it was so wrong—instead of being an act of faithfulness, his persecution of Jesus's followers was an act of rebellion against God.

It will be interesting to see if at some point Gushee might do the same thing. Could do a more thorough deconstruction—that would even echo some of the heat Paul brings to critiquing his own former theology? Doing so would move the conversation in a decidedly less irenic direction. However, such a move might lead to some more insightful awareness of why, precisely, this issue is so difficult—and thus, help move us toward resolution, even if such a move might actually be, in some sense, even more conflictual.

I also wonder, if Gushee did such a theological deconstruction, would he be able to limit himself only to deconstructing evangelical views of "homosexuality"—or would he have to end up with a much broader deconstruction of evangelical theology as a whole?

IV. ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS YET

I think it is a good thing that the Christian debate about whether churches should be inclusive or restrictive in relation to LGBTQ folks has generated so much literature. The sheer mass of writing is too much to keep up with, but out of this ferment have come some good materials. One of the very best books I've yet read on this theme is by a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) pastor and theologian, Mark Achtemeier.

The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart (Westminster John Knox, 2014) has many strengths. It's of manageable length (131 pages), clearly written, based on solid research, a nice mixture of personal engagement and theological reflection, and coherently argued. I recommend it as a solid book to help those already in the inclusive camp to understand better how the Bible is actually a positive resource for faith communities that have already made a commitment to be inclusive. I also recommend it for those who aren't sure what they believe and would like to check out the best advocates for inclusion. And, as well, I recommend it for those who are confident of their restrictive convictions but would like better to understand the strongest arguments for inclusion. I believe it will contribute to a more accurate and fair-minded conversation going forward.

AN EVANGELICAL'S CHANGE OF HEART

Part of the appeal of this book is that Achtemeier himself used to affirm the opposite point of view. He cites an article he published in 1996, "The Upward Call of God: Submitting Our Sexuality to the Lordship of Christ," that was written in support of the movement in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to forbid ordination to openly gay and lesbian ministers. Not long after that article, though (which did contribute to the formal reinforcement of restrictive denominational policies), Achtemeier began to change his view. In time he became an advocate for overturning the restrictive policies concerning marriage and ordination—which happened in 2011.

It would have been nice to learn a bit more of Achtemeier's heart and mind as a restrictive advocate, but he keeps the book focused on his constructive argument for affirmation of same-sex marriage—which is a strength of the book. Achtemeier uses his thinking process in his emerging affirmative view as a device to drive the narrative. This makes the book more readable, though at times it may feel a little contrived.

Overall, though, the books reads well, the argument unfolds in a careful and attractive way, and most of the key bases are covered. Part of

Achtemeier's implied argument here is that he started out as an "evangelical" (maybe not the most precise term for a person holding a high view of the Bible and loyalty to the Presbyterian tradition) and changed his view *because of* those "evangelical" convictions. As with several other recent books (e.g., Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian*; William Stacy Johnson, *A Time to Embrace*; and James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*), Achtemeier establishes that fairly conservative biblical and theological convictions may be compatible with affirming same-sex marriage. That is, he overthrows the assumption that the only way to be inclusive is to dismiss biblical authority.

THE ROLE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

At the same time, Achtemeier's approach (also as with the approach in the books just cited) does *start* with human experience as a catalyst to revisit the biblical and theological tradition and to question received interpretations. His first chapter, "The Harvest of Despair: Why Traditional Condemnations of Gay Relationships Can't Be Right," recounts how his change in thinking was stimulated by his friendship with a non-straight woman, "Kristi." He realized that Kristi was a wonderful Christian woman who had not chosen her affectional orientation and who would be required to submit to unfair suffering should she submit to the churches' expectation that she forego all intimate relationships.

The catalyst for Achtemeier's path to change was his openness to consider the strangeness of the restrictive view when applied to a person such as Kristi. "The spiritual fruit I saw in the lives of devout gay people who were trying to follow the traditional teaching was the exact opposite of what the Bible says will be the results of conforming our lives to the will of God, instead of love, peace, joy, and closeness to God I was seeing bitterness, brokenness, and spiritual alienation. It was only when Kristi and others *gave up* trying to follow the traditional teaching that I saw the spiritual fruits emerging that would normally be associated with obedience to God's will" (15).

While Achtemeier will keep Kristi's experience in mind in the rest of book, his approach is to use the experience as a catalyst to re-examine the tradition. He ends up validating the teaching of the Bible (as he interprets it) and draws heavily on the theological tradition of his Calvinist ecclesial location. He uses experience not as a rival source to the Bible but as a resource for his reading and affirmation of the Bible.

So, he directly challenges restrictive views on the level of the reading of the Bible—not on the level of questioning the applicability of the Bible as many of those making inclusive arguments do. This approach not only

challenges those holding restrictive views to recognize where the differences actually are—and in doing so possibly opening possibilities for a conversation that does recognize a shared commitment to the centrality of the Bible, it also can provide comfort and encouragement to those who don't want to have to choose between affirming the Bible as central to their faith and affirming LGBTQ Christians.

I appreciate Achtemeier's approach. I think it is only honest and self-aware to recognize that our experiences shape how we read the Bible. This is true for people on all sides of our issue. It is not possible, or desirable, simply to let the Bible provide our direction without recognizing that we read the Bible as human beings who are shaped by our own "horizon" (to use Hans-Georg Gadamer's term in his reflections on hermeneutics). Our challenge, if we are to take the Bible seriously, is to engage in an interactive process where we allow our experiences to shape the questions we ask of the Bible while at the same time making every effort to listen to what the Bible actually says. This is what Achtemeier seeks to do, and he is largely successful in my view.

ON NOT BEING MISLED BY THE "SEVEN FRAGMENTS"

The bulk of this book is made up of careful interaction with biblical materials. It starts with a discussion of why we must not place too much weight on what Achtemeier helpfully calls "fragments," scattered cryptic texts that seem to allude to some kind of same-sex sexual activity. He refers to other issues, such as slavery and the subordination of women, where Christians have also appealed to isolated scriptural fragments in order to establish some kind of hurtful interpretation.

Achtemeier articulates an approach to using the Bible for ethical guidance that emphasizes the big picture of the Bible's affirmation of human wholeness. Only after discussing this big picture and applying it in a general way to sexuality will Achtemeier return to a more careful examination of the "fragments" in later chapters. He will not dismiss the fragments as wrong; in fact he tries to argue for their truthfulness when properly understood. But he will make a case for why the fragments are secondary and that we have other guidance from the Bible concerning sexuality that is more central and more life affirming.

"I realized it was not enough simply to recognize that traditional condemnation of homosexuality was mistaken. Such a recognition wouldn't carry much credibility unless it was accompanied by a truer, better reading of the Bible that showed in a positive way how gay people were recipients of God's blessing" (25).

THE "GOOD SENSE PRINCIPLE"

Achtemeier begins his appropriation of biblical materials for his pro-same-sex marriage argument with a key point about how to read the Bible for ethics. He calls it the "good sense principle," which is basically the idea that the guidance we get from the Bible should make sense to us; it should fit with our experience of life. He opposes this to the idea that the Bible's commands don't have to make sense, they can be arbitrary, we simply follow them because they are in the Bible whether they actually makes sense to us or not.

The good sense principle is crucial for being able to use the Bible in ways that actually enhance life. "If we treat even the noblest moral teaching as an arbitrary rule and fail to consider the reasons and purposes that underlie it, our attempts at obedience will likely produce distorted and damaging results. Any adequate interpretation of the Bible's moral teaching will include not just rules or principles for guiding behavior, but an *understanding of the reasons* why such principles make sense" (31; Achtemeier's italics).

An key element of this good sense principle is that biblical commands have a "sensible purpose" (33) and are not absolutes dropped from the sky and equally valid for all times and contexts. We may assume that the commands made sense in their context, and our task as interpreters is to try to understand that context. When we do so, we do not threaten the truthfulness of some commands by analyzing the sensible purpose of other commands in ways that cause us to see how those commands are directly applicable for us today (Achtemeier's examples is the distinction between commands versus male/male sex in Leviticus and commands versus bestiality—the applicability of the latter is not compromised when we question the applicability of the former—33).

"Though there are times when God's commandments seem mysterious to us, God is not an arbitrary tyrant who makes capacious demands to text our devotion. God does not set up meaningless hoops for us to jump through. God has lovingly created and fashioned us in God's own image, and the *reason* God provides us guidance in the form of commandments and divine wisdom is because God loves us deeply and wants our lives to flourish. God gives us the commandments *for our good* (Deut 10:13). For this reason, we stand on solidly biblical foundations when we say that a good test of whether we have understood the Bible's teaching correctly is whether or not we can discern the loving *reasons* that stand behind it" (34-35; Achtemeier's italics).

The application of this line of reasoning is obvious. A person such as Achtemeier's friend Kristi did not experience the anti-same-sex

relationships "commands" from the Bible as life giving. Those commands did not make sense in her life. Therefore, the validity of such commands is appropriately questioned. Kristi's experience does not determine Achtemeier's reading of the Bible, but it impacts the questions and doubts he has about received interpretations. It does not make sense to him that the Bible would lead us to affirm what seem like arbitrary commands that lead to people's unhappiness rather than their thriving.

Another way to understand this approach is to say that Jesus is the center of the Bible's moral teaching. "If an interpretation of biblical Law fails to have Jesus as its central reference point, that is a sure sign that we have misunderstood the Bible's teaching. Christ is the focal point of God's intention for human beings, and so his life and ministry and example must figure prominently in any interpretation of the Bible's guidance for our lives" (38).

GOD'S PLAN FOR LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND SEXUALITY

Achtemeier approaches the Bible's message concerning sexuality as if it could be applicable to all human beings. Even if the message is mainly couched in terms of male/female relationships being assumed, its meaning does not necessarily require an exclusively heterosexual dynamic. The Bible sees human bodily existence quite positively. Sex comes from God and is a good part of *both* our spiritual and material existence. "Humans are created for deep communion with a partner, and because we possess both bodies and spirits, this communion is all-encompassing; it involves our physical, bodily natures and our emotional and spiritual capacities" (46).

The New Testament uses the imagery of love and marriage to convey the dynamics of our relationships with God and Jesus. "The love that binds people together in marriage is *like* the love that exists in the heart of God…. The biblical writers can describe God's love for us as married love, because human marital love is itself an image of the love that has existed from all eternity in the heart of God" (49; Achtemeier's italics).

Achtemeier then argues that same-sex marriage offers "the same or very similar opportunities for growth in love and grace and mutuality and for learning to give the whole of oneself to another person" as opposite-sex marriage (58; Achtemeier's italics). So, to forbid church-blessed access to this way of growing in faith is to quench the Holy Spirit.

While acknowledging that for most people, opposite-sex marriage provides the context for covenanted intimacy, Achtemeier points to other biblical dynamics in asserting that same-sex marriage can be a valid and life-giving "outside the norm" expression of the godly love marriage is

meant to be the context for. "From Genesis 3 on, the entire Bible is the story of God repeatedly bringing redemption, blessing, and salvation to a fallen world that stands firmly outside the plan and pattern of God's original intention. So claiming that God blesses only the standard pattern that appears in the creation stories in Genesis would require us to dismiss almost the entire witness of the Bible, from Genesis 3 through the very last chapter of the book of Revelation!... Over and over again the pages of Scripture witness to a God who delights in confounding standard expectations and conferring blessing outside the conventional, majority ways of doing things" (66-7).

BACK TO THE "FRAGMENTS"

After establishing the general biblical for affirming same-sex marriage, Achtemeier returns to the "fragments" to show that those scattered texts are not speaking to our current situation of same-sex marriage. He wants to show that the issue is not about affirming the importance and truthfulness of the Bible, but simply about correctly interpreting the texts that are *misused* to justify discrimination against LGBTQ Christians.

His account of the texts in Genesis, Judges, and Leviticus that generally come up makes good points in contextually them in ways that challenges the standard account. However, he makes an added point in discussing *positive* accounts of close same-sex relationships—Ruth with Naomi and David with Jonathan. He does not suggest these two relationships were covenanted partnerships analogous with our day's same-sex marriage. However, he does note the "depth of love and devotion described in each instance" that has many "features in common with modern-day gay marriages….The Bible contains not the slightest hint of a negative judgment about either of these relationships" (85).

Likewise, Achtemeier makes the case, well-argued and persuasive in my view, that the New Testament "fragments" also refer truthfully and helpfully to dynamics that we should still today be critical of (promiscuity, coercion, exploitation)—but that they do not speak to the reality of our same-sex marriages.

"Paul's logic on Romans 1 [makes] perfect sense; if you remove the one true God from the center of your life and worship, your sexual life disconnects from God's purposes as well…. But it [has] no bearing of the faithful gay Christians I [have] encountered in the present day: There [are] not people who [are] disconnecting from God's purposes; they [long] to have God at the center of their lives. Their faithful, covenanted relationships [are] fully capable of embodying God's purposes for love and marriage. Paul's justifiably negative view of the idolatrous and

exploitative same-sex activities of his own time clearly [have] no bearing on my conclusions about the ability of these modern-day, covenanted, same-sex relationships to align with God's loving purposes" (95).

Paul's use of the term *aresnokoites* (literally, "men-lying," often translated as "homosexuality") in a condemnatory vice list in 1 Corinthians and the use of the same term in a similar vice list in 1 Timothy are valid but non-applicatory. "These vice lists are referencing same-sex behaviors that are totally different from the mutually loving, committed, gay relationships that are possible in today's society and culture. We can fully agree with the author of 1 Timothy in viewing human sex trafficking as a terrible form of exploitation that is utterly contrary to God's will. But affirming this has no bearing on our previous conclusions about the ability of loving, committed gay relationships to fulfill God's central purposes for love, marriage, and sexuality" (101).

AFFIRMING LIFE

Part of what impresses me with Achtemeier's book is how he presents the Bible as a positive resource, not a problem to overcome. And I believe that he does this in generally a responsible and non-idealistic way. He's not trying to fit the Bible in an overly optimistic way into his experience-oriented affirmation of the relationships of his LGBTQ friends. More so, in a careful and coherent way, he gives an account of the actual teaching of the Bible on love, sex, and marriage—and shows that this teaching, in the big picture, is indeed life-affirming for all who participate in committed, mutually-edifying intimate partnerships.

And then he goes on, without simply excising the problematic fragments, to counter the claims made by restrictive thinkers to be offering the most accurate reading and application of those texts.

However, it is the case (and this is to Achtemeier's credit), he does not approach Christian ethics as simply a matter of interpreting and applying biblical teaching. The lives of people such as his friend Kristi—and the rest of us—are a crucial part of interpreting and applying the Bible. It's not simply a one-way street, moving from then to now. It's a conversation where we rightly insist that the Bible's moral teaching make a large amount of sense and be applied in ways that enhance life. We could say, after Jesus, that the Bible is for human beings, not human beings for the Bible.

V. REFUTING THE EVANGELICAL REJECTION OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSIPS

Evangelical Christians in North America are evolving—gradually—to become more welcoming of LGBTQ Christians. One indication of this movement is the growth in the number of books that come from a relatively conservative theological perspective arguing on biblical grounds for such welcome. One of the most useful of these books is James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Eerdmans, 2013).

Brownson is a long-time New Testament professor at Western Theological Seminary and an ordained minister in the Reformed Church in America. The RCA resembles Mennonite Church USA in the wide theological diversity among its congregations. As a whole, it appears to fit into an interesting space between the evangelical world and the "mainstream" Protestant world—active in ecumenical relationships on both sides. However, as far as I know, Brownson represents a minority perspective in the RCA with his argument for the affirmation of same-sex marriage. His views as expressed in this book surely will evoke strong antipathy from many corners of the RCA world.

A PARENT'S RESPONSE

One way to situate this book is to see it as a father's response to his son coming out as gay. This event, which Brownson calls a "dramatic shock to my life," challenged him "to re-imagine how Scripture speaks about homosexuality" (1). Most fathers in this situation (I know quite a few who made a move like Brownson's—becoming affirming of same-sex relationships as a consequence of one's child coming out) don't have the expertise to write a 300-page scholarly treatise that chronicles this "re-imagining." We should be grateful that Brownson does.

Of course, Brownson's transparency could lead a suspicious reader to dismiss his book as special pleading. Brownson's bias of acceptance of his son could be seen as undermining his scholarly objectivity, perhaps fatally. On the other hand, for some of us this confession of personal interest actually helps validate Brownson's work. It shows that he will understand the human issues involved, in particular the pain caused by restrictive arguments that all too often show a profound disregard for the emotional and relational costs of their agenda.

Regardless, while Brownson's personal investment mainly helps us understand *why* he takes this topic on, his arguments ultimately stand or fall on the quality of his analysis and communication skills. I belive that

Brownson has done solid thinking based on an impressive amount of research. He also writes clearly and with an irenic tone, making it much more difficult simply to dismiss his conclusions due to his personal stake.

Of the books I've read on the topic of LGBTQ inclusion, I think that Brownson's offers the deepest and most well reasoned refutation of the core argument of those Christians with a restrictive stance. He addresses in depth the core arguments of the restrictivists—he likely won't persuade many solidly on that side to change their views (who could?), but he will surely win over some of those on the middle, especially ones who have been at least partly persuaded by arguments based on male/female complementarity and on the centrality of Romans one.

TAKING ON THE "TRADITIONALIST" CASE

Brownson claims to be shaped in his approach by traditional Reformed emphases, including the commitment to the church is always reforming itself in relation to its ever evolving understandings of scripture. The book is very biblically oriented. Brownson is not afraid to challenge received interpretations—he sees this as a calling of Reformed theology. But he does hold on to the centrality of scripture.

The principle of continuing reform "assumes that what Scripture *seems* to say is not always identical to how it truly should inform Christian faith and practice." As a consequence of this awareness, Brownson has been willing "to reread texts that seemed clear, and those that have always seemed puzzling, in an attempt to find new patterns and configurations in which both the texts themselves and a range of human experience might cohere more fully" (13).

I appreciate that Brownson is so scrupulous in his approach to the Bible. His keeping scripture so central leads to him offering close readings of the texts. He takes seriously what he calls the Bible's "moral logic" concerning same-sex relationships. Brownson's arguments are clear and accessible, but his expansive discussion that goes out of its way to address the restrictivist arguments might be more detail that many of those who agree with his conclusions feel they need. Happily, Brownson is very good at summarizing, so portions of the book might easily be skimmed without missing the main thread of his case for inclusion.

Brownson acknowledges that "traditionalists all point to gender complementarity as the central form of moral logic that undergirds what they believe to be the Bible's universal rejection of same-sex erotic relationships. These relationships are 'against nature' and 'nature' is further explained as the complementarity of the genders" (21). So his task will be to show that in fact these traditionalist assumptions are not warranted based on a more careful reading of the Bible.

He argues that, in fact, the few and scattered cases where the Bible actually speaks directly (and, admittedly with hostility) about same-sex erotic relationships, the concern is never "anatomical and procreative complementarity" (23). We need to scrutinize those texts to understand why the negative assessment is given. Brownson will conclude that the moral logic that actually is behind the negative allusions to same-sex sexual intimacy is not complementarity but elements of the alluded to cases of same-sex practices that are also considered to be wrong among opposite-sex people: "These ancient texts speak against pagan practices, against pederasty and abuse, and against violations of commonly embraced standards of decency and "normality" that were part of the ancient world. As such, they cannot speak directly to committed, mutual, and loving same-sex unions in the contemporary church" (44).

"COMPLEMENTARITY" AND THE HEART OF MARRIAGE

The restrictivist (my term) or traditionalist (Brownson's term) arguments have evolved through the course of the debates of that past generation. A key theme that has increasingly become the focus for those arguments has been the notion of gender complementarity—that God created us male and female for a reason (procreation, certainly, but also the way the two sexes in their essence complement each other—something that is lost in same-sex relationships.

A central text for this argument is the creation account in Genesis 1:26–2:18. Part of what restrictivists see in that text is a sense of humanity as a sexual binary—male or female, with both being necessary for a valid marriage. It is the *difference* between male and female that is seen to be crucial in the relevance of the creation account.

Brownson challenges that assertion. He argues, to the contrary, that the core of the picture in Genesis is the *similarity* between Adam and Eve. He summarizes his argument in three points: "(1) The focus in Genesis 2 is not on the *complementarity* of male and female, but rather in the *similarity* of male and female. (2) The fact that male and female are both created in the divine image (Gen 1:27) is intended to convey the value, dominion, and relationality *shared* by both men and women, but not the idea that the complementarity of the genders is somehow necessary to fully express the divine image. (3) The 'one-flesh' union spoken of in Genesis 2:24 connotes not physical complementarity but kinship bond" (26).

I found this section of the book quite helpful. The centrality of the "kinship bond" was a new idea for me, but it makes sense. Brownson asserts, "the focus of the Genesis 2 text is on the formation of the essential

and foundational building blocks of human community—the ties of kinship." He goes on to suggest that Jesus had the same idea. For Jesus, "that 'the two shall become one flesh' means that divorce—the negation of the essential mutual obligation of kinship—is unacceptable and contrary to the will of God…. The one-flesh union is centrally concerned about kinship obligations, which are established by God in marriage and thus cannot be set aside by human beings (Mk 10:9; Mt 19:5-6)" (34).

Brownson points to three main elements of the Christian understanding of marriage: unitive, procreative, and sacramental (86). Of these three, the unitive element has priority in the Bible. Because of the centrality of the element of marriage as a way of merging two lives as this building block of human community, Brownson ultimately sees no reason why Christian marriage should not be inclusive of same-sex couples, just as it is of infertile heterosexual couples.

In fact, in the various mentions of marriage as a "one-flesh" union in the Bible, procreation is never part of the picture":

> The creation of the woman is not narrated, first of all, as a means for humankind's achieving "fruitfulness," but rather as an antidote to the problem of aloneness…. Everything about the Genesis 2 text suggests [that] the procreative meaning of marriage should … be subordinated to its more essential unitive purpose (89).

"NATURAL" SEXUALITY

Brownson goes into great detail in interpreting Romans 1, admittedly the most extensively discussed biblical text by restrictivists. His arguments are helpful and mostly persuasive. However, he does not take into account what I see to be one of the most important points in thinking about that text. That is simply that Paul does *not* write Romans 1:18-31 in order to give a position on how Christians should approach sexuality.

Paul's *main* agenda here is to set up his readers for his critique of them that begins in chapter 2. He seems clearly to exaggerate the injustices of the "Gentiles" (i.e., the power elite of the Roman Empire) in order to lower the boom on his readers: "You do the same thing" (2:1). The "same thing" is not sexual debaucheries of a "homosexual" bent but arrogance and self-righteousness that leads to violent injustice (of the sort Paul himself had been guilty of, see Gal 1:13-14).

Hence, I think Brownson gives the tendency of restrictivists to isolate Romans 1:18-31 from its context and read it as constructive sexual ethics too much credence when he zeroes in on the details of Paul's discussion as if Paul's main point is to give normative directives for sexual behavior. That said, Brownson's discussion here too is clear and helpful. He meets

the restrictivists on their own ground. If in fact Paul were writing normative sexual ethics here, Brownson's construal of the content of such ethics is much better than the restrictivists'. Given that most writing on this passage from across the spectrum makes the same mistake, Brownson's is an important contribution—though ultimately not necessarily of great importance.

Brownson argues that in Romans 1, Paul is most of all concerned with "excessive desire and a lack of self-restraint," not the "unnaturalness" of the same-sexness of the condemned behavior (195). He acknowledges that the debate about what Paul means by "opposed to nature" in this passage is the crux of the differences between his view and the traditionalist view. The latter see Paul being offended that two men (and, perhaps two women [though Brownson shows that the reference to "women" here almost certainly does not concern lesbian activities but women having sex in non-procreative (i.e., non-"missionary position") ways, 244] are having sex. Brownson sees Paul being offended that the sexual practices were lustful, unrestrained, and oppressive (245).

He concludes: "When Paul speaks of this behavior as *unnatural*, he focuses attention not on the violation of gender complementarity but on the ways in which this behavior violates assumptions taken for granted throughout the culture of that day regarding what is natural for men and women as individuals, as members of society, and as part of the physical world. For Paul, all of these dispositions are expressive of a fundamentally disordered state arising from humanity's proclivity to idolatry and its failure to worship the one true God" (261).

FOR TODAY?

In the end, Brownson offers a thorough, sophisticated, pro-Bible version of the standard inclusivist argument concerning the Bible and same-sex relationships—an argument I happily affirm. The Bible's big picture, what Brownson calls its "moral logic," presents a picture of marriage and intimate relationships that focuses on mutual love. This picture implicitly affirms same-sex intimate relationships that manifest the same virtues as healthy heterosexual relationships.

And, when read carefully and contextually, the Bible does not offer directives applicable today that would overrule that implicitly affirmative stance. The texts that are usually cited by the restrictivists as forbidding same-sex marriage are being misread and misapplied, according to Brownson—and he shows in great detail why he makes that claim.

Though quite scholarly and detailed, this is a user-friendly book (at least for those with the motivation to go deeply into the biblical

materials)—clearly written, carefully argued, irenic in tone. It is probably the best thorough refutation we have of the restrictivist position insofar as that position is based on a certain reading of the Bible.

Given its level of detail, Brownson's treatment may not be particularly interesting for those who have already moved beyond the "biblical debates." However, for inclusivists on the more theologically conservative side of the spectrum, for people in the middle, even for restrictivists who are interested in rigorous attempts to counter their views, and for anyone else interested in what the Bible actually does say about same-sex relationships, this book will be of great interest.

Appendix: Behind Mennonite Same-Sex Sexuality Debates: Kathleen Temple and Virginia Mennonite Conference, 1998-2002[1]

[Written by Kelly M. Miller, Senior History Thesis, Goshen College, April 19, 2011. Used with the permission of the author.]

On May 1, 2002, Kathleen Temple, a part-time pastor of Shalom Mennonite Congregation in Harrisonburg, Virginia and an instructor in Eastern Mennonite University's Bible and Religion department, mailed identical letters to each member of Virginia Mennonite Conference's (hereafter, Virginia Conference) Faith and Life Commission (FLC) Personnel Committee. In this letter, Temple resigned her ordination credentials, realizing the Personnel Committee was on the verge of revoking the conference's official blessing of her ministry.

This action brought to a end a struggle that began four years earlier when, after joining Shalom's pastoral staff, Temple had requested a routine transfer of her ordination from the "special ministries" category to that of "pastoral ministries."[2] At the time, the FLC Personnel Committee refused to process her request because they believed her advocacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals was incompatible with Virginia Conference's theology, faith, and practice. Several years of conflict ensued and though this tumultuous period officially ended when Temple terminated her ordination, the ripple effects of this conflict extended for many more years.

PERSONALITY: KATHLEEN TEMPLE'S CONVICTIONS

Kathleen Temple's journey with church ministry began in Phoenix, Arizona. She grew up in a secular home and became a Christian in her

[1] This is a somewhat condensed version of Miller's original thesis. It may be read in its entirety at: peacetheology.net/homosexuality/church-discipline/

[2] The category of "special ministries" includes non-congregational roles such as college Bible faculty.

teenage years in the early 1970s. She connected deeply to Jesus' message of good news to the vulnerable. Temple felt a call to pastoral ministry almost immediately. In a 1994 credentialing application for Northern District Conference, Temple wrote, "I could think of nothing better than to accept his gifts and to embrace the chance to become part of his work in the world. The grace I was given, I wanted to give."[3]

However, Temple did not begin formal theological study until years later. In 1980, she audited courses at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS) in Elkhart, Indiana, when her husband Ted Grimsrud enrolled. For the first time, academic studies enthralled Temple. During her time in Elkhart, she also decided she wanted to be a Mennonite. Temple wrote that the Mennonite "dedication to the Bible and to peace" impressed her greatly. She also noted that her "spiritual commitment to pay attention to justice and injustice for those who are the most vulnerable in society" was compatible with both the Mennonite "work of peace and justice on local and trans-local levels and Mennonite's efforts to integrate faith and life, theology and ethics."[4]

Based on her connection to these values, Temple became a member of Eugene Mennonite Church after moving to Oregon in 1981. Later, in 1992, Temple returned to AMBS and completed more courses in biblical studies, pastoral education, conflict analysis and mediation.[5] In between, Temple studied at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkley, California from 1984 to 1986, graduating with a Master of Arts in Theology.[6]

In 1994, Temple secured her first congregational ministry position when she and Grimsrud began to pastor Salem Mennonite Church in Freeman, South Dakota together.[7] Temple loved her work—pastoral care, worship leading, preaching, and teaching.[8] In 1996, Northern District Conference of the GC Mennonite Church ordained Temple for church ministry. That same year Temple and Grimsrud relocated to Harrisonburg, Virginia, where they both accepted faculty positions in Eastern Mennonite University's (EMU) Bible and Religion department.[9]

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[3] Kathleen Temple, response to "Questions for Ministerial License, Ordination, and Commissioning," December 5, 1994.

[4] Kathleen Temple, "Ministerial Leadership information," November 25, 1993.

[5] Kathleen Temple, "Navigating 'Contrary Advocacy,'" in *The Cost of Truth: Faith Stories of Mennonite and Brethren Leaders and Those Who Might Have Been*, edited by Roberta Showalter Kreider (Kulpsville, PA: Strategic, 2004), 49.

[6] Temple interview, March 11, 2011.

[7] Temple, "Navigating 'Contrary Advocacy,'" 49.

[8] Temple interview, March 11, 2011.

[9] Temple, "Navigating 'Contrary Advocacy,'" 49.

At this time, Temple transferred her ordination credentials from Northern District Conference to the "special ministries" category of Virginia Mennonite Conference, a classification that included ordained chaplains, school administrators and professors.[10] The ordination transfer proceeded without a hitch. In addition to her part-time teaching duties, Temple joined the ministry team of Shalom Mennonite Congregation (hereafter, Shalom), a small church that formed in 1986 as a ministry to the EMU campus and Harrisonburg District. Overseer Wayne North installed Temple as a pastor on October 10, 1998.[11] At this point, Temple's seemingly smooth transition into Mennonite leadership structures was nearing its end. Though relatively new to a denomination that prides itself on long-standing community, Temple had quickly integrated into Mennonite structures. However, her newly transferred credentials would soon come under question.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, many denominations, including Mennonites found themselves in deep disagreement over same-sex sexuality. The two largest North American Mennonite bodies, the General Conference (GC) Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church (MC) jointly commissioned the first Mennonite study of sexuality in 1980, just as Temple was beginning to audit courses at AMBS.

In 1986, as Temple finished her studies in Berkeley, California, the GC church passed "A Resolution on Human Sexuality" at its triennial conference. The following year, the MC denomination adopted an almost identical statement known as "A Call to Affirmation, Consent and Covenant Regarding Human Sexuality" when it held it biennial assembly. These two documents, known as the Saskatoon and Purdue Statements, assert that same-sex sexual "activity" is sin. However, both statements also call for Mennonites to remain in "loving dialogue," even across divisions. The views expressed in both of these documents remain the official teaching position of the Mennonite church to this day.

In an interview, Temple recounted the first time she advocated for the LGBTQ population. Before Temple's introduction to the Mennonite church, she had attended a non-denominational church in Eugene, Oregon for a time. One year, when Temple was in her mid-twenties, Eugene voters responded to a proposal for equal housing and employment rights.[12] Temple recalled a speaker who came to her church and described the sinful nature of same-sex relationships. According to Temple, his message was "vote anti-gay." Temple went to the polls

[10] Ibid., 50.

[11] "History," Shalom Mennonite Congregation website.

[12] Temple interviews, August 18, 2010 and March 11, 2011.

prepared to follow these instructions, but in the end, did not. "I couldn't vote what I thought was probably Christian," she said. "I walked down there, got in that booth and voted wrong."[13] Even though Temple did not identify as an advocate for same-sex relationships at that time, this election showed Temple that certain faith communities held specific expectations for individual action. More specifically, she became aware that support of the LGBTQ population would be considered taboo by some religious denominations, congregations and individuals.

Temple then began to learn more about LGBTQ issues. She felt an increasing call to "celebrate love in all its forms."[14] While Eugene's ballot proposal planted the seeds of this conviction in Temple's heart, her commitment to LGBTQ inclusion in the church continued to flourish as she became more intimately involved with the Mennonite Church and its call for social justice. Ironically, the denomination that nurtured this commitment to social justice would also be the denomination that would discipline Temple for living out the gospel's message.

Much of Temple's spiritual commitment to social justice focused on the LGBTQ community because, as she shared in a May 2004 discussion with the Shenandoah Valley Gay and Lesbian Alliance, "my guess is that individuals of sexual orientation minority are more vulnerable in almost any society to violations of the basic human values of safety, respect, and freedom than any other category of people except perhaps children."[15]

After moving to Harrisonburg in 1996, Temple began to advocate for LGBTQ individuals. She helped form a support group known as "The Open Door." The group's goal, recounted Temple, was to "provide a safe place for discussion and encouragement for people with concerns for the pain the church and society has been causing…many vulnerable people," in this case, LGBTQ individuals and their family and friends.[16] Temple did not hide her involvement in this group. In fact, she took a public role as contact person for "The Open Door," a fact for which some leaders in Virginia Conference would condemn her.

Temple's advocacy took private forms, as well. For example, each year the faculty, staff and students of EMU sign an agreement called the Community Lifestyle Commitment that currently includes conduct rules such as abstention from the misuse of alcohol and illegal drugs, stewardship of economic resources and abstinence from sexual relationship outside of marriage. On several of her faculty contracts,

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[13] Temple interview, August 18, 2010.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Temple, "SVGLA Coffee Talk," 1.

[16] Temple, "Navigating 'Contrary Advocacy,'" 50.

Temple edited the Community Lifestyle Commitment to ease her discomfort with some wording and content. For example, in her August and September 1999 contract, part of the text read, "I recognize my responsibility as a member of the community to refrain from sexual immorality (including premarital, extramarital, and homosexual practices)." In her contract, Temple circled "homosexual practices" and added, "*only* so long as Ted [Grimsrud, her spouse] is male."[17] Several months later, in her March and April 2000 contract, Temple made similar edits and wrote, "Without amending this statement, I could not, in good conscience, have signed it."[18]

When Temple transferred her credentials to the "special ministries" category of Virginia Conference, conference leadership did not question her convictions relating to same-sex sexuality. However, two years later, in 1998, when Temple asked to transfer her ordination credentials from "special" to "pastoral" ministries after securing a pastoral position at Shalom, Conference officials began to question her pro-LGBTQ beliefs and advocacy. This shift in interest on the part of Virginia Conference leadership can be partially attributed to Virginia Conference structures.

STRUCTURES: MENNONITE POLITY AND ITS LIMITS

Before 2001, North American Mennonites were organized into two separate denominational groups: the GC and MC churches. Northern District Conference, the conference that first ordained Temple, was in the GC conference, while Virginia Conference, the regional conference to which Temple transferred in 1996, was a MC conference member.

One important structural difference between these two groups relates to understandings of authority. GCs practiced a stronger congregational polity that gave individual congregations authority to, say, approve a pastor's ordination request. For this reason, Salem Mennonite Church, not Northern District Conference, decided to ordain Temple.[19] For the MCs this power rested in a centralized leadership structure. In Virginia Conference, FLC Personnel Committee establishes leadership guidelines and grants, maintains and discontinues ministerial credentials. Thus, it would now be the FLC Personnel Committee, not a congregation such as Salem or Shalom, that could authorize Temple's credential transfer.

The merger of the MCs and GCs into Mennonite Church USA was complicated by continued tension surrounding same-sex sexuality. Some

[17] Kathleen Temple collection.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Temple interview, March 11, 2011.

regional conferences threatened to withdraw if the denomination did not more clearly state the intent to discipline congregations who extended membership to non-celibate LGBTQ individuals. In response to this pressure, as well as the mounting number of disciplinary procedures against pastors and congregations accepting LGBTQ individuals into church membership, church leadership developed membership guidelines that were eventually rewritten and approved at the 2001 general assembly in Nashville, Tennessee. This three-page set of guidelines dedicated almost a third of its length to "Clarification of Some Issues Related to Homosexuality and Membership."

This statement acknowledges that "issues of same-sex orientation and lifestyle have been the source of deep controversy in our nation and in the church" and that "many people are asking for clarification regarding the beliefs and practice of the Mennonite Church USA regarding the matter of homosexuality." To that end, the membership guidelines reaffirm the Purdue and Saskatoon statements, forbid credentialed MC USA pastors from performing a "same-sex covenant ceremony" and set up a timeline and process for discerning conference membership for congregations that had been disciplined by one conference only.[20]

The membership guidelines satisfied enough constituents to allow the merger to move forward. In 2001, the GC and MC denominations agreed to jointly form MC USA. However, as with other official church statements regarding same-sex sexuality, parties on both sides of the issue were left dissatisfied with denominational polity.

In past decades, contention surrounding same-sex sexuality has not been limited to denomination-wide discussion. Twenty-one area conferences currently comprise MC USA and these localized structures have also felt pressure to make policy decisions to handle same-sex sexuality-related conflicts. Virginia Conference is no exception.

Founded in 1835, Virginia Conference is now divided into twelve districts. Originally, Virginia Conference district affiliation was based purely on geographic vicinity. However, more recently, the conference has begun to base district affiliation on a variety of factors including "affinity of theological faith understandings, historical developments, and congregational preference" in addition to geographic location.[21] This shift can partially be attributed to the great diversity present within the conference. According to Owen Burkholder, Conference Minister during Temple's pastorate, Virginia Conference stretches "from academia to Appalachia" which has at times polarized the conference.

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[20] Membership Guidelines, MC USA website.

[21] Virginia Conference bylaws, art. 5, sec. 1.

Burkholder explained that a significant portion of the conference is heavily influenced by EMU in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He noted that EMU "accommodates and addresses" societal changes more quickly than mountain churches. Additionally, rural churches are more influenced by fundamentalism. During his tenure as conference minister, Burkholder has seen the distance between "academia and Appalachia" create "huge tension" among various parts of the constituency in regards to issues such as women in leadership, military service and same-sex sexuality. Differences manifest themselves not only through different opinions, but also through fundamentally "different ways of approaching the question." For example, in regards to same-sex sexuality, some constituents are open to dialogue and discernment while others believe the Bible unilaterally condemns same-sex sexuality and that the issue does not merit further conversation.[22]

The FLC is intimately aware of conference diversity as it relates to same-sex sexuality. Comprised of all district bishops and overseers, along with three other at-large members of the conference, the FLC provides leadership in "spiritual, doctrinal and faith and life issues" in the conference.[23] In 1983, soon after the General Boards of the GC and MC denominations commissioned their study of human sexuality, Virginia Conference's Council of Faith and Life (now the FLC), adopted a pamphlet entitled "Homosexuality—A Guide for Concerned Christians" that provides guidance for individuals dealing with same-sex sexuality, whether personally, with a family member or through their congregation. This pamphlet condemns same-sex sexuality as a biblically "deviant expression of sexuality," though it does differentiate between "orientation" and "practice." It also expresses confidence that some LGBTQ people can and should change their sexual orientation. Reaffirmed in 1997, "Homosexuality—A Guide for Concerned Christians" remains the teaching position of Virginia Conference.[24]

For a time, Temple's disagreement with Virginia Conference's teaching position on same-sex sexuality did not hinder her participation in official ministry. She settled into a routine at EMU and Shalom that included teaching, preaching, organizing Shalom's young adults and participating in The Open Door, to name a few tasks. During this time, however, tensions continued to mount on in the churches. Though Temple began to hear criticism from some members of the EMU

[22] Burkholder interview, August 24, 2010.

[23] Bylaws, art. 9, sec. 3, cls. 1 and 3.

[24] "Homosexuality—A Guide for Concerned Christians," Virginia Mennonite Conference Council on Faith and Life (Harrisonburg, VA, 1983).

community for her involvement in The Open Door, she heard few complaints from Virginia Conference until Shalom requested that the conference recognize her new position at Shalom by transferring her credentials from "special" to "pastoral" ministries.[25]

Prior to her work at Shalom, the FLC was well aware of Temple's support of same-sex relationships and participation in The Open Door. However, when she requested to transfer her ordination credentials, a typically easy and routine task, the FLC declared her advocacy a potential problem for the first time. As Harrisonburg District overseer, Wayne North, explained to Temple in a letter on August 10, 1999, before the FLC would transfer her credentials they wanted to know whether she was "supportive" and "able to work with the conference policy as it relates to same sex relationships." He further explained that in becoming an congregational pastor, Temple became "more directly answerable to the conference," whereas before, EMU provided the main oversight for her work.[26] Thus, the addition of pastoral work heightened FLC interest in Temple's position on same-sex sexuality.

On July 21, 2000 the FLC Personnel Committee passed a motion to "discern" Temple's "embracing and acceptance of Virginia Conference theology, faith and practice, and the possible impact on the status of her ministerial credentials." FLC Personnel Committee meeting minutes from August 2, state concern regarding Temple's "perceived advocacy of sexual expressions at variance with acceptable Mennonite and Virginia Mennonite Conference standards of faith and practice."[27]

Temple was not the only person whose position on same-sex sexuality concerned the Personnel Committee. On July 21, the committee also passed motions to begin similar conversations with Ray Gingerich and Ted Grimsrud, professors in EMU's Bible and Religion Department.[28] The FLC committee chair initiated discussions with Gingerich in response to a comment he made in a delegate session that summer that "raised questions" for bishops and overseers.[29] The FLC Personnel Committee wished to confront Grimsrud after he signed "A Welcoming Open Letter on Homosexuality" that was published in the *Mennonite Weekly Review* on February 17 of that year. This letter, signed by 650 North American Mennonites urged the church to "bless monogamous relationships of same-sex couples who affirm covenant vows" and to

[25] Temple, "Navigating 'Contrary Advocacy,'" 50-1.

[26] Email from Wayne North to Kathleen Temple entitled "Interview Preview," August 10, 1999.

[27] FLC Personnel Committee Minutes, August 2, 2000.

[28] FLC Personnel Committee Minutes.

[29] Burkholder interview, April 5, 2011.

continue dialogue and discernment around LGBTQ inclusion.[30]

Beginning conversations with Temple, Grimsrud and Gingerich demonstrate the FLC's increasing nervousness about leaders advocating for greater inclusion. They also, however, put the FLC Personnel Committee in unprecedented territory. As Burkholder remembers it, this was the first time the conference initiated disciplinary procedures in response to views on same-sex sexuality.[31]

August 22, 2000 meeting minutes reflect their awareness that "any action taken in reference to the issue(s) under discussion would set a precedent that may govern future responses in similar contexts."[32] To move forward, Grimsrud agreed to engage in a year of conversations with George Brunk III, special ministries overseer, Myron Augsberger, and Wayne North, both district overseers. Though their conversations covered a myriad of topics, they primarily discussed the Mennonite Confession of Faith. After the year passed, George Brunk III submitted a letter affirming Grimsrud's continued presence as an ordained Virginia Conference minister. For the moment, Virginia Conference released Grimsrud from official scrutiny.[33] The FLC ended its proceedings with Gingerich without taking action.[34]

However, conversations with Temple did not end. By September's meeting the FLC Personnel Committee set their course. In an action passed by consensus, they encouraged the FLC to take "strong action on credentialed leaders who advocate for individuals involved in homosexual practice."[35] Two days later, on September 24, the FLC tabled the motion to transfer Temple's credentials.[36] For the next several months, FLC Personnel Committee meeting minutes show occasional updates on Temple's ministry and ordination status, but the committee still failed to transfer her credentials due to "lingering questions" in relation to Temple's position on same-sex sexuality. Though the structures set up by Virginia Conference should have allowed Temple to transfer her credentials rather simply, in practice, they did not.

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[30] "A Welcoming Letter on 'Homosexuality.'" *Mennonite Weekly Review*, February 17, 2000. Grimsrud was the only ordained person in Virginia Conference to sign the letter.

[31] Burkholder interview, April 5, 2011.

[32] FLC Personnel Committee minutes, August 22, 2000.

[33] Grimsrud interviews, April 8 and 12, 2011.

[34] Burkholder interview, April 5, 2011.

[35] FLC Personnel Committee minutes, September 22, 2000.

[36] FLC Personnel Committee minutes, September 10, 1999.

CONTEXT: A CONFLICTUAL TIME FOR VIRGINIA MENNONITES

Virginia Conference experienced several conflicts in the latter part of the 20thcentury that enhanced conference-wide anxiety prior to Temple's entrance. For example, in 1972 the conference painfully split when 562 members of West Valley District left Virginia Conference and formed Southeastern Conference. West Valley District members, known for their traditional and conservative theology, felt uncomfortable with the "diversity of doctrine and practice and administrative policies" existent in the conference. For example, they supported strict regulations of traditional dress and felt uneasy with Virginia Conference's programs that promoted "illegitimate involvements with 'the world'" such as Mennonite Voluntary Service.[37] Despite efforts to appease West Valley District concerns by granting them greater autonomy, West Valley did not remain a part of the conference.

During the 1980s, the Conference faced controversy due to women's ordination. In 1988, the FLC approved an internal study entitled "Headship and Leadership Roles of Women" that identifies and explains two generally opposing viewpoints relating to women in formal church leadership.[38] Around this time, bishops and overseers also authorized the FLC to process credentials "without consideration of gender," allowing districts and congregations to ordain women if they were ready, yet not forcing them to do so.[39] On September 10, 1989, Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus was the first woman ordained by the conference.[40] Interestingly, Shalom, the same church of which Temple was a pastor, initiated Brunk Stoltzfus' ordination. The FLC did not contest Brunk Stoltzfus' right to be ordained. However, Brunk Stoltzfus came from a high-profile family and some of her family members, such as her brother George Brunk Jr., opposed her ordination, generating controversy.[41]

Then, in the mid-1990s, Virginia Conference had to discern whether or how to accept active soldiers as congregational members. Several Virginia Mennonite congregations are located in the highly militarized

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[37] Fred Kniss, *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 103-5.

[38] "Headship and Leadership Roles of Women," Virginia Mennonite Conference Ad Hoc Committee on Headship, 1988.

[39] Burkholder interview, April 5, 2011.

[40] Ruth Brunk Stotlzfus, *A Way Was Opened: A Memoir* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 345.

[41] Burkholder interview, April 5, 2011; Brunk Stoltzfus, *A Way*, 331.

Tidewater region where new members often come to the church with active military ties. Several Tidewater congregations accepted soldiers as official church members.[42] Virginia Conference ultimately stated that they did not "endorse" the decision to accept military service people into church membership, but would not discipline these congregations.[43] Some were not satisfied with this outcome and the issue remained unresolved even until the time of Temple's disciplinary procedures.

Upon becoming Conference Minister, Burkholder was aware that discussions about same-sex sexuality had long been on Mennonite radar. He perceived that the years leading to Temple's struggle were especially "anxious" in Virginia Conference despite the absence of internal disciplinary procedures or conference transfers due to sexuality debates.[44]

Elroy Miller, former chair of the FLC Personnel Committee, spoke of growing conference "angst" at the time and a sense of "emerging energy" that would eventually "take on a life of its own" and result in changed conference policy regarding sexuality. He felt that the possibility of change advocates reaching critical mass generated "considerable unease" in the conference, especially outside of the Harrisonburg District, home to a progressive element within the conference.[45]

Burkholder perceived anxiety in the conference around sexuality from the start of his tenure. When he learned of the Catholic Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family paper, "Always our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers," he distributed several copies to bishops and overseers. Subsequently, the FLC decided to produce a similar document that would give Virginia Conference pastors a model for relating to LGBTQ individuals in their congregations. The creation of what came to be known as "A Pastoral Approach towards Persons with a Homosexual Orientation" (hereafter, "Pastoral Approach") was completed when the FLC adopted its "Pastoral Approach" on September 25, 1999.

This document affirms the previously affirmed position that same-sex sexuality represents "bondage and sin."[46] In adopting the "Pastoral Approach" without putting it to a delegate body vote, the FLC, as

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[42] "Criteria for Membership in Tidewater Area Mennonite Churches," Virginia Mennonite Conference Warwick and Norfolk Districts, April 1, 1995.

[43] J. Lorne Peachy, "Virginia takes stand of membership for military personnel but allows full membership for churches that disagree," *Gospel Herald*, January 30, 1996.

[44] Burkholder interview, April 5, 2011.

[45] Miller interview, August 23, 2010.

[46] "A Pastoral Approach to Persons of Homosexual Orientation," Virginia Mennonite Conference FLC (Harrisonburg, Va., 1999), 2.

Burkholder described it, protected delegates from a divisive adoption process. In his understanding, this "gatekeeping action" helped manage anxiety in the conference.[47]

At this time, national conversations about the Mennonite merger intensified. According to Burkholder, much of the conference was not inclined to support the MC USA movement, fearing the loss of their MC heritage and structures. However, Burkholder "was sure" Virginia Conference needed to join MC USA. In essence, he said, Virginia Conference "tolerated" the merger "on behalf of the rest of the church." Burkholder said the MC USA movement was certainly grassroots. However, "it wasn't Virginia Conference's grass."[48]

Some conference districts left at this time. In 2001, Cornerstone District withdrew, claiming MC USA guidelines for dealing with LGBTQ people were not "clear and stringent enough."[49] Similarly, on the day that Virginia Conference joined MC USA, Mountain Valley District, left the conference citing a variety of reasons including issues of dress, jewelry, women in ministerial leadership, relationship to divorcees and issues of same-sex sexuality. Thus, the merger not only affected Virginia Conference's denominational membership, it also changed the composition of the conference itself. The conference shrunk from twelve districts to nine as a direct result of tensions surrounding same-sex sexuality and, less significantly, other issues of cultural adaptation.[50]

Meanwhile, Virginia Conference leadership pushed its position with a newly passed "Commitment on Current Issues." On October 11, 2000 the FLC sent the commitment to all ministers credentialed in Virginia Conference. This document acknowledged the diversity of opinions surrounding both "homosexual practice" and "participation in the military" within the conference. Further, it reiterated official conference teaching on the issue.[51] While a letter sent along with the commitment stated that the conference did not require "full assent of will and intellect," it asked that church leaders "avoid teaching, preaching, or pastoral counseling that advocates against" official church position.[52]

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[47] Burkholder interview, August 24, 2010.

[48] Burkholder interviews, August 19, 2010 and April 5, 2011.

[49] Melanie Zuercher and Edward Stoltzfus, "The Story of the Listening Committee," in *To Continue the Dialogue: Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality*, ed. C. Norman Kraus (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2001), 90.

[50] Burkholder interview, August 19, 2010.

[51] "Commitment on Current Issues." Virginia Mennonite Conference Faith and Life Commission (Harrisonburg, Va., May 12, 2001).

[52] Letter from Virginia Mennonite Conference Faith and Life Commission to Virginia Mennonite Conference credentialed ministers, October 11, 2000.

Finally, the commitment requested that credentialed ministers respond with either full assent, partial assent with willingness to avoid contrary advocacy or with a request for "further counsel and discernment."[53]

Temple received the commitment less than a month after the FLC tabled her ordination transfer request. In a 2010 interview, Burkholder hypothesized that the commitment might have been in response to Temple's advocacy as she was, perhaps, the first "compassionately vocal" minister who scared some of Virginia Conference's leadership. However, he was not certain of the commitment's genesis.[54] Whatever the document's origin, it is clear that Virginia Conference suspicion of Temple was framed not only by divergent opinions on same-sex sexuality, but also conference structure and an fearful context.

CHARTING A CONFLICT: 1998-2002

Needing to respond to the "Commitment on Current Issues," Temple turned to her congregation for advice. With its help Temple decided that although she did not agree with Virginia Conference's stated position on same-sex sexuality, she could refrain from contrary advocacy. As she explained in a later interview, she could, for the time being, keep her "disagreement under wraps." Temple did not view her commitment to refrain from contrary advocacy as a long-term solution. She hoped, instead, that keeping quiet would allow her to "buy time" while those opposing increased inclusion became "less fearful and vengeful."[55]

Along with Temple, four Shalom members met with Virginia Conference representatives on November 15 to discuss Temple's decision. The Shalom group also requested a clear definition of contrary advocacy. According to Temple, Virginia Conference representatives would not provide one. "They couldn't agree amongst themselves," she recalled in a recent interview. While all conference representatives agreed that officiating a same-sex commitment ceremony would constitute contrary advocacy, opinions were split on situations such as introducing alternative biblical interpretations in an EMU classroom or accompanying a parent to her or his child's same-sex commitment ceremony. In the interview, Temple said that this meeting convinced her that she could not "stay out of hot water" because some FLC Personnel Committee members actually demanded her "full assent of will and

[53] "Commitment on Current Issues."

[54] Burkholder interview, August 24, 2010.

[55] Temple interviews August 18, 2010 and April 8, 2011.

intellect."[56] Even after committing to avoid contrary advocacy, Temple realized she would continue to walk on thin ice.

However, on December 16, 2000, more than a year after Temple requested that the FLC Personnel Committee transfer her credentials, they finally did so, though with a caveat. Temple's credentials were placed on probation for one year, until January 31, 2002. According to Personnel Committee meeting minutes, Temple would be "under close supervision for a specified period of time in order to determine whether the credential becomes Active, Suspended, or Withdrawn."[57] Additionally, the FLC Personnel Committee required Temple to attend monthly meetings with Harrisonburg District Overseer Truman Brunk.

During this time, Brunk would serve as Temple's mentor and encourage her to contemplate "compliance with VMC polity and positions."[58] According to Miller, the probationary year was for Temple and Brunk to "walk together, to talk with each other, to listen to each other, to diffuse the passion and give time for airing differences and grievances." In Temple's understanding of the probationary year, though, the conference expected that after a year of probation, Temple would conform to their teaching on same-sex sexuality—or else.[59]

Temple's interactions with Virginia Conference weighed her deeply. In a November 3, 2000 email to Shalom, she wrote, "I often feel these days that neither standing nor walking nor dancing nor flying are at all possible…I sometimes fear that I have completely lost my 'dancing legs' by being on thin ice for too long." In this email, Temple also predicted the struggles to come throughout the next year and a half. "It is still going to be hard work every day, at least for some time," she wrote.[60]

Temple moved forward, complying with Conference requests. She met with Brunk once a month. Temple called their meetings "congenial and frank."[61] In a personal interview, Temple characterized Brunk as a "pleasant person" who was "fun to be around." She greatly appreciated the chance to debrief her ministry with him. Temple commented that Brunk usually "laud[ed]" her work as a professor and pastor.[62]

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[56] Temple interview August 18, 2010.

[57] Faith and Life Commission Personnel Committee Minutes, December 16, 2000.

[58] Letter from Elroy Miller to Kathleen Temple, February 6, 2001.

[59] Temple, "Navigating 'Contrary Advocacy,'" 52.

[60] Email from Kathleen Temple to Shalom Mennonite Congregation, November 3, 2000.

[61] Temple, "Navigating," 52.

[62] Temple interview, August 18, 2010.

However, Temple's conversations with Brunk inevitably returned to sexuality. He would ask her to interpret various Bible passages and challenge her to feel compassion for those who feared increased openness to LGBTQ people in the Mennonite church. These were difficult discussions and at times conversations turned tense. "I know I raised my voice at him many times," Temple admitted. However, discussions of other aspects of Temple's ministry and outside interactions at Virginia Conference functions balanced these intense conversations.[63] In fact, in his first report to the Personnel Committee on December 19, 2001, Brunk described his conversations with Temple as a "positive experience" and requested to extend the probationary period.[64] Brunk also expressed the desire to postpone additional disciplinary action because it could lead to a "conflictual situation" with Shalom.[65]

However, only two days after Brunk reported to the Personnel Committee, Miller sent an email to Burkholder, Brunk and the Personnel Committee. Miller urged the Personnel Committee to take prompt action against Temple and suspend her credentials. He feared that a failure to deny the extension of her probation would be perceived as "progress by…advocates for change." Further, he noted, a year extension would give these advocates "time to plant the seeds of doubt."[66] Personnel Committee Chair Glendon Blosser agreed with Miller, and in an email response of the same day Blosser stated, "Time is on the side of those that want to destroy the institution."[67] Clearly, Temple's yearlong probation had not given time to "diffuse the passion."

Brunk responded swiftly to Miller and Blosser. On December 22 he criticized communication patterns, writing, "I am war-weary and tired of tit-for-tat rhetoric." He proceeded to defend Temple and stated that through their year of meetings, he had "been keenly aware of her goodness—not her badness. She has a heart for Christ and love for justice." Further, he emphasized that she had kept her commitment to refrain from contrary advocacy. He wrote, "I have not heard her make statements that would undermine the Conference or its principles."[68]

Soon after this email exchange, Burkholder emailed Miller, Brunk and the Personnel Committee that unclear structures for decision-making made the conflict more difficult: "We are sorting out polity questions"

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Faith and Life Commission Personnel Committee minutes, December 19, 2001.

[65] Email from Miller to Burkholder, December 21, 2001.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Email from Blosser to Miller, December 21, 2001.

[68] Email from Brunk to Miller, et al, December 22, 2001.

relating to agency among the district, conference and larger church. To this end, he echoed Brunk's call to bring Shalom's voice into Temple's process. Not only could the congregation hold Temple accountable to her commitment to avoid contrary advocacy, he also hoped that including Shalom, should the situation solidify "in a negative way," could prevent the congregation from accusing Virginia Conference leadership of power abuse.[69]

January 2002 Personnel Committee meeting minutes show more discussion about polity issues as they related to Temple's disciplinary procedure. On January 8, the committee discussed a "spate of emails" that asked them to include Harrisonburg District as well as Shalom in decision-making regarding Temple's credentials.[70] Two days later, minutes record one Committee member's fear that the committee was "leap-frogging" Harrisonburg District, suggesting that the decision-making process was unclear to some people involved.[71] As the conflict proceeded, the conference's top-down structure became more evident.

As the Personnel Committee discerned how to address structural issues and move forward with Temple's situation, Temple felt alone and uninformed. On December 30, 2001, Temple sent a letter to each member of the Personnel Committee expressing her pain and isolation. She feared the Personnel Committee would not, even after a year of probation, grant her full ordination. "You seem to be holding me at arm's length even now," she wrote.[72] A couple of weeks later, she finally heard from Burkholder. In a January 16, 2002 letter, he explained why she had not received personal responses because the Personnel Committee worked through a consensus. Hence, the committee did not "respond individually to personal requests that would take away from the group consensus and relate only to our individual opinions," he wrote.[73]

Harrisonburg District Overseer Wayne North, who had installed Temple as a pastor at Shalom over two years earlier, echoed the necessity of maintaining distance between Temple and the committee. "Your appeal for communication is well taken," he wrote. However, "while personal friendship might well prompt response from individual members of the committee it would not be appropriate for us each to express our

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[69] Email from Burkholder to Miller, December 26, 2001.

[70] Faith and Life Commission Personnel Committee Minutes, January 8, 2002.

[71] Faith and Life Commission Personnel Committee Minutes, January 10, 2002.

[72] Letter from Temple to members of the Personnel Committee, December 30, 2001.

[73] Letter from Burkholder to Temple, January 16, 2002.

comments on committee agenda.[74] Though Temple's letter still did not establish personal relationships with Personnel Committee members (she had, early in the process invited them all to observe her EMU classes and work at Shalom), it did highlight inadequate communication patterns that North acknowledged in his letter to Temple: "It is clear that too much is taken for granted in the matter of communication."

Temple continued to call for increased communication. On February 1, she sent an email to Miller asking why the Committee still hesitated to grant her full ordination. She also criticized the committee's lack of transparency. "An accused person has the right to know of what she or he is being accused," she wrote. "I am not one from whom members of the committee should withhold information about any allegation about me that has been brought to the committee for deliberation."[75]

The same day Temple emailed Miller wanting more information, she received a letter from Burkholder that revealed one reason the Personnel Committee continued to worry about her beliefs. He cited two articles that had appeared in EMU's student newspaper *The Weather Vane* as concerning.[76] He first noted a letter to the editor published on November 8, 2001. In "Response to Previous Letter on Issues of Sexual Identity," Temple addressed a student letter that expressed the pain experienced as a same-sex oriented member of the EMU community. Temple wrote that the church and its members "have done a poor job of embodying God's love for those who are suffering ostracism for who they love."[77]

Temple's story was also told, though she was not mentioned by name, in a December 6, 2001 article entitled "Faculty and Staff Take Issue with Forced Resignation." This article, which described faculty response to EMU's firing of lesbian staff member Sue Blauch because of her sexual orientation, also alluded to Temple's work with The Open Door and her continuing disciplinary procedure with Virginia Conference.[78] These articles, Burkholder wrote, had renewed Personnel Committee "uneasiness" and anxiety rose when Temple publicly "questioned" the church's stance.[79] This uneasiness was soon to skyrocket.

In the fall of 2001, Blauch and her partner Karen Meyers asked Temple and Grimsrud to officiate their upcoming commitment

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[74] Letter from North to Temple, no date.

[75] Email from Temple to Miller, February 1, 2002.

[76] Letter from Burkholder to Temple, February 1, 2002.

[77] Kathleen Temple, "Response to Previous Letter on Issues of Sexual Identity," *Weather Vane*, November 8, 2001.

[78] Amanda Jantzi, "Faculty and Staff Take Issue with Forced Resignation," *Weather Vane*, December 6, 2001.

[79] Letter from Burkholder to Temple, February 1, 2002.

ceremony. Both Temple and Grimsrud regretfully declined, Temple due to her tenuous situation with Virginia Conference and Grimsrud in respect of MC USA's membership guidelines that forbade a credentialed pastor from performing a same-sex covenant ceremony. However, the two agreed to attend and play minor roles in Blauch and Meyers' ceremony that was to take place in early 2002.

Temple did not expect reading a scripture passage would constitute contrary advocacy. However, when Temple informed Brunk of her plans, he was "absolutely horrified" and told her that the Personnel Committee would not condone this participation.[80] In an email to Temple, Brunk wrote that her decision put him in a "difficult position." He then asked to terminate their period of mentorship.[81] This reaction shocked Temple, though she later realized that Brunk had "barely been hanging on" and the Personnel Committee was pressuring him to distance himself from Temple. Temple's decision to participate in the service was, in effect, "the straw that broke the camel's back."[82]

Brunk did feel himself to be in a delicate position. In a March 2003 letter he expressed the fragility of his position "walking the line" on issues of same-sex sexuality. He wrote, "I have found myself in a difficult place while seeking to uphold Conference positions. I have been 'labeled' by conservatives for being too liberal and by liberals for being too conservative." In March 2002 Brunk felt pressure to discontinue his formal relationship with Temple.[83] In an email to Brunk, Temple wrote, "I see that you probably need to distance yourself from my actions, or your effectiveness in your areas of ministry could be compromised."[84] Thus, Temple and Brunk terminated their mentorship.

At this point, the Personnel Committee moved quickly to terminate her ordination. In a letter sent to Temple on March 29, Blosser acknowledged, "communications have not been adequate…in this relationship." In an effort to rectify this, he finally included the definition of contrary advocacy that Temple had been requesting for over a year, transparently providing an after-the-fact rationale for the Committee's action to terminate her ordination.

Blosser also asked Temple to attend a Personnel Committee meeting and "personally state where you are with respect to and support for" the Virginia Conference and MC USA position on same-sex relationships.[85]

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[80] Temple, interview, August 18, 2010.

[81] Email from Brunk to Temple, no date.

[82] Temple, interview, August 18, 2010.

[83] Letter from Brunk to Temple, March 30, 2003.

[84] Email from Temple to Brunk, March 23, 2002.

[85] Letter from Blosser to Temple, March 29, 2002.

However, before they arranged this meeting, Temple received another letter from Blosser that informed her that the Personnel Committee defined her upcoming participation in Blauch and Meyer's commitment ceremony as "advocacy" and thus, grounds for the removal of her ordination. This action also condemned Harrisonburg's Broad Street Mennonite Church for renting its facility to Blauch and Meyers even though neither woman was a member of the Broad Street congregation.[86] Eventually, Virginia Conference would revoke Broad Street's conference membership for this action.

Temple's response to the Personnel Committee's threat was sharp. She criticized Personnel Committee members and Virginia Conference leadership for failing to meet with her before making such a decision. She further critiqued their interpretation of her action. While Virginia Conference's official definition of contrary advocacy includes "officiating" covenant ceremonies, Temple argued that scripture reading did not violate the terms of her commitment.[87] In fact, Temple noted in an email to Brunk, "to 'perform' or to 'officiate' is what I told the couple I would *not* be able to do," though that is what they initially requested. In this email Temple also informed Brunk that she was "seriously" considering resigning her ordination.[88] Temple wrote that this option seemed appealing because she felt "less and less hope that my ministry as a whole or the 'fruit' of my life will be evaluated fairly by the FLC."

Temple's husband Grimsrud also participated in the commitment ceremony. He welcomed all attendees to the service and Virginia Conference later questioned him for this role. Grimsrud wrote a letter to his overseer apologizing for violating conference expectations that he had not been aware of and promised to refrain from participating in same-sex commitment ceremonies as long as he was ordained in Virginia Conference.[89] Apparently, this action appeased the overseer.

However, based on her history with the conference, writing a letter would not save Temple's credentials. When Burkholder informed her that keeping her ordination was no longer possible, Temple ended her formal relationship with Virginia Conference. On May 1, 2002, Temple wrote a letter to the Personnel Committee. She stated, "I very much *want* to remain a part of Virginia Conference." However, she also took seriously the Personnel Committee threats to revoke her ordination.

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[86] Letter from Blosser to Temple, April 15, 2002.

[87] Letter from Temple to Personnel Committee members, April 17, 2002.

[88] Email from Temple to Brunk, April 19, 2002.

[89] In 2005, Grimsrud transferred his ordination credentials to Central District Conference. Grimsrud, interview, April 8, 2011.

"Given that the formal relationship seems to be no longer possible," she wrote, "I request that my ordination be terminated."[90] At their May 10 meeting, the Personnel Committee accepted Temple's request and terminated her credentials effective August 21, 2002. And so, after almost three years of conversation, Virginia Conference and Temple ended their official journey together.

AN UNSATISFACTORY RESOLUTION

From Temple's perspective, the conference defeated her. In a presentation to the Shenandoah Valley Gay and Lesbian Alliance, Temple stated, "They had finally won."[91] She incurred deep wounds throughout the disciplinary process. She recounted feeling "battered and bruised" by the "unjust and disrespectful" credential review.[92] Burkholder acknowledged Temple's pain. He said the conference indeed "squash[ed]" Temple, and he regretted this reality.[93]

Temple did continue pastoring at Shalom and teaching at EMU because ordination was not a prerequisite for employment at either institution. However, she found ordination an important affirmation of her work in the church. "I really believed in the reality of the church's blessing and…without the blessing through the official channels I really felt like the wind (as in the Spirit) had gone out of my sails."[94] Though formally cut from Virginia Conference, in the letter ending Temple's ordination, she noted that she would "cooperate fully" should Virginia Conference ever reconsider her "acceptability" as a credentialed pastor.[95]

As it turned out, Temple soon decided she needed "a good rest" from the intense scrutiny experienced during the previous years.[96] So, in September, 2003, she took a leave of absence from her pastoral duties at Shalom. The following March she resigned from both Shalom and EMU.[97] Temple's disciplinary procedure with Virginia Conference had wounded her deeply enough that she could not continue in church ministry, the vocation she felt called to ever since becoming Christian.

Afterward, Temple returned to tailoring, a profession she explored as a young adult. Working with her hands has helped in healing process. In

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[90] Letter from Temple to Blosser and Miller, May 1, 2002.

[91] Temple, "SVGLA Coffee Talk," 1.

[92] Temple, "Navigating 'Contrary Advocacy,'" 54-5.

[93] Burkholder interview, August 24, 2010.

[94] Temple interview, August 18, 2010.

[95] Letter from Temple to Blosser and Miller, May 1, 2002.

[96] Temple, "SVGLA Coffee Talk," 2.

[97] Temple, "Navigating 'Contrary Advocacy,'" 55.

tailoring, "The highs aren't as high" she said, but "neither are the lows as low." Temple has experienced a measure of healing since she terminated her ordination: "I just feel good when I wake up every morning."[98]

Despite some healing, Temple still feels alienated from the Mennonite church. She has lost the inner freedom she once felt to "speak openly." After losing her ordination, Temple backed away from public LGBTQ advocacy. While she still signs letter and petitions, she does not currently feel able to "step up" and enter the heated discourse still surrounding same-sex sexuality due to exhaustion from the disciplinary procedure and the emptiness felt without the conference's blessing.[99]

Temple laments that the church still discriminates against LGBTQ people. She said she will not feel content until the "sickening" prejudice stops, but has also lost faith that the Mennonite church can change.[100] For Temple, the resolution to her conflict with Virginia Conference was certainly dissatisfying because she lost the official blessing of the church and incurred a great deal of personal pain through an unjust process. Temple was additionally heartbroken that her situation did not seem to lead to greater understanding and acceptance of people with a diversity of sexual orientations among church leadership, polity and constituents.

Shalom was also dissatisfied with the process regarding Temple's ordination. Temple's co-pastor Earl Zimmerman called Virginia Conference's treatment of Temple "unjust." He felt marginalized by Virginia Conference's lack of communication. He sees the proceedings as "impersonal" and "top down."[101] Two months after Temple submitted the request to terminate her ordination Shalom held a church retreat about how to respond to the treatment of Temple. Retreat attendees discussed a variety of options, and leaving the conference, while also "proactively addressing" contentions gained majority support.[102]

Harrisonburg District initiated a listening group to "listen…and try to understand" when it learned that Shalom wanted to transfer to Central District. This group met four times throughout February and March, 2004 and subsequently released a report that highlighted three primary reasons for Shalom's transfer request.

First, Shalom was unhappy with Conference polity and with the relationship of conference leadership to member congregations. Shalom felt that Virginia Conference did not trust the judgment of "the

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[98] Temple interview, August 18, 2010.

[99] Temple, interviews, August 18, 2010 and April 8, 2011.

[100] Temple, interview, August 18, 2010.

[101] Zimmerman interview, August 20, 2010.

[102] Shalom Mennonite Congregation meeting minutes, June 29, 2002.

congregation to discern how to relate pastorally to homosexuals." Second, Shalom was dissatisfied with the treatment of Temple. Shalom representatives expressed feeling "hurt and marginalized" by the process and the fact that "neither the congregation, nor Earl Zimmerman…were *ever* consulted concerning her ministry, how she functioned as a pastor, or about the theological perspective she expressed in the congregation."

Finally, Shalom highlighted "significant errors of process and communication" in the way Virginia Conference handled disagreements with both Temple and Broad Street Mennonite Church. The Listening Group report highlighted Shalom's contentions with polity and process employed by Virginia Conference in their discernment of Temple's credentials. The report also noted that these inquietudes in addition to inadequate "acknowledgement of the wrongdoing and hurt" made it difficult for Shalom "to entertain the notion of reconciliation (in the sense of remaining in Virginia Conference)."

In the report, Harrisonburg District representatives to the listening group said that the meetings "made Shalom's journey and pain much clearer."[103] In a personal interview, Zimmerman said the Listening Group allowed both groups to "hear…each other."[104] The report Shalom and Virginia Conference jointly wrote to Central District on March 25, 2005 echoed this sentiment. They wrote that the listening group process had been "praised as something of a model for working together."[105]

Still, Shalom decided to leave. In a meeting on October 14, 2003, 84 percent of the congregation voted to apply for membership with Central District with its more congregational polity. In a March 25, 2005 report from Shalom and Virginia Conference to Central District, Shalom stated, "We desire a more congregational polity than what we experienced in Virginia Mennonite Conference. We believe that local congregations need to be directly involved in controversial matters of faith and life and should have the freedom to work pastorally in such situations." It went on to note, "because of mutual misunderstandings, failures in process, and human failing…trust has been broken to a degree that will not be easily or quickly repaired."[106]

In the first congregational transfer under new MC USA polity guidelines, Virginia Conference released Shalom on February 5, 2005

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[103] "Report of Listening Group," Virginia Mennonite Conference, March 25, 2005.

[104] Zimmerman, interview, August 20, 2010.

[105] "Report to Central District Conference," 2.

[106] "Report to Central District Conference," 1.

and Central District accepted the congregation on June 25 of the same year.[107] Virginia Conference leadership expressed disappointment about Shalom leaving several times during the transfer process. Members of the FLC met with Shalom leadership in April 2004 to review "management of the processes" surrounding Temple's ordination transfer. In this meeting, they acknowledged "missed opportunities" to include Shalom in the conflict with Temple. Further, the FLC passed an action on June 6, 2004 that communicated official regret for these "missed opportunities."[108] In July, Michael Shenk, member of the FLC Personnel Committee wrote a letter to Shalom Pastor Earl Zimmerman and Ruby Friesen-Zehr, Shalom's administrative assistant, that stated that the FLC was making a "genuine effort to be open and clear" in response to Shalom's critique of procedural missteps. This letter also asked Shalom to reconsider their decision to transfer to Central District.[109]

Other Virginia Conference representatives echoed this call. A March 26, 2004 letter from Virginia Conference Moderator Joseph Longacher to Ed Yoder, Shalom Congregational Chair, conveyed the unanimous desire of the Virginia Conference Council that Shalom would continue in formal relationship with Virginia Conference.[110] Burkholder also sent Zimmerman an email asking Shalom to remain in Virginia Conference. In this email he admitted to procedural missteps and stated that Virginia Conference had learned from their journey with Temple and was now more capable of carrying out "a careful process."[111]

Despite tensions immediately following Temple's loss of ordination, Virginia Conference's decision to expel Broad Street Mennonite Church, and Shalom's subsequent decision to transfer to Central District, fear surrounding same-sex sexuality on a polity level soon quieted for a time in the conference. Remarked Conference Minister Owen Burkholder, "I have enjoyed the lull…since all of this went somewhere else."[112] However, in a recent interview Burkholder noted that conversations surrounding same-sex sexuality have resurfaced.

For example, at the most recent Virginia Conference annual meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina, held June 24 to 26, 2010, Burkholder led a workshop focusing on pastoral approaches to same-sex sexuality. It was

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[107] "Challenge to CDC: Be people of vision," *Central District Reporter*, July 2005.

[108] "Reflections with the Leadership of Shalom Congregation," 1-2.

[109] Letter from Shenk to Zimmerman and Zehr, July 20, 2004.

[110] Letter from Longacher to Yoder, et al, March 26, 2004.

[111] Email from Burkholder to Zimmerman, February 8, 2005.

[112] Burkholder interview, August 24, 2010.

popular; 76 out the 110 people registered for workshops attended.[113] Burkholder said this required much "emotional energy," but was also quite "gratifying." He concluded that the brief "lull" experienced in Virginia Conference after the controversies with Temple and Broad Street is now over. However, renewed energy does not mean that controversy has ceased. Even today understandings of same-sex sexuality among FLC members are mixed. "We are not of one mind," said Burkholder.[114] Getting rid of Temple and of Broad Street did not free Virginia Conference from strife for long.[115]

[113] Burkholder interviews, August 24, 2010 and April 5, 2011.

[114] Burkholder interview, August 24, 2010.

[115] *2016 postscript from Ted Grimsrud:* Just recently, Community Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg has declared itself a welcoming and affirming congregation. It remains a member in good standing in Virginia Conference for the time being, though the relationship is uneasy. In the Spring of 2016, Isaac Villegas, a prominent leader in the broader Mennonite Church USA (for several years he served as a member of the denomination's Executive Board) and pastor of Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship, performed a same-sex wedding. He was forced to resign from the Executive Board and had his ministerial credentials suspended by Virginia Conference. As this is written, his status remains in limbo, though his role in his congregation (which supported his act) remains the same.

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