

The Bible on Homosexuality: Exploring Its Meaning and Authority

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ABSTRACT. Even within this secular age the Bible is still referred to in controversial matters of ethics and morality. Nowhere is this more evident than in the debate over the acceptability or unacceptability of homosexuality. This paper evaluates the Bible's statements on homoeroticism by explaining their historical, cultural, linguistic and narrative contexts. It finds that while the Bible is silent on matters of orientation, it does seem to adopt a negative attitude toward at least male same-sex sexual encounters. This finding, however, is in itself irrelevant unless it is related to how communities use and make sense of the Bible. There are many biblical prohibitions and condemnations that are ignored by even the most fundamentalist Christian groups. Whether the biblical passages on homoeroticism are treated authoritatively or not rests ultimately on the outlook and interpretive framework used by a Christian community to make coherent sense of the Bible. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>*
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The Bible remains one of the central documents of western civilization. It has inspired literature, art and music, and it has shaped people's understandings of themselves, society and morality. It continues to lurk on or just below the surface of most contemporary debates. Be it abortion, gene therapy, the death penalty, divorce or education, the Bible invariably enters the discussion. Even in today's so-called post-Christian and secular age the Bible is rarely far from people's minds. In cultures historically influenced by Christianity, the Bible continues, often unconsciously, to shape the secular exercise of power (Nissinen [1998] 1-4). This influence is increased exponentially once one enters the Christian communities: For most Christians the Bible remains the ultimate source of guidance and inspiration. When a controversial topic arises, Christians will sooner or later ask, "What does the Bible say?" Indeed, the Bible's authority is such that among some Christians all discussion comes to an end once the Bible is quoted (Helminiak [1994] 12). Even less biblically dogmatic Christians still grant the Bible a central role. L. William Countryman, for instance, recognizes that the Bible was written in different historical circumstances and must be understood within the context of these circumstances. People need to appreciate that the biblical authors expressed themselves in terms of the religious traditions in which they lived and worked. For Countryman, however, this does not mean that the Bible is merely a historical document that has no relevance for the present. He insists that this often alien past that is canonized in the Bible may break into our present and direct us toward new opportunities. The Bible is still relevant because it offers a questioning, even disruptive, intervention into the self-assurance of the present; it can call Christians to new faithfulness and new understanding (Countryman [1988] 2-4). Whether they agree with it or not, Christians feel compelled to turn to the Bible in times of controversy because it provides them with alternative perspectives and avenues of thought. The debate over homosexuality is such a controversy, and it is inevitable that Christians will consult the Bible on this matter.

Consulting the Bible, however, is fraught with two main difficulties. The first, and most obvious, is determining the meaning of the relevant biblical passages on homosexuality. The Bible is an ancient text written by people who lived in a very different world from our own. Their languages, government, customs and beliefs stand in stark contrast to those of the 21st century. In order to understand what these people believed, we must engage in detailed and painstaking scholarly research. Biblical passages, especially when they have been translated into modern languages, cannot be taken at face value. Linguistic, philological, histori-

cal, social, cultural and even geographical factors must be taken into account. Only when such research is undertaken do we begin to come close to the original meanings of the biblical passages. Such scholarly activity, however, is not enough. The second, and least understood, difficulty that arises from consulting the Bible is that of biblical authority. Are the passages we are reading to be treated as authoritative, or can they be ignored? Although most Christians would describe the Bible as the supreme authority in their lives, in practice nobody, not even the most fundamentalist Christian, follows and adheres to the teachings of the entire Bible. Certain passages are emphasized more than others, and some are even ignored. Otherwise, the results would be chaotic, since the Bible is a vast document compiled over centuries which often contradicts itself. This dynamic of selective reading must be appreciated in any discussion on biblical authority. It is not enough to ask what the Bible says about homosexuality, one must also understand the underlying hermeneutical issues that shape how the Bible is used by a Christian community.

This article addresses both these difficulties. The first part examines the biblical passages that are considered to be about homosexuality, and attempts to discern their meaning within their historical, cultural and linguistic context. The second part outlines the hermeneutical forces that determine which sections of the Bible are treated authoritatively and which are not. It is this writer's contention that these forces, rather than the detailed scholarly analysis of particular biblical passages, are the main authority in deciding the acceptability or unacceptability of homosexuality within today's Christian community.

PART I: HOMOEROTICISM IN THE BIBLE

Only a few passages appear to address directly the issue of homosexuality. They are the story of the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19:1-11), a number of prohibitions in the Torah (Lev. 18:22, 20:13), and statements by the Apostle Paul (Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10). Some Christians regard the overall negative tone in these texts as proof that God utterly condemns homosexuality or at least homosexual behavior. But it is important to appreciate that these biblical passages were written in a world very different from our own, with different values, norms and traditions. For one thing, the term 'homosexual' was unknown. The authors wrote about erotic encounters between people of

the same sex without reference to individual orientation (Nissinen [1998] v-vi). Daniel Helminiak points out that

The Bible Texts do not condemn homosexuality as we understand it today. In fact, even the term “homosexuality” is misleading in this discussion. The Bible’s concern is about same-sex acts, what had been called “homogenitality.” The Bible texts show no awareness of homosexuality, the psychological disposition that inclines people to be emotionally and erotically attracted to people of their own sex. (Helminiak [1997] 82; see also Nelson [1978] 182, and Hays [1986] 200)

In his own study of the Bible Martti Nissinen finds the word ‘homoeroticism’ far more applicable to the biblical texts, since it refers to “all erotic-sexual encounters and experiences of people with persons of the same sex, whether the person is regarded as homosexual or not” (Nissinen [1998] 17). His advice is followed throughout the rest of this article.

Both Helminiak’s and Nissinen’s observations demonstrate that, in order to understand these biblical passages correctly, one must first examine them within their historical context. One needs to appreciate the issues they are addressing, their interpretation of sex and gender, and how they understand erotic same-sex interaction.

Sodom (Gen. 19:1-11)

The story of the destruction of Sodom has strongly shaped western attitudes toward homoeroticism. For over a thousand years people have regarded it as an example of God’s unequivocal condemnation of same-sex erotic encounters: God destroyed Sodom because men wanted to have sex with men. This interpretation has been so influential that in the English language the word ‘sodomy’ has come to mean anal or oral copulation, usually with someone of the same gender. But a closer reading of the story reveals that the crime of Sodom had little to do with the idea of homoerotic sex between two consenting adults (Hays [1996] 381). In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible the relevant passage reads as follows:

Two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them . . . he urged them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house . . . and

they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom . . . all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof.” But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.” Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. (Gen. 19:1-11) (All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version)

There is some debate whether the verb “to know” (Hebrew: *yāda*) actually refers to sexual intercourse. In some other passages in Genesis the word is used as an expression for intercourse (Gen. 4:1, 17, 25; 24:16; 38:26), but the term unequivocally means sexual “knowing” in only about a dozen of its almost one thousand occurrences (Num. 31:17; Judges 11:39; 21:11; 1 Sam. 1:19; 1 Kings 1:4) (Nissinen [1998] 46). This has led some to argue that the crowd outside Lot’s home merely wanted “to know” who the two strangers were and considered Lot unqualified to offer these strangers hospitality because he himself was an outsider, a resident alien in Sodom (Nelson [1978] 183; Boswell [1980] 94). But the context in which the word is used suggests that some kind of sexual activity was intended. In the hope of appeasing the mob, Lot offered them his daughters (Gen. 19:8), using the phrase “that have not known a man” (Hebrew: *lō yādē ū îš*) to indicate that they are virgins. As Nissinen points out, the verb *yāda* is used here “with an explicitly sexual meaning—only a couple of lines after the previous similar use” (Nissinen [1998] 46). It seems clear, therefore, that the men of Sodom’s demand “to know” Lot’s guests included a sexual element. However, Lot’s willingness to offer them his daughters also shows that Sodom’s men were intent on performing male-male gang rape (Helminiak [1994] 37-38). There is no indication whatsoever that any form of consensual

homosexual intercourse was intended. The angels visiting Lot demonstrate no desire to have sex with the men outside and strike them blind when they attempt to break down the door. The mob intends violence that includes male-male rape (Soards [1995] 15), something even modern gay-rights activists would condemn.

The offense perpetrated by the men of Sodom, however, involved much more than an attempt at male-male rape. One of the cardinal rules of Lot's society was to offer hospitality to travelers. Sodom lay in desert country, and sleeping outside in the cold of night could be fatal. One was obligated to give shelter to those passing through. In fact, this rule was so strict that one could not even harm an enemy once he had been offered shelter for the night. Lot was prepared to sacrifice his daughters' virginity to uphold this law. The men of Sodom were guilty of attempting to transgress this law: they abuse strangers, insult travelers and show inhospitality toward the needy (Helminiak [1994] 38-39). The earliest commentaries on the Sodom story regarded the transgression in this very light. Rather than emphasizing the sexual nature of the abuse, they concentrated on the Sodomites' breaking of the law of hospitality and accused them of pride, xenophobia and judicial offenses. Ezekiel states that Sodom "had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezek. 16:49), and Isaiah admonishes Sodom to "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Is. 1:17). The writers of these prophetic works were probably aware of the sexual nature of the attempted assault in Sodom, but it seems they never considered the offense an issue of sexual immorality in its own right. Even in the Jesus tradition Sodom's sin appears to be linked to hospitality rather than to any kind of sexual transgression (Nissinen [1998] 46-47; Nelson [1978] 184):

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: ". . . . As you go, proclaim the good news. . . . Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. . . . If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town." (Matt. 10:5-15. See also Luke 10:1-12)

Here the offense is not male-male sex or rape, but the rejection of God's messengers. The parallel with Sodom seems to be closed hearts that reject

strangers, wickedness that will not welcome God's heralds (Helminiak [1994] 40).

The sexual aspects of the Sodom story began to receive greater attention during the Hellenistic age. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (Jewish writings from roughly 200 BCE to 100 CE that never became part of the Hebrew Canon) contain a number of references to Sodom that highlight the sexual nature of its transgressions. The Book of Jubilees represents the city as a symbol of corruption, fornication and idolatry (13:17; 16:5-6; 20:5; 22:22; 36:10), and the Testament of Benjamin and the Testament of Levi accuse Sodom of lechery with women (Test. Benj. 9:1), adultery, prostitution and the marrying of Gentile women (Test. Levi 14:6-7). Nevertheless, there are no unambiguous references to homoeroticism, the emphasis rather being on heterosexual recklessness. Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–c. 54 CE) and Flavius Josephus (37 CE–c. 100 CE) gave the Sodomites' behavior a more homoerotic interpretation. Both men were strongly influenced by Hellenistic philosophy and used the familiar term *physis* ("nature") in order to define homoerotic behavior as "against nature" (*para physin*). Philo accused the Sodomites of violating the wives of their neighbors and of engaging in male-male intercourse, which in his opinion led to infertility, men's effeminacy and venereal disease. Philo condemned male homoerotic acts because he believed they converted men into women and distorted sex life, the sole purpose of which he saw as procreation. His views were shared by Josephus, who rejected any sexual activity that was not between a man and his wife purely for the making of children. In his reading of the Sodom story Josephus repeated the customary Jewish argument that the city had been destroyed because of its arrogance and hatred of strangers, but he included the further interpretation that Lot's guests were handsome young men who aroused erotic passions in the city's men (Nissinen [1998] 89, 93-97).

Early Christian writers, however, seem to have maintained the older and probably more authentic interpretation of the Sodom story. The extremely anti-sexual Origen (185-254), who may have castrated himself to avoid sexual temptation, saw Sodom's sin as a transgression of the law of hospitality. He argued that since no other good deeds of Lot are mentioned, Lot escaped the city's destruction merely because he opened his home to guests. The other inhabitants of Sodom were annihilated for not extending the same courtesy. Saint Ambrose (c. 339-397) expressed a similar point of view. Although he believed that sexual interests played a part in the Sodomites' behavior, he considered the moral issue to be primarily one of hospitality, pointing out that Lot put

the hospitality of his house above the modesty of his daughters. John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435) appears to have ignored the possibility of a homoerotic contribution to Sodom's downfall, claiming instead that the main culprit was gluttony. Other Christian writers seem to have downplayed or ignored the sexual aspects of Sodom's transgression. As late as the fourteenth century *Piers Plowman* contained the opinion that Sodom's destruction was occasioned by overplenty and sloth. It would appear, therefore, that early Christians did not consider the Sodom story's central moral teaching to be the condemnation of homosexual relationships (Boswell [1980] 97-98).

An intriguing aspect to the Sodom story is Lot's willingness to allow his daughters to be raped. While the modern-day reader may take offense at such apparent callousness, the biblical writer did not seem disturbed: neither God nor the angels rebuke Lot for making such an offer. In Lot's culture wives and children were first and foremost the property of the male head of the household. But this did not mean that he could do with them as he pleased. Society's basic building block at the time was the family (unlike today in western society, where it is the individual), and the patriarch had a duty to maintain, or even enhance, the family's wealth and public standing in the community. The other family members were tools which the patriarch used to fulfill this duty (Countryman [1988] 149-150). When Lot offered his daughters to the mob, he not only risked financial loss, since no man would marry a woman who had been 'used,' but also public humiliation, because his daughters' loss of their virginity before marriage would bring shame on his house (Deut. 22:13-21) (Nissinen [1998] 46). Thus, from the biblical writer's perspective, Lot's offer was commendable, not deplorable. But Lot's offer also indicates that ancient Israel considered the violation of the law of hospitality and male-male rape to be far more serious offenses than the rape of women. A close reading of the prohibition in Leviticus against male-male sex acts may explain why this was the case.

The Abomination in Leviticus (Lev. 18:22; 20:13)

Leviticus contains what appears to be a clear prohibition against same-sex sexual encounters: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." The penalty for such behavior is death for both participants (Lev. 20:13). There are, however, some interesting aspects to this prohibition. First of all, female homoeroticism is not mentioned; only men having sex with other men is at issue. Second, the main point of concern seems to be the question of ritual and religious

purity. The English word “abomination” is a translation of the Hebrew *toevath*, which can be rendered into “uncleanness,” “impurity,” or “religious/ritual taboo.” The word is used in the Old Testament to designate those Jewish actions that cause ethnic contamination or idolatry (Helminiak [1997] 83; Boswell [1980] 100). Male-male sex acts were an “abomination” because they threatened Israel’s drive to maintain religious and ritual purity. Purity played a central role in ancient Jewish life, for it enabled Israel to differentiate itself from other nations. By labeling something as pure or impure, ancient Judaism could determine what was part of Jewish identity and what was not. Leviticus 17-26 forms what is called the Holiness Code. It allowed the ancient Israelites to separate their religious cult from those of other nations. The beginning of Leviticus 18 states:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the Lord your God. You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the Lord. (Lev. 18:1-5)

The Holiness Code allowed Israel to set itself apart from all that was unclean, thus ensuring a healthy relationship with their God (Countryman [1988] 22-23). Male-male sexual activity may have been a practice among ancient Canaanites. By condemning it Leviticus was safeguarding Jewish identity in the face of Canaan influences. To engage in homoerotic sex was to be like the Gentiles, to identify with non-Jews, and to betray the Jewish religion (Helminiak [1994] 45-46).

This prohibition against male-male erotic encounters, however, was only one part of a complex set of rules that safeguarded Jewish identity. Death was prescribed not only for male homoeroticism, but also for several other infringements: giving one’s offspring to the god Molech (Lev. 20:2), cursing one’s mother or father (Lev. 20:9), committing adultery or incest (Lev. 20:10-12), or having sex with an animal (Lev. 20:15-16). Furthermore, there were other offenses that, while not warranting the death penalty, still called for harsh punishments: seeing members of one’s family naked (commonly understood to be referring to incest) (Lev. 20:17, 19), consulting mediums (Lev. 20:6), or sleeping with a woman during her menstruation (Lev. 20:18). The last two ac-

tions would hardly be considered crimes today. To concentrate merely on the passages that condemn male homoeroticism is to read the Holiness Code in a highly selective and arbitrary fashion.

But there was more to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 than a desire to avoid ritual uncleanness and safeguard Jewish identity. Underlying it was a deep concern to protect an understanding of gender that was considered central for the strength, growth and survival of the community. Within ancient Jewish society men and women were assigned distinct gender roles, the transgression of which was perceived as a serious threat to Judaism. The male gender was regarded as the active, while the female was thought of as the passive. In ancient Jewish eyes the only way two men could have sex with each other was if one took on the passive role, that is allowed himself to be anally penetrated by his partner. This, however, was considered a threat to the very fabric of Jewish identity, because it blurred the important distinction between male and female that Jews regarded as part of the bedrock of their society. Sexual contact between two men mirrored the active/passive roles between masculine and feminine. By allowing himself to be penetrated anally, the passive male lost his manly honor and transgressed the given gender boundaries. This concern over correct gender roles may explain why Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 do not mention female homoeroticism. Since it seems that the central issue was penetration, there was no danger that women would transgress their assigned gender roles. A woman's lack of a penis prevents her from penetrating another woman. It seems possible, therefore, that female homoeroticism was not mentioned because it was not considered a transgression of the given gender roles.

This strong desire to safeguard gender distinctions may, in part, clarify why the writer of the Sodom story in Genesis did not condemn Lot for offering his daughters to the mob to be raped: No actual transgression of gender boundaries was involved. The rape of a woman was less outrageous than the rape of a man because it involved a form of sexual assault that did not transgress the ancient Jewish interpretation of gender roles: an active man was still penetrating a passive woman. When Lot offered his daughters, he was trying to protect his guests from becoming the victims of an act of sexual aggression that forced men to behave like women. His guests' manly honor would have been lost. By comparison, the rape of the daughters, while offending Lot's honor, would not have jeopardized the gender roles central to Jewish society (Nissinen [1998] 41-44, 51, 98-101).

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10

Three passages within the New Testament have traditionally been associated with homoerotic behavior: Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and Timothy 1:10. The former two belong to the writings of Paul, while the last is no longer considered to be part of the Pauline corpus. But whether Paul wrote all three or not, their inclusion in the New Testament has guaranteed their considerable moral and spiritual authority. For some Christians these passages are incontrovertible proof of God's negative attitude toward same-sex physical relationships: homoerotic behavior is inherently sinful and must be condemned and discouraged at all times. Considering their ongoing influence in the debate over homosexuality, these three passages warrant a closer look.

Both 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 contain lists of behaviors which are described as sinful, godless and morally reprehensible. Those who engage in such activities will not inherit the kingdom of God. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul observes:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes [*malakoi*], sodomites [*arsenokoitai*], thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

This position is echoed in 1 Timothy 1:9-10:

This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites [*arsenokoitais*], slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

While homoerotic acts are not singled out for special condemnation, they do appear to be part of the lists. It is, however, difficult to determine what exactly is being condemned. Whether these passages actually censure all forms of same-sex physical relationships hinges on the meaning of the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. The authoritative *A Greek-English Lexikon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* renders *arsenokoitais* into “a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex,” and offers two meanings

for *malakos*: (1) “pertaining to being yielding to touch, *soft*,” and (2) “pertaining to being passive in a same-sex relationship” (Bauer [2000] 135, 613). These translations remain, however, debatable. The term *arsenokoitai* never appears in a passage that gives a clear sense of how it was used by the New Testament writers. There is no certain use of it prior to the writing of the New Testament, and it only occurs in the New Testament in the two passages quoted above (Countryman [1988] 117-118). The word does have obvious sexual connotations, since the second part (*koite*) refers to “bed” and thus probably to a sexual act, but Nissinen argues that it remains unclear whether the first part of the word, *arsen* (“man,” “male”) is the subject or the object. If it is the object, it means a man who sleeps exclusively with men (“one who lies with men”). If it is the subject, it may mean a man who sleeps with both men and women (“a male who lies”) (Nissinen [1998] 115). Robin Scroggs, however, suggests that *arsenokoitai* is actually an idiom derived from the Septuagintal version of Lev. 18:22, which reads in part *kai meta arsenos koimethese koiten gynaikos* (“and you shall not sleep in bed with a man as with a woman”), and of Lev. 20:13, which includes the words *kai hos an koimethe meta arsenos koiten gynaikos* (“and whoever may lie in bed with a man as with a woman”) (Scroggs [1983] 106-108). If Scroggs is correct, then Paul’s lists of condemnations mention homoerotic activity. Whatever the case, it seems likely that *arsenokoitai* does refer to some kind of male homoerotic activity (Soards [1995] 19; Nelson [1978] 188; Helminiak [1994] 91), even though the exact nature of this activity remains obscure. What the word definitely does not refer to is any kind of female homoerotic behavior. *Arsenokoitai* only mentions men (*arsen*). It would appear that on the question of female-female sexual encounters 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 are completely silent (Helminiak [1997] 84).

The word *malakoi* is even more difficult to define accurately. The basic meaning of *malakos* is “soft,” but it occurs in patristic writings with senses as varied as “cowardly,” “refined,” “weak willed,” “delicate,” “gentle” and “debauched.” Generally, the word is used to speak about frailty of body, illness, moral weakness, or frailty of character. It is also used to introduce an effeminate nuance when talking about pederasty. This may be why some translators of 1 Corinthians 6:9 have assumed *malakoi* refers to passive partners in pederastic relationships. But Christians have not always translated *malakos* in this manner. Until the Reformation, and within Roman Catholicism until well into the twentieth century, the word was applied to masturbation (Boswell [1980] 106-107). Furthermore, Greek sources indicate that, on its own,

malakos was not used to refer to homoerotic activity. Rather, it emphasized femininity. In the ancient Greek world the accusation of effeminacy was not used to draw attention to a man's sexual orientation or gender identification, but instead to his lacking of moral quality. A *malakos* was someone who demonstrated what were thought to be the typical signs of feminine weakness: lack of self-control and a willingness to yield to pleasure (Martin [1996] 124-127). It is possible that when Paul included *malakoi* in his list of vices, he was referring to persons who are "unrestrained" or "wanton," not people engaged in homoerotic behavior (Nissinen [1998] 117-118; Helminiak [1994] 86). This, however, remains an educated guess, and it appears unlikely that we can know with certainty what Paul meant by the term (Countryman [1988] 119).

Romans 1:26-27

Paul's letter to the Romans contains the only clear and direct reference to homoeroticism in the New Testament. Unlike 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10, whose exact meaning is obscured by the difficulty of accurately translating two words, Romans 1:26-27 makes a fairly unambiguous reference to some kind of male same-sex conduct. Its reference to female homoeroticism is more debatable.

Paul speaks of the consequences that befall those who exchange the true God for idolatrous images. Since Romans 1:26-27 is part of a larger polemic, it is useful to quote this polemic in most of its entirety (i.e., Romans 1:18-27):

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. . . . So they are without excuse; for though they know God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator . . .

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse [*ten physiken khresin*] for unnatural [*para physin*], and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse [*ten physiken khresin*] with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

The sheer force of this passage is obvious. For some Christians it states unconditionally that all homoerotic behavior is sinful and deserves the Churches' condemnation. Other Christians are unwilling to draw such a conclusion, and have, at times, gone to great lengths to demonstrate that Paul did not actually condemn homoerotic behavior. Their observations, while sometimes strained, shed new light on Paul's thought and need to be taken into account in any evaluation of Romans 1:26-27.

The verses that mention homoeroticism are part of a larger polemic against idolatry. Paul is speaking of people who have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles" (v. 23). For this offense God has allowed them to be the victims of a number of impurities and degrading passions, one of which is homoerotic behavior. What is noteworthy is that the main culprit is idolatry. Homoeroticism is not spoken of in isolation, but as a consequence of rejecting or ignoring the one true God. Paul looked at the Gentile world and saw homoerotic activity and idolatry, and he linked the two firmly together. For James B. Nelson and Richard B. Hays this indicates that Paul believed that God's wrath was not directed at homoerotic acts, but at idolatry. Homoeroticism was the punishment for the prior offense of worshipping false Gods (Nelson [1978] 186-187; Hays [1996] 388). This may also explain what Paul meant when he said that men "received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (v. 27). The traditional interpretation of this verse is that the "error" is homoerotic behavior and the "penalty" is some kind of punishment for this behavior. L. William Countryman, however, observes that nobody has given a satisfactory explanation of what this penalty may have been. Some form of venereal disease or hemorrhoids have been suggested, but since these maladies were not confined to people who engaged in homoerotic activity, these explanations seem unlikely. Countryman also points out that it is not at all clear that Paul was referring to homoerotic behavior when he used the word "error" (*plane*). In his other writings Paul always used the word to refer to wrong beliefs or teachings, not wrong desires or actions, and there is

no reason to believe that he altered his normal usage in Rom. 1:27. Countryman points out that the most straightforward interpretation, and the one most in accord with the context, is that “error” refers to idolatry and “penalty” to homoerotic activity (Countryman [1988] 115-116). God punishes idolaters by, among other things, inflicting homoerotic desires and behaviors upon them (Soards [1995] 21-22).

Countryman also argues that it is difficult to determine whether Paul considered these homoerotic acts to be wrong in themselves. He points out that Paul did not apply the vocabulary of sin to homoerotic activity. Paul used many words to refer to sin: sin (*hamartia*, *hamartema*), lawlessness (*anomia*), unrighteousness (*adikia*), godlessness (*asebeia*). Words like these only appear twice in Romans 1:18-31; at the beginning in reference to idolatry (vv. 18-23), and at the end as a heading for a whole list of wrongs—a list that does not mention sexual behavior (vv. 29-31). Instead, Paul labeled homoerotic acts as an impurity (v. 24: *akatharsian*). In doing so he undoubtedly was drawing on the Jewish Holiness Code, which used the concepts of cultic purity and impurity to differentiate Jews from non-Jews. Paul may have been indicating the extent to which the act of idolatry made the Gentiles different from the Jews. It is important to note that Paul was not speaking of individuals, but Gentile culture as a whole. Because the Gentiles persisted in the sin of idolatry, God decreed that certain unclean practices would be characteristic of their culture. One such practice was homoerotic activity (Countryman [1988] 110-111).

Paul may have agreed that homoeroticism violated Jewish purity laws, but this still does not clarify whether he thought homoeroticism wrong in itself. It is well known that Paul had a mixed attitude toward Jewish law. While he respected and honored it, he did not believe it necessary for salvation. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ had created a situation where obeying Jewish law was no longer essential for a close relationship with God. Consequently, Paul did not require Gentile converts to Christianity to undergo circumcision or follow Jewish dietary restrictions, restrictions that differentiated pure from impure foods. As far as Paul was concerned, the eating of impure foods had no impact on a person’s salvation. Paul’s labeling of homoeroticism as an impurity, therefore, does not clarify whether he thought it inherently wrong. Instead, the matter rests on what Paul meant by the phrase “Their women exchanged natural intercourse [*ten physiken khresin*] for unnatural [*para physin*], and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse [*ten physiken khresin*] with women, were consumed with passion for one another” (Rom. 1:26-27). What is at issue is how

Paul understood the terms *physis* (natural) and *para physin* (unnatural). Today the words “natural” and “unnatural” are often used to distinguish between something that conforms to the laws of nature and is therefore good or acceptable, and something that breaks the laws of nature and is therefore bad and unacceptable. But *physis* and *para physin* were not necessarily used in this manner two thousand years ago. In antiquity *physis* did not refer to universal biological laws. Instead, it had a number of meanings: it could be a fundamental cultural rule; a conventional, proper, or inborn character or appearance; or it could be the true being of a person or thing. In Stoic philosophy *physis* was used to refer to laws by which people should live. Within this context the term *para physin* probably meant something like “seriously unconventional,” like when Seneca (c. 4 BCE-65 CE) described hot baths, potted plants, banquets after sunset, and a sexually passive man as “against nature” (*contra naturam*) (Nissinen [1998] 105). When Paul spoke of *physis* he was not referring to universal laws, but what was characteristic, consistent, standard, ordinary, expected and regular for a particular people or organism. A continuity with the past was also implied. The Jews were Jews by nature (Gal. 2:15: *emeis physei Ioudaioi*), just like the Gentiles were uncircumcised by nature (Rom. 2:27: *ek physeos akrobystia*) (Boswell [1980] 110; Helminiak [1994] 64). To be unnatural was to deviate from the ordinary and expected. If this is how Paul used *physis* in Rom. 1:26-27, then he may have been saying that Gentiles had only heterosexual desires until God visited impurity upon them for their idolatry, and that consequently they exchanged their regular sexual acts for irregular homoerotic encounters. They lost continuity with their heterosexual past (Countryman [1988] 114).

At this point it is important to explore what Paul meant when he stated that “Their women exchanged natural intercourse [*ten physiken khresin*] for unnatural [*para physin*]” (v. 26). This has often been regarded as a reference to female homoeroticism, but this interpretation is not as clear cut as it may first appear. The verse does not actually specify with whom the women engage in unnatural intercourse. James E. Miller has argued that there is good reason to understand this passage as referring to unnatural heterosexual intercourse (i.e., anal or oral penetration of a woman by a man). Although male homoeroticism was hotly debated in ancient classical culture, female homoeroticism received far less attention. An exhaustive list of classical sources on female same-sex behavior can be compiled quite quickly. Furthermore, in no discussion of female homoeroticism was male homoeroticism regarded as its counterpart; rather, heterosexuality was considered the counter-

part of female homoeroticism. Male and female same-sex behaviors were treated as separate categories, unrelated to each other. A similar situation can be discerned in ancient Jewish culture. As already mentioned, while the Mosaic code condemned male homoeroticism, it ignored female same-sex activity. The Talmud's Gemara (*Shabbat* 65a and *Yebamot* 76a) does mention female homoeroticism twice, but while these descriptions express disapproval, the act itself is not, like male homoeroticism, considered unlawful (Miller [1995] 4-7). These findings lead Miller to the following observation:

Though discussions of male homosexuality are rather common, references to female homosexuality in either Classical or Jewish literature are rare enough for us to require some specificity from Paul before we can conclude with assurance that his is discussing female homosexuality in Romans 1:26. Without such specificity the reference to female homosexuality would be lost on his audience.

Since "parity is rarely expected to act retroactively in rhetoric" (Miller [1995] 8), it is unlikely that verse 26 was about female homoerotic activity. Instead, the partners for these women were probably men. But what then was this 'unnatural intercourse' in which these women engaged? Miller points out that, unlike female homoeroticism, 'unnatural' heterosexual intercourse, in the form of oral and anal copulation, was widely discussed in the classical world, often in connection with contraception. It is also significant that Paul appears to be referring to the same unnatural and natural activity in both verses 26 and 27. Both women and men are engaging in the same kind of unnatural physical acts. However, as far as the ancient world was concerned, women could not penetrate each other in the same manner as men could penetrate men because they lacked the necessary anatomical appendage. Thus women engaged in homoerotic activity were considered unable to practice the same unnatural intercourse (i.e., oral and anal copulation) as men. For Miller this indicates that the 'unnatural' female behavior Paul was referring to was a willingness to be orally and anally penetrated by men: "the similarity in function described in Romans 1:26 refers to non-coital sexual activities which are engaged by heterosexual women similar to the sexual activities of homosexual males" (Miller [1995] 10). For an alternative reading of Rom. 1:26 see Jewett [2000] 231-234).

Deviation from the natural, however, was not automatically morally reprehensible. In Rom. 11:24 Paul mentions that God has "cut from

what is by nature [*kata physin*] a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature [*para physin*], into a cultivated olive tree . . ." Here God goes against the ordinary and expected and creates an irregular situation where the Gentiles may receive salvation. It would be hard to imagine that Paul was accusing God of morally corrupt behavior. The term *para physin*, therefore, did not necessarily imply moral turpitude (Boswell [1980] 112). Some scholars have used this analysis of *physis* to argue that Paul was not making a moral judgment in Rom. 1:26-27; he was simply stating that these men and women engaged in sexual acts that were beyond the regular, outside the ordinary, and were not the ones people usually performed. Daniel A. Helminiak states uncatagorically that "There is no sense whatever in those words that the practices were wrong or against God or contrary to the divine order of creation or in conflict with the universal nature of things" (Helminiak [1994] 64).

Helminiak's statement, however, fails to appreciate the negative context in which *para physin* is used in Romans 1. Paul was not simply talking about homoeroticism, but homoeroticism in relation to the sin of idolatry. He regarded the former as a punishment for the latter. Paul came from a Jewish background that expressed disgust toward same-sex sexual interactions, and there is no reason to believe that he did not share this disgust (Schmidt [1997] 101). Furthermore, Richard B. Hays points out that in ancient Stoicism morally correct action was often described as living *kata physin*, and that the opposition between 'natural' and 'unnatural' was frequently used as a way to distinguish between heterosexual and homoerotic behavior. In Paul's time the categorization of homoeroticism as *para physin* was a commonplace feature of Hellenistic Jewish attacks against such behavior (Hays [1996] 387). Therefore, far from considering homoerotic activity to be morally neutral, Paul probably regarded it, in the words of Martti Nissinen, as "abnormal transgressions of gender boundaries, that is, 'unnatural' acts performed by 'normal people'" (Nissinen [1998] 111). It seems likely that within the context of Romans 1 *para physin* had negative, not neutral, moral implications.

This interpretation of *para physin* seems to agree with the overall tenor of Paul's argument in the first three chapters of Romans. Paul's main concern was not homoeroticism, but the relationship of Jewish law to salvation through Jesus Christ. At the time of Paul's missionary activity there was disagreement over whether Gentile converts to Christianity also had to practice Jewish law and undergo circumcision. Many Jewish Christians insisted that adoption of Jewish law was a necessary prerequisite for following Jesus Christ, but Paul argued otherwise. He

claimed that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ had superseded Jewish law and made it unnecessary for salvation. In his letter to the Romans Paul wanted Jewish Christians who followed the law to realize that they were no better than Gentile Christians who did not follow Jewish law and did not undergo circumcision. The law did not make people more righteous or guarantee their salvation. In order to drive this point home, Paul resorted to a rhetorical trap. He stimulated his Jewish readers' moral indignation and feelings of religious superiority by listing a number of sins traditionally associated with Gentile culture, including the, for Jews, deeply disgusting practice of homoeroticism. But Paul was lulling his readers into a false sense of security before hitting them with the argument that they were just as guilty of sin: "What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin . . ." (Rom. 3:9). Paul was indicating that the Jews were no better than the sinful Gentiles who, among other things, engaged in homoerotic activity. For his Jewish readers Paul's argument must have come as a severe shock, but that was probably his intent. He wanted them to realize that it was faith in Christ, not the law, which guaranteed salvation (Rom. 3-21:24). Part of his argument implied that people who did not engage in homoerotic activity were no better off than those who did. All were guilty of sin and in need of God's grace. As Martti Nissinen points out, Paul probably did consider homoeroticism immoral, but it was not his major concern when he wrote Romans:

Presumably nothing would have made Paul approve homoerotic behavior. Clearly, Paul, to whom marriage was the only acceptable venue for sexual life [1 Cor. 7:8-9], could not have approved any same-sex interaction that even resembled sex between a man and a woman. But condemning "homosexuality" is not Paul's main concern. His words about same-sex conduct in Romans 1:26-27 are one example he chose from his tradition to illustrate how badly the world needs grace and, at the same time, to set a trap for anyone who would read his words with feelings of moral superiority or religious bigotry. (Nissinen [1998] 112)

Paul may have thought homoeroticism morally questionable, but he did not consider those who avoided it any less guilty of sin. Homoeroticism was just one transgression of many perpetuated by humanity, and was no worse than any of the other examples of human unrighteousness listed in Romans 1:29-31 (Hays [1994] 8-9). Before God all were

equally guilty of disobedience: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (Rom. 11:32).

The Wider Perspective of Marriage

While the above analysis of Gen. 19:1-11, Lev. 18:22, 20:13, 1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10 and Rom. 1:26-27 suggests that the Bible probably tends toward a negative view of at least male homoeroticism, it also shows how difficult it is to determine these passages' exact meaning and relevance. Words, phrases and contexts are open to alternative interpretations and different levels of emphases, and it is not always clear to what extent these few biblical references to same-sex sexual activity can function as a guide in the modern debate over homosexuality. A number of Christians, however, have argued that it is a mistake to approach these passages in isolation. They need to be placed within a wider biblical context, and this context is the biblical view of marriage. Thomas E. Schmidt insists that the biblical proscription of homoeroticism rests not on its lists of proscribed activities, but on its pervasive and coherent affirmation of marriage. In the Bible sexual relations are only acceptable when they take place within the confines of marriage, and marriage is always between a man and a woman, never between two people of the same sex. Schmidt argues that there are four biblical affirmations about sex and marriage:

1. Reproduction is good. Abraham was blessed with many offspring (Gen. 17:2), and Ps. 127:3 describes the birth of sons as a reward from God. Furthermore, it was through reproduction that God began to offer salvation to the world, first by focusing on the covenant with Israel (the nation can flourish if it has offspring) and then through the birth of the messiah in the flesh (cf. 1 John 4:2). Homoeroticism ignores the central goodness of reproduction, thus short-circuiting the process of creation and salvation.
2. Sex is good. The process by which offspring are produced is a beautiful experience.
3. Marriage is good. This is implied in Genesis, assumed in the rest of the Old Testament, and reiterated in the New Testament (Matt. 19:1-19; 1 Cor. 6-7).
4. Male and female are necessary counterparts. Humanity is created male and female (Gen. 1:27), and each is made for the other. The union between male and female remedies the incom-

pleteness each gender feels in isolation. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that this completeness can be achieved through the union of two people of the same sex. Sex is only good if it takes place within the confines of marriage, and marriage between people of the same sex is not allowed.

When the biblical references to homoeroticism are read within this overall context, the Bible's position on same-sex sexual activity becomes very clear: Since homoerotic behavior falls outside of these four biblical affirmations regarding sex and marriage, it is sinful and must be rejected by all Christians (Schmidt [1997] 93-96):

The point is simple, and it runs like a red thread through all the passages. The point is marriage. When biblical writers evaluate any same-sex act . . . in relation to the marital union of male and female, they find that it falls short of the plan of God present from Creation. (Schmidt [1997] 104)

In a similar vein, Richard B. Hays argues that when Paul speaks of people acting contrary to nature (*para physin*), he is appealing to a conception of the world as designed by God and revealed in the Bible. Those who engage in homoerotic behavior are defying the creator and revealing their alienation from God. From Genesis 1 onward the Bible insists that men and women are made for each other and that their sexual desires can only be fulfilled within heterosexual marriage. Thus Hays concludes that while the Churches should support civil rights for homosexuals, homosexual should refrain from homoerotic activity and attempt to live a life of celibacy. This would be in accord with the biblical witness (Hays [1996] 390, 402).

John Stott shares this view. He insists that the negative prohibitions against homosexual activity in the Bible make sense only if read in conjunction with the positive teachings in Genesis about human sexuality and heterosexual marriage. Genesis not only acknowledges the human need for companionship (Gen. 2:18), but also reveals how God has met this need. First God created all the birds and beasts and paraded them before Adam, but no suitable helper was found who could live alongside Adam and be his mate. Consequently, God found it necessary to form woman out of man. Stott does not claim that this account needs to be taken literally. Instead, he believes that it has a deeper symbolic and mythological meaning which reveals God's attitude toward intimate human relationships. In his very act of creation God intended close,

physical, human companionship to consist of intimate relations between a man and a woman (Stott [1998] 32-33), not between people of the same sex. This is borne out by Genesis' description of marriage: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). For Stott this biblical description of marriage shows clearly that

heterosexual intercourse in marriage is more than a union; it is a kind of reunion. It is not a union of alien persons who do not belong to one another and cannot appropriately become one flesh. On the contrary, it is the union of two persons who originally were one, were then separated from each other, and now in the sexual encounter of marriage come together again. (Stott [1998] 34-35)

Stott emphasizes that Jesus himself endorsed this Old Testament view of marriage. In the Gospel according to Matthew Jesus repeats the affirmations contained in Genesis:

He answered, "have you not heard that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' [Gen. 1:27] and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' [Gen. 2:24]? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt. 19:4-6)

In Stott's opinion, Jesus made three statements: (1) God made humans male and female; (2) God said that a man must leave his parents and cleave to his wife; (3) God joins man and woman together in such a way that nobody can separate them. For Stott it is clear that a homoerotic relationship transgresses all three of these divine purposes. Thus it follows that modern homosexual partnerships are essentially incompatible with marriage, the God-ordained context for one-flesh intimacy (Stott [1998] 36, 39).

Reading the Bible from this perspective, Christians like Thomas Schmidt, Richard Hays and John Stott have little difficulty describing homoeroticism as unbiblical and thus incompatible with God's will. Lev. 18:22, 20:13, Rom. 1:26-27, 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10 are short passages that reaffirm the biblical insistence in Genesis that all sexual relationships must take place within the confines of a heterosexual marriage. Seen within this overall context, Paul's statements in Rom. 1:26-27 take on a particular significance. For Schmidt the passage

shows “that same-sex relations are a specific falsification of right behavior (immorality), made possible by the general falsification of right thinking about God (idolatry)” (Schmidt [1997] 101). At the Fall rebellious humanity invented idols, creating a moral vacuum in which homoerotic activity became possible (Schmidt [1997] 103). In short, same-sex sexual activity is a consequence of turning away from God. The solution is to bring people who perpetrate such acts back to God. John Stott recognizes that the Bible only speaks of homoerotic activity and does not really address the question of orientation, but he believes that the Bible’s prohibitions clearly forbid homosexuals from acting out their desires: “We may not blame people for what they are, though we may for what they do” (Stott [1998] 14). Rather than engaging in same-sex sexual relationships, people with homosexual desires should turn to Christ for the power to practice abstinence. Stott insists that homosexuals will only find peace when they learn to follow God’s commandments, for “God’s commands are good and not grievous” (Stott [1998] 70-71). Their homosexual urges will probably remain, but their celibacy will allow them to progress beyond the limited rewards of sexuality to the unlimited rewards of a healthy relationship with God (Stott [1998] 70-75).

Whether one agrees with Schmidt, Hays and Stott or not, they have a point when they argue that the Bible presents a more or less negative view of at least male homoeroticism. However, it is debatable whether this negative view can be applied to female homoeroticism. There is only one passage in the Bible which appears to mention women in this context (Romans 1:26), but it fails to specify whether women are engaging in unnatural heterosexual or homoerotic intercourse. It seems likely that Paul meant women engaged in anal and oral heterosexual copulation. Even if one rejects this interpretation, the ambiguity of the verse must at least be acknowledged. This Schmidt, Hays and Stott fail to do. It seems more appropriate, therefore, to argue that the Bible contains a negative view of male homoeroticism, but is either unclear or silent on the question of female homoeroticism. Nevertheless, another question also needs to be addressed: how relevant and authoritative are the Bible’s statements on homoeroticism for today’s Christians? For Schmidt, Hays and Stott the Bible’s authority on this matter reigns supreme, for someone like Martti Nissinen the matter is not as clear:

Quite possibly no biblical author approved of homoeroticism in any form they knew. To understand this attitude rightly, it is necessary to examine the way they understood same-sex interaction.

The perspective of the biblical texts is clearly centered around physical sexual contacts, the background of which is seen in idolatry or moral corruption and the motivation for which is attributed to excessive lust (Romans 1) or xenophobia (Genesis 19; Judges 19). Love and positive feelings are not mentioned; responsible homosexual partnerships based on love seem to be completely inconceivable.

Nissinen points out that it “would not be fair to claim that Paul would condemn all homosexuality everywhere, always and in every form” (Nissinen [1998] 124). However, he also admits that it is impossible to say what any of the biblical writers would have said had they known what we know today about homosexuality (Nissinen [1998] 125).

**PART II:
WHAT MAKES THE BIBLICAL PASSAGES
ON HOMOEROTICISM AUTHORITATIVE?**

The apparent negative biblical view of male homoeroticism would seem to support the conclusion that Christians should condemn at least male same-sex sexual encounters. The matter, however, is a little more complex. At issue is whether or not these few biblical comments must necessarily be regarded as authoritative for all Christians. Christians, no matter how biblically based they claim to be, invariably highlight certain biblical teachings and downplay or ignore the rest. For instance, although the Holiness Code forbids a man from sleeping with a woman during her menstruation (Lev. 18:19), very few Christians consider this a central biblical injunction which must be followed by all. Indeed, most of the laws, rules and regulations contained in Leviticus are practically ignored by today's Churches. They prefer to stress that aspect of Paul's teaching that claims that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ supercedes and supplants ancient Jewish law. In doing so Christians are re-interpreting the Old Testament according to the teachings of the New Testament. But Christians do not even follow all the teachings of the New Testament. Instead, they grant some passages more authority than others. Take for instance 1 Timothy 2:11-15:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

While for most of their history Christians have used such biblical passages to force women into a subordinate role, the situation has undergone a considerable change in the last few decades. A number of contemporary Churches have begun to grant their female members an unprecedented level of equality. There is New Testament support for such a move: Galatians 3:28 states “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” If one follows the teachings of this passage, then all inequalities between Christians must be removed. If one prefers to highlight 1 Tim. 2:11-15, then the subordination of women is allowed. But even the strongest supporters of 1 Tim. 2:11-15 do not enforce all its teachings: rarely do they link female salvation with childbearing. Christians, whether consciously or unconsciously, do not give equal weight to every biblical teaching. Some are given more authority than others. Furthermore, which teachings are emphasized or ignored differs between communities. Some will prefer to highlight Gal. 3:28, while others will insist that 1 Tim. 2:11-15 should dominate.

The same difficulty affects Christian interpretations of the biblical passages on homoeroticism. Stott insists that these negative prohibitions against same-sex sexual activity only make sense when read in connection with the Bible’s positive teachings about human sexuality and heterosexual marriage in Genesis 1 and 2: “without the wholesome positive teaching of the Bible on sex and marriage, our perspective on the homosexual question is bound to be skewed” (Stott [1998] 30, see also Hays [1996] 390). Stott justifies this interpretive approach by referring to 1 Cor. 6. He notes that after Paul presents his list of wrongdoers (1 Cor. 6:9-10), which may include men who engage in homoerotic activity, he directly quotes Gen. 2:24 in v. 17: “The two shall be one flesh.” This indicates that references to homoeroticism must be read within the context of Genesis 1 and 2. But is Stott correct? Is this really the only valid way to read the Bible on homoeroticism? As already mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* that appear in 1 Cor. 6:9-10 are difficult to translate and may or may not refer to some kind of male homoerotic activity. Furthermore, nowhere in his letters does Paul state explicitly that his statements on male same-sex sexual encounters must be read within the context of Genesis 1 and 2. Stott suggests that Paul’s quoting of Gen. 2:24 implies as much, but that is a matter of interpretation. The quotation itself is sandwiched

in a section which appears to be more about heterosexual misdeeds than homoerotic ones. What is important to remember is that it is Stott, not the Bible, who says that the homoerotic question must be read within the context of Genesis 1 and 2. Martti Nissinen, in contrast, prefers to use a very different interpretive approach. He suggests that the key interpretive framework for understanding these passages on homoeroticism is the fundamental biblical teaching of love: "In Christian communities, no one denies that love is the preferred and desired attitude toward other human beings." However, understanding the nature of this love is often very difficult. The catchphrase 'love the sinner, hate the sin' is merely a superficial representation at best. Love is also not the same thing as tolerance:

The one who tolerates is seen as above the other. The distance and difference between the self and the other remains, because the need to tolerate requires that there is something wrong with the other person. Love, on the other hand, means stepping into another person's shoes, carrying his or her load, suffering together (*sympathein*). Love is not about striving toward objective good but about putting oneself at risk for another human being. (Nissinen [1998] 139)

Nissinen insists that the command to love in this manner is decisive for Christian morality. It is also the central interpretive principle for understanding all biblical commands, advice and ideals:

The New Testament emphatically asserts, in the mouths of both Jesus and Paul, that the entire law depends on the commandment of love, that love fulfills the whole Law, and that the one who loves has fulfilled the Law (Matt. 22:34-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14). This applies also to the passages in the Bible that refer to homoeroticism. Making love a priority in applying these texts in real life does not imply all-accepting "tolerance" or the altering of God's word. To give love priority in biblical interpretation means careful examination of both the Bible and the prevailing reality in which we live with neighbors of flesh and blood. (Nissinen [1998] 140)

When Christians follow this commandment to love, they leave behind the traditional paternalistic and externalizing attitudes that shape so much of human society. Instead they are forced to look at themselves in

the mirror and ask why they are bothered by homoerotic activity (Nissinen [1998] 140). They begin a journey of self-discovery. So, whose interpretive approach is correct? Stott's insistence that the biblical passages on homoeroticism must be understood within the context of Genesis 1 and 2, or Nissinen's argument that the commandment of love should dominate? Both could be correct, or both could be wrong. It depends on which interpretive framework is regarded as authoritative by the Christian community.

Attempts to construct and uphold these kinds of interpretive frameworks can be found throughout Christian history. Even in the early Church it was soon realized that some form of interpretive guidelines and authority were needed if Christianity was not to deteriorate into a plethora of competing sects. Within twenty years of Jesus' crucifixion his followers were already squabbling over whether Gentile converts should be required to undergo circumcision and adopt Jewish purity codes. In order to at least partially resolve this issue, the leaders of the earliest Christians gathered in Jerusalem around 49 CE and decided that Gentile converts would not have to adopt Jewish customs as long as they avoided impurities which particularly offended their Jewish-Christian brethren (Acts 15:1-21; Gal. 2:1-14). This so-called Council of Jerusalem is considered by many Christians to have been the first Church council. What is noteworthy is that at this early phase in their history Christians found it necessary to form some kind of authoritative body to clarify disputed issues of faith and practice. In the following centuries councils developed into formal meetings between bishops and Church representatives for the purpose of regulating Christian doctrine and discipline. Councils even played a role in the formation of the New Testament, which took shape because there already existed a Christian community that could determine which works should and should not belong in it. The first Christians did not have a New Testament; their scriptures were what are now called the Old Testament. However, new written works appeared almost immediately, and Christians began to single out certain writings as more authoritative than others. In general, it seems that twenty-two of the twenty-seven books acknowledged by Christians today were accepted in the Western Church by 200 CE. Other works took more time. The Letter to the Hebrews, for instance, did not find a place until the fourth century. There was also some ambivalence over the number of apocalypses. The Revelation of John was accepted, but some Christians wanted to include the Revelation of Peter and the Shepherd of Hermas. A probable later addition (though still from the fourth century) to the canons of the Synod of Laodicea (363

CE) lists all the books of the present New Testament except the Revelation of John. The Council of Hippo in Africa (393 CE) and the Synod of Carthage (397 CE) listed all twenty-seven books of today's New Testament. These councils and synods did not so much form the New Testament as recognize views about its content that had taken shape over centuries of Church usage (Ewert (1983) 126-129; Goodspeed (1962) 68). Nevertheless, they highlight the fact that the early Christian communities expressed and understood their faith within a particular interpretive framework which, over time, allowed them to determine which books belonged in the New Testament.

This interpretive framework, however, could only exist with the help of some kind of authoritative structure. Very early on in their history Christians realized that an authority beyond the general community and the scriptures was needed to ensure the Church's faithfulness to the teachings of the Apostles. The Bible alone could be interpreted in many different ways; how was the Church to determine which interpretation was correct? Slowly there began to appear the theory that the Church's ministers, by virtue of their endowment with the Holy Spirit, were the divinely authorized custodians of apostolic teachings. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Clement of Rome (fl. c. 96 CE) expressed the conviction that Christ had appointed the Apostles to proclaim his message, and that these Apostles had subsequently commissioned bishops and deacons to continue the work. The Church had a duty to remain obedient to its clergy (Clement [1968] chps 42, 47). Both Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200) and Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225) considered Christ himself to be the ultimate source of Christian doctrine, but they thought this revelation had been entrusted to his Apostles, and through them alone could knowledge of this revelation be obtained. Tertullian insisted that Christians could not pick and choose doctrines according to their whims; they had to follow the Apostles' teachings. Any doctrine had to demonstrate "its origin in the tradition of the apostles . . ." (Tertullian [1973] chp. 6). Irenaeus claimed that no matter how much Christians differ in language or intelligence, the force of tradition must remain the same. In his argument with the Gnostics he described this tradition as the Church's oral teaching and distinguished it from the teachings contained in scripture. But where in practice was this apostolic testimony or tradition located? Irenaeus placed it in the Church that had maintained the unbroken linear succession of bishops going back to the Apostles themselves. The Holy Spirit ensured that these bishops were endowed with an infallible charism of truth. Only those Churches sustained and led by bishops in apostolic succession could determine doctrine and thus biblical inter-

pretation. Correct exegesis was the sole prerogative of the Church, and this Church only existed where the apostolic succession of bishops had been kept intact (Stevenson [1987] 111-115).

Designating the bishops as the Church's ruling authority, however, did not completely resolve matters of Church teaching. It became apparent that some kind of doctrinal standards were also required to ensure orthodoxy and set the limits of acceptable biblical interpretation. In the early Church these took the form of creeds that were formulated by large gatherings of bishops in councils. The most famous of these creeds is the Constantinopolitan-Nicene Creed, commonly known as the Nicene Creed. It was first formulated at the Council of Nicea in 325 and reached its final shape at the Council of Constantinople in 381. It is still used today by Zwinglians, Calvinists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox (Marthaler [1987] 261-264). Throughout their history Christians have summarized their central beliefs in creeds, confessions, articles and catechism. Even denominations that insist that the Bible is the only authority have felt it necessary to outline their beliefs and practices in separate documents. These documents often became rules of faith for Church members. During the Reformation there was a proliferation of creed making. Among the most famous are the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530, which stated very clearly the fundamental Lutheran doctrines, and the Reformed movement's Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, which, among other things, paid close attention to the issues of worship, Church ministry and the ordering of life in marriage. Since only the Bible had supreme authority, none of these confessions was considered to be set in stone (Leith [1973] 61, 127). Nevertheless, they provided interpretive guidelines for how the Bible was to be read and understood. In England the 39 Articles came to play a similar, if not equally comprehensive, role. They were a revision of the 42 Articles of 1553, which were largely the work of Archbishop Cranmer. Promulgated in 1563 by Convocation as part of the Elizabethan Settlement, they reached their final form in 1571. Rather than being a statement of Christian doctrine in the form of a creed, the 39 Articles were short summaries of dogmatic tenets, each addressing some controversial point of the Reformation. They were neither as comprehensive as many mainland European creeds, nor did they have the full authority that was given to the Lutheran and Reformed confessions (Leith [1973] 266). Nevertheless, until 1865 Church of England clergy were required to affirm each specific article.

These examples illustrate that throughout Christian history the Bible has always been interpreted according to certain doctrinal and confes-

sional guidelines. Not all biblical passages have been given equal weight and authority. Some have been highlighted and others have been played down or even ignored. Only by doing so could the Christians make sense of what is a large and often contradictory document. Christians have been aware of this fact for centuries. In his highly influential work *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Richard Hooker (c. 1554-1600) rejected the notion that scripture is and must be treated as the only source of human wisdom and knowledge. To limit oneself solely to the Bible was to cut oneself off from the many other ways God imparts his will to humanity. Hooker argued that on its own the Bible is not only unclear, but does not even explain why it should have any spiritual significance. The only reason why people accept the authority of the scriptures is because there is another authority which tells them to do so. Hooker located this authority in the Church's episcopal tradition. Bishops were men who have received authority from God to apply their reason to understanding and clarifying scripture. Through their teachings people know that the Bible is authoritative and are able to make sense of its contents. Nevertheless, Hooker was careful not to subordinate completely scripture to other forms of authority. He continued to emphasize that while scripture may require external clarifications, it can and must act in its own right as a powerful source of negative criticism within the Church (Hooker [1875] II, i, 4; ii, 2-3; iv, 2; v, 1; vii, 3-5; V, lxxvii, 1-2; lxxxii, 12).

But Hooker's work also highlights the complicated relationship that exists between interpretive authority and scripture. While Hooker placed Church authority firmly in the hands of the bishops, he acknowledged that the bishops could fall into error and consequently needed to be open to criticism and correction. There was an alternative source of authority which acted as a corrective when bishops made false decisions or abused their power. He located this corrective authority in the reading, or at least open hearing, of the Bible by every Church member. For Hooker the reading of scripture was an important part of Church life because the Bible furnished even the most mundane lay persons with the means to evaluate what they had been taught by their leader. Hooker may have been wary of people reading the Bible on their own without the guidance of Church leaders and traditions, but he did see the scriptures as functioning as a source of negative criticism: nothing could be tolerated which openly contradicted scripture (Hooker [1875] Preface, viii, 7; II, v, 1; vii, 5; V, xxii, 2). What Hooker realized is that there is no clear cut way in which the exact meaning of scripture can be determined and maintained. Traditions and authoritative structures can help make

sense of an otherwise large, unwieldy and at times self-contradictory document, but the document itself has the potential to challenge and undermine any existing interpretive framework or authority. Neither the Church nor the Bible are monolithic structures in which one unchanging tradition, authority structures and biblical interpretations are maintained. Rather there is a constant tension between the Bible, community, tradition and leadership, and all four are constantly changing.

With regard to homosexuality and homoeroticism, it is simply not enough to ask what the Bible says. Far more complex issues of tradition and authority must also be addressed. What role have these few biblical passages played in the history of the Churches' attitudes towards homosexuals? Have they been central or peripheral? How have the interpretations of these passages changed over time? Furthermore, how have the Churches exercised authority to ensure doctrinal and ethical uniformity within their communities? Depending on tradition and the practice of authority, these biblical passages on homoeroticism can be an unequivocal condemnation of homoeroticism, or peripheral statements which are overruled by other biblical, ecclesiastical, social or experiential concerns.

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