HOMOSEXUALITY ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE:

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE POSITION OF THE FREE METHODIST CHURCH

ON SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

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Like all Christian bodies, the Free Methodist Church is presently confronted with the necessity of responding to strong cultural pressures to accept homosexual relationships, especially those described as "monogamous, covenantal partnerships." The recent move to legalize "gay marriage" in many states (and nations) has provided the impetus to address this matter with urgency, intentionality, and careful deliberation.

The biblical understanding and evaluation of homosexuality stand at the center of the Church's response. This centrality of the Bible in the current discussion stems from two considerations. First, the Christian Church in general and the Free Methodist Church in particular hold the Bible to be the ultimate authority in all matters pertaining to faith and conduct. Indeed, the refusal to accept homosexuality in the Christian tradition throughout history derives from the biblical witness. Second, the Bible's consistent negative appraisal of homosexuality is the primary obstacle to the acceptance of homosexuality by the majority of contemporary Christians and Christian bodies.

A proper examination of the biblical position will be sensitive to both exegetical and hermeneutical issues. In an effort to acknowledge the historical and incarnational character of the Scriptures, an appropriate examination will carefully pursue the exegesis, or interpretation, of relevant passages in order to ascertain how the inspired authors intended that the original readers in their own historical contexts should understand these passages. But such an examination will recognize also that the Bible is more than an amalgam of passages. The Bible is canonical Scripture, which implies a profound unity and a functional interaction among its passages. Thus, it is necessary to note the

connections between the various biblical passages that address, either directly or indirectly, same-sex relationships so as to ascertain the specific contours of the position of the Bible in its entirety. Moreover, the Bible as canonical Scripture functions as *norma normans* (norming norm), establishing the standard for the Church's life and faith for every generation throughout history; and thus the Bible's canonical role requires us also to assess how these biblical injunctions and perspectives can, from the perspective of the biblical witness in its entirety, be legitimately applied to the issue of committed, monogamous homosexual relationships/partnerships in our own day.

Throughout the history of the Church, and in large measure even into the present time, a broad consensus has existed around the interpretation of biblical passages dealing with homosexuality. This consensus has recently been challenged by a few revisionist voices. But in spite of the attention they receive, the number of these revisionist interpreters is relatively small; and their arguments have generally been rejected by the majority of biblical scholarship. In the past several years scholarly treatments on the issue of homosexuality and on the biblical passages related to it have multiplied exponentially; a vast literature has emerged. Therefore, given the limited scope of this paper it is both unnecessary and impossible to repeat here the detailed examination of the relevant passages. This paper includes only brief exegetical discussions of the pertinent texts, followed by a short synthetic conclusion and finally a bibliography of fuller treatments.

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25

This first set of passages actually makes no explicit mention of homosexuality. But in some ways these texts offer the most significant indications of the biblical perspective on homosexuality, since they present the fundamental framework for human sexuality. The whole of Gen. 1-3 functions as a

"foundational narrative," whose purpose is to set forth not only the origins of the cosmos and more specifically of the human race, but also the divine purpose and design for humanity.[1]

The account of creation as presented in 1:1-2:3 reaches its climax in the creation of human beings (אדם/*'adam*) in 1:26-30. [2] The passage itself moves from the creation of humanity (1:26-27) to the blessing and provision for humanity (1:28- 30). The passage begins with the divine intention to make humankind after the "image" and "likeness" of God, concepts that the writer develops in terms of dominion over the animals (1:26), followed by the actual implementation of this intention, where reference to the "image" of God is repeated and is further developed in terms of male and female: "So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (1:27). [3] The meaning of image/likeness of God has been debated over the centuries. [4] For our purposes it is important to note only that this passage links the divine image with "male and female." When we read this passage in light of the second account of creation in Gen. 2 it appears likely that the image of God involves not only humanity's role of representing God (in God's capacity as caring sovereign Lord) to creation at large, or the ability to address and be addressed by God, i.e., to have interpersonal relationship with God, but also the experience of full and rewarding heterosexual union.[5] Indeed, the structure of this passage suggests that even as God is profoundly relational in that God

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[1] As Jesus himself recognized in Mark 10:2-9par.

[2] This climactic ordering is suggested not only by the consideration that the creation of humanity stands at the culmination of God's fabricating work within Gen. 1, but also by the observations that the keyword ברא/*bara'*, which features so prominently in the superscription of Gen. 1:1 ("God *created*"), is repeated three times in 1:27, and that humankind is created in the "image" and "likeness" of God. In addition, scholars have noted that those features of creation that pertain especially to human habitation and life (1:9-13) receive fuller treatment than do those that are less directly connected to human existence. See , e.g., Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), 27.

[3] Unless indicated otherwise, the NRSV is employed.

[4] A helpful survey of views regarding the image/likeness of God is found in Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 29-32.

[5] This reference to heterosexual union is of course linked to procreation (v. 28), but is not limited to it in such a way as to suggest that heterosexual union exists only for the purpose of procreation. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the writer has separated v. 27 and v. 28 by the statement at the beginning of v. 28: "And God blessed them, and God said to them…" and by the fact that procreation is not mentioned at all in the creation of the woman in Gen. 2.

realizes God's own divine impulses through the creation of the world and especially of humanity, so humans realize the image of God as they live in relationship to others, and especially in the relationship between male and female.[6]

The story of the creation of humanity in Gen. 1 receives fuller treatment in Gen. 2: 18-25. In Gen. 2, as in Gen. 1, the focus of God's creative work is upon humanity. But here the climax is reached with the creation of the woman who completes that which was lacking in the creation of the male. In Gen. 2:18 God declares that "It is not good that the man should be alone," a statement standing in stark contrast to God's repeated declarations of the goodness of creation in Gen. 1, and especially Gen. 1:31: "And God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good." God then attempts to address this gaping deficiency in the goodness of God's creation by making a "helper fit for him." The word "helper" (עזר/*'ezer*) denotes not simply "help at work" but rather "support in the broad sense,"[7] i.e., an enabling to live out existence in this world in the fullest and most successful way. This helper is to be "fit for him," a word that suggests "complementarity rather than identity."[8] The animals clearly will not fulfill this role (vv. 19-20); and consequently God creates the woman from the man's ribs (vv. 21-22), followed by a final inference drawn by the narrator: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother, and they become one flesh." Heterosexual marriage, then, is a uniting constituting anthropological wholeness.[9]

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[6] See, e.g., Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 60: "By God's will man is not created alone but designated for the 'thou' of the other sex. The idea of man…finds its full meaning not in the male alone but in man and woman." See also the trenchant comments by Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 160: "A consequence of this is that there can be no question of an 'essence of man ' apart from the existence as two sexes. Humanity exists in community, as one beside the other, and there can only be anything like humanity and human relations where the human species exists in twos. W. Zimmerli is exaggerating when he writes in his commentary: 'A human being in isolation is only half a human being.' A lone human being remains a complete human being in his lonesomeness."

[7] Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 227.

[8] Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 68: "As Delitzsch…observes, if identity were meant, the more natural phrase would be 'like him,' כמוהו ."

[9] Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 61.

Gen. 19:4-11/Judges 19:22-26

These passages offer the first explicit reference to homosexual behavior in the Bible.[10] In Gen. 18 Abraham is visited by three men who turn out to be three angels, or more precisely two angels and Yahweh, who promise that Sarah will bear a son to Abraham a year hence. As the men are about to leave Yahweh reveals to Abraham his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah "because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave" (18:20); and the following verses continue the dark portrait of the Sodomites by repeatedly describing them as "wicked." When the two angels come to Sodom they encounter Lot, Abraham's nephew, who insists they lodge with him, presumably in accord with the standards of hospitality so characteristic of the culture of the Ancient Near East.[11] But just as the guests were about to retire "the men of the city…both young and old, all the people to the last man" assemble and call to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them" (19:4-5). Lot refuses, describing their proposed actions as being "wickedly," and offers his daughters instead since the men "have come under the shelter of my roof" (an act that raises its own problems regarding treatment of women).[12] Rebuffing this offer, the men of the city threaten to "deal worse with [Lot] than with them" (19:6-9) and are subsequently struck blind to await the destruction of the city the next morning (16:10-23).

[10] Some have argued that the story of Ham "seeing his father naked" in Gen. 9:20-28 describes Ham's homosexual rape of his father; e.g., Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 63-71; Donald J. Wold, *Out of Order: Homosexuality and the Bible in the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 65-76. In my judgment a strong case can be made for this interpretation; but in the final analysis the evidence is lacking for a firm conclusion.
[11] The same display of hospitality is found in Abraham's actions towards his guests at the beginning of Gen. 18.
[12] See the helpful discussion of the appalling demeaning of women on the part of Lot in Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First* Story (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 56-67; and for the even more horrendous account of sexual violence against women in Judges 19 see Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old* Testament (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 35-67.

The claim that the word "know" (ידע /*yada'*) does not refer to sexual intercourse but involves simply their inquiring after the identity of the men[13] is without foundation and founders on the fact that the very same word is used in v. 8 where it clearly refers to sexual intercourse, the observation that Lot considered their intention to be a wicked act (v. 7), and the consideration that this word is the typical expression in the Hebrew Bible for sexual intercourse.

More substantial are the arguments that the issue here is not actually homosexual intercourse but rather breach of hospitality or perhaps gang rape. Without doubt the men of Sodom violated cultural standards of hospitality; but such violation of cultural standards could hardly be described as great wickedness. That the issue in question is gang rape may be suggested by the similar story in Judges 19:22-26. And it is true that subsequent references to Sodom in the Bible do not clearly describe their sins in terms of homosexuality.[14] Nevertheless, when one reads this story in light of the entire Old Testament canon, especially the creation accounts of Gen. 1-3 and the prohibitions of homosexual intercourse in Lev. 18 and 20, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at least part of the wickedness of the Sodomites involved homosexual relations.[15]

Lev. 18:22/20:13

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[13] D. S. Bailey, *Christianity and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955), 3-4; Bailey is followed by John J. McNeil, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1976), 54-55; John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 93-94; and Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is The Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response,* rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), 57.

[14] In Isaiah 1:7-17 the sins of Sodom seem to be violence and oppression of the poor; in Ez. 16:49-50 the sins of the city are described as pride and disregard to the poor and needy; the reference to "unnatural lust" on the part of the Sodomites in Jude 7 (literally "went after other [or other kind of] flesh") may well refer to intercourse with angels (see the immediate context, esp. vv. 5-7, 8-10); and the reference to their "lawless deeds" in 2 Peter 2:8 is a general description of evil. See Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 79-91 for arguments that at least some of these passages refer to homosexuality.

[15] Later Jewish interpreters understood the sin of the Sodomites as (attempted) homosexual intercourse. See Philo, O*n Abraham* 133-41; *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 4:37; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 1.194-95, 200-201.

With these passages we have the only direct biblical prohibitions of homosexual intercourse.[16] Various pagan practices are condemned in Lev. 18; these same practices are described again in Lev. 20, but there with penalties added. Lev. 18:22 explicitly prohibits homosexual intercourse: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." Lev. 20:13 declares: "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them."

Lev. 18 is framed by strong admonitions to avoid the practices of the Egyptians and the Canaanites and instead orient behavior around the statutes of Yahweh (18:1-5, 24-30), with the warning that to pursue these behaviors is a matter of "abomination" and will result in the defilement of the land and in Israel's being cast out of the land. The close association of land and covenant in the Old Testament indicates that these behaviors involve essential covenant violation. The specific behaviors sandwiched between this framing include incest (18:6-18), intercourse during menstruation (18:19), adultery (18:20), devotion of children to Molech (18:21), homosexual intercourse (18:22), and bestiality (18:23). Some scholars have argued that because the prohibition regarding homosexuality comes immediately after the warning not to participate in the Molech cult we are to understand the real issue in the homosexual prohibition to be idolatry and not sexual immorality;[17] and, indeed, the Old Testament does otherwise prohibit male cult prostitution.[18] But in Lev. 20 the prohibition against participation in the Molech cult is separated from the homosexual prohibition by many verses; and the arrangement of the prohibitions in Lev. 18 is explicable on other grounds.[19]

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[16] 1 Cor. 6:9, 1 Tim. 1:10, and Rom. 1:26-28 contain indirect prohibitions.
[17] E.g; Scanzoni and Mollenkott, *Is The Homosexual My Neighbor?,* 63-66; Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 100-102; contra Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 149-59.
[18] See, e.g., Deut. 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7.
[19] See, e.g., William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 196-201.

This discussion of the relationship between the prohibition of homosexual conduct and idolatry raises the issue of the motive, or reason, behind the prohibition of homosexuality. Some have suggested that procreation is the concern lying behind all the prohibitions found throughout Lev. 18, and that the objectionable character of these behaviors thus has to do with the wasting of semen;[20] the inference, then, is that insofar as we no longer consider sexual intercourse to be limited to the function of procreation these prohibitions are irrelevant for us. Others have argued that the motive lying behind these prohibitions is the mixing of semen with other (defiling) substances, e.g., menstrual blood or excrement (in the case of anal penetration in homosexual intercourse), thus rendering the issue one of ritual or cultic purity;[21] the inference here is that these prohibitions are no longer applicable for Christians who follow Jesus and Paul[22] in their rejection of the continuing relevance of purity laws. But each of these suggestions fails to account for all of the prohibitions or for the language used within the chapter to describe these prohibitions. The conclusion that best fits the data is the one put forward by the noted anthropologist Mary Douglas, and adopted by several biblical scholars, viz., that the issue behind all these prohibitions, including homosexuality, is the transgression of divinely established boundaries which correspond to the natural world and/or support social stability, particularly healthy family structures.[23] This view supports the continuing applicability of the prohibitions, since the natural

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[20] E.g., Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1567-68. Milgrom himself indicates one problem with this position, viz.,masturbation is prohibited neither here nor elsewhere in the Old Testament. A possible support for the hypothesis that the issue involves the waste of semen is the consideration that lesbian relationships are not forbidden here (or elsewhere in the Old Testament). But the omission of any reference to lesbianism is more likely due to the fact that the emphasis is here upon actual sexual intercourse, which in the Ancient Near East was assumed to involve penetration by the penis. It is possible, too, that lesbianism was virtually unknown in Israel or the Ancient Near East generally; we have virtually no references to lesbianism in ANE material. See Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 142-46.

[21] E.g., Stephen F. Bigger, "The Family Laws of Leviticus 18 in Their Setting," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979): 202-203.

[22] E.g., Mark 7:19; Acts 15:1-35; Gal. 3:1-5:15.

[23] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); ibid., *Natural Symbols* (New York: Vintage, 1973); Wold, *Out of Order*, 91-100; T. M. Thurston, "Leviticus 22 and the Problem of Homosexual Acts," in *Homophobia and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Michael L. Stemmeler and J. Michael Clark (Dallas: Monument, 1990), 7-23; Innocent Himbaza, Adrien Schenker, and Jean-Baptist Edart, *The Bible on the Question of Homosexuality* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 45-71. For a survey of various

world remains constant as do (arguably) the fundamental human dynamics that make possible family stability and health.[24]

Three further considerations argue in favor of the continuing applicability of the prohibition of homosexual intercourse in Lev. 18 and 22. First, the passage employs strong language to describe the censure of this activity: "abomination" (תבל /*tebel*), defined by Holladay as "abominable confusion, contamination."[25] Second, the sanction imposed upon this behavior in Lev. 20 is extreme: death. Generally speaking, the more severe the sanction or penalty for an action, the more likely it is that the prohibition should be considered transcendent and transcultural, legitimately applicable in other times and places.[26] Third, this strong prohibition against all homosexual activity is unique among the cultures of the Ancient Near East. Homosexual relations between consenting adults of equal social standing were accepted by Israel's neighbors within the Ancient Near East; social stigmatization and legal sanctions were imposed only in cases involving compulsion, especially between persons of power and those of lower social standing (such as between adults and adolescents).[27] Among the nations of the

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possible motives/reasons behind the prohibitions of Lev. 18 see Saul Olyan, "'And with a Male You Shall Not Lie the Lying Down of a Woman:' On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994): 179-206.

[24] The only prohibition in Lev. 18 and 20 that is not taken up and affirmed in the New Testament nor considered by the Church to be binding is that pertaining to intercourse with a menstruating woman. But the purpose behind this command may have been to remind Israel that sexuality, and particularly sexual intercourse, are under the control and prerogative of Yahweh and that there is in fact a sacred aspect to sexual relations. Thus Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 138: "The menstrual period was the time that God had given women to cleanse their bodies from impurity as a prelude to renewing a cycle of fertility (a sabbath of sorts from sex). It was not the time for men to intrude with procreative designs. Deliberate intercourse during a menstrual period not only had the effect of 'wasting seed' but also of putting one's own desires at cross-purposes with God's timing. Men were required to exercise self-restraint and wait for divinely created processes to run their course."

[25] William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 386.

[26] Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, 172-79.

[27] See, e.g., Wold, *Out of Order*, 29-61; Gordon Wenham, "The Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," *Expository Times* 102 (1991): 359-61. In this connection one should note that the general term "male"(זכר/*zakar*) over against other terms that would suggest a youth or person of lower standing (e.g., נַעַר/*na'ar* "youth") indicates that the issue here is not compulsion or abuse of power; this conclusion is also substantiated by the wording of Lev. 20:13, particularly "*both* of them have committed an abomination," by the penalty that *both* of them are to be put to death, and by the suggestion of intentional choice on the part of both parties: "their blood is upon them."

Ancient Near East only Israel forbade the general practice of homosexual intercourse. Gordon Wenham summarizes the situation thus:

> The Old Testament rejection of all kinds of homosexual practice is apparently unique in the ancient world. Most of the ancient near East adopted an attitude to homosexuality very similar to that of classical Greece and Rome which simply accepted it as long as it was done among consenting adults.[28]

Scholars generally accept the principle that biblical statements or teachings that stand in continuity with the practices of surrounding culture(s) ("paracultural") are more likely to be situation-bound, i.e., so closely bound to the original historical situation as not to be legitimately applicable in other times and places; while those statements or teachings that are unique or discontinuous with the practice of the surrounding culture(s) ("countercultural") are more likely to be transcendent, i.e., directly applicable to other times and places, including our own.[29]

Of course, the fact that something was prohibited in the Old Testament does not necessarily mean that it is proscribed for Christians today. The prohibition of sexual relations with a menstruating woman, for example, carries a severe penalty according to Lev. 20:18 ("both of them shall be cut off from among their people"); yet the Church has not condemned this practice. One must take into account the "progress of revelation,"

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[28] Wenham, "Old Testament Attitude to Homosexuality," 360. Wenham examines the attitudes towards homosexuality in Assyria, Egypt, and among the Hittites, but acknowledges that Ugaritic texts do not provide us with any evidence from the Canaanites. Yet the framing of Lev. 18 with references to avoiding the sins of the Canaanites suggests that those behaviors prohibited throughout the chapter, including homosexuality, were practiced among the Canaanites.

[29] Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, 157-62; William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 494-95.

particularly the movement from Old Testament preparation to New Testament fulfillment. We turn now to the witness of the New Testament.[30]

Rom. 1:26-27

This passage offers the most explicit and complete repudiation of homosexual relationships found in the Bible, and the only direct biblical mention of lesbianism.[31] It is important, of course, to set this passage within its context. Paul pronounces the thesis of his theological argument in 1:16-17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by his faith.'" Paul then supports and explicates this claim throughout the remainder of the theological discussion that concludes with 11:36. This theological discussion itself moves from the problem of universal sin and consequent judgment (1:18-3:20) to the solution of the gospel which offers free, justifying grace through faith (3:21-11:36). More specifically, within 1:18-3:20 Paul shows that Gentiles (1:18-32) and Jews (2:1-3:8) stand under the righteous judgment of God, finally drawing the general conclusion that all humankind is guilty before God (3:9-20). Rom. 1:18-32 is therefore not primarily concerned with

[30] Some scholars find references to homosexuality in other Old Testament passages. E.g., Tom Horner, *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Bible Times* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) perceives homoerotic indications in the relationship between Jonathan and David and between Ruth and Naomi. But his arguments are forced; and virtually no scholars have accepted his conclusions. Moreover, Horner locates these indications of homosexuality only within the earlier stages of the tradition and insists that they have been modified or largely obliterated in the final canonical form of the text. For arguments against Horner's position see Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 164-70.

[31] Lesbianism received very little attention in the Greco-Roman world, probably due to the great repugnance with which it was held. While a range of views regarding male homosexuality (particularly pederasty) existed in the Greco-Roman world, from acceptance and celebration to rejection as "against nature" (especially by the Stoics), the attitude toward female homoeroticism seems to have been entirely negative. Paul may therefore have included mention of lesbianism here in order to contribute to his portrait of shocking behavior within Gentile culture and in order to make clear that women as well as men participated in the rejection of the revelation of the God of nature. See Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 174-75, 178.

homosexuality; rather, homosexuality is mentioned as part of Paul's moral condemnation of the Gentile world.

The structure of 1:18-32 is straightforward. The thesis is found in 1:18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth." Paul then supports the claim of wickedness by his condemnation of idolatry in 1:19-23. He goes on to support the claim of divine wrath by his threefold insistence that "God gave them up," firstly to the lusts of their hearts and the degrading of their bodies (1:24), to which he offers no specifics; secondly to "degrading passions" (1:26), offering the specific example of homosexuality; and thirdly to "a debased mind and things that should not be done" (1:28), to which he provides the specifics of an extended vice list.[32] Paul makes explicit the connection between pagan idolatry and homosexuality by the link-phrase "they exchanged" (1:23, 25, 26).

Four points emerge from this passage. First, Paul seems to discuss homosexuality here because the Jews considered it to be a particularly vivid example of Gentile debauchery. Homosexuality was virtually unknown among Jews;[33] but it was often discussed by Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews as characteristic of Gentile abominations. Thus, Paul does not describe homosexuality here because it is the most egregious of all sins but rather because its mention contributes to his argument that Gentiles have deliberately turned their back upon the revelation of God made manifest in creation. Paul chooses to focus on homosexuality in this passage also because such behavior expresses particularly well the essence of idolatry, viz., the rejection of the God

[32] See Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 113-14.
[33] Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 159-183; Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 66-98.

who reveals God's self precisely through creation. Since homosexuality contradicts nature in that it does not contribute to procreation it demonstrably stems from a rejection of nature and finally a rejection of nature's God. As Richard Hays puts it: "The refusal to acknowledge God as Creator ends in blind distortion of the creation."[34]

Second, according to this passage homosexual behavior and passions are not causes of divine wrath, but constitute the effect of God's wrath.[35] Here we note the causal connections in 1:24-26, and the repeated refrain: "God gave them up…." Homosexual behavior and passions are thus a judgmental effect of humanity's rebellious ignorance of the God who has revealed God's self in creation. Paul insists that homosexual passions and behavior are a judgment unto themselves. It is important to recognize that Paul is describing the wrath of God upon the world, and especially the Gentile world, as a whole, and is not suggesting that those who practice homosexuality are themselves, as individuals, more ignorant, more guilty, or deserving of greater judgment than is the case with other Gentiles. Rather, the fact that this type of behavior, which from the Jewish perspective is debasing and self-destructive, characterizes Gentile culture (and specifically, in Paul's world, Greco-Roman culture) is proof that God's wrath is being expressed upon that portion of humanity that is dependent entirely upon the revelation of God through nature and that has, in willful ignorance, rejected this revelation of God. Of course, the consideration that this behavior is a manifestation of divine wrath also clearly implies that it is contrary to God's will. Thus, although Paul is not here directly or explicitly forbidding such behavior,

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[34] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 385. Note also the fine statement from Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 111: "the refusal to 'know God' brings in its turn a false knowledge of the entire creation, including a false knowledge of the human self."

[35] Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 47-48; Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 385-86.

his argument allows no other conclusion than its repugnance to God and its proper repudiation by the Christian community. Indeed, this experience of present divine wrath points ahead toward future eschatological wrath (cf. 2:5-16). [36]

Third, this passage insists that homosexual behavior is improper precisely because it is "against nature" (παρα φυσιν/*para phusin*) rather than according to nature (1:26-27). Although some have recently argued that this phrase refers to "constitutional heterosexuals" who deny their own heterosexual nature when they engage in homosexual acts that are unnatural to them,[37] this expression was typically used by those Greek philosophers (especially Stoics) who opposed homosexuality to describe homosexual behavior in its contradiction to physical nature. Hellenistic Jews, such as Philo and Josephus, adopted this language in their insistence that the Jewish Scriptures also considered homosexuality as contrary to creation.[38] In the present passage Paul combines this expression with language that is reminiscent of the creation account of Gen. 1-3 [39] in order to make it clear that such behavior contradicts the very structure of creation.

Among Greek and Hellenistic Jewish writers the claim that homosexual behavior was contrary to nature seems to have been an inference from the impossibility of procreation.[40] But Paul elsewhere does not discuss the value of heterosexual marriage

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[36] Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 99-103; Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 246-70.
[37] E.g., Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, 109-13.
[38] Wold, *Out of Order*, 180-86; Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 254-70; Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 387.
[39] Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 386, 404-405.
[40] Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, insists throughout that the basis of this claim is not only the impossibility of procreation but also the complementarity of male and female anatomy (i.e., genitalia). Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 286, also mentions the argument from anatomy. But in spite of the fact that the argument from anatomy has intuitive merit, neither Gagnon nor Fitzmyer offers

in terms of procreation but rather in terms of holistic personal and inter-personal fulfillment (e.g., Eph. 5:25-33). Paul seems to base the creation-appropriateness of heterosexual relations in the possibility of procreation, but does not restrict heterosexual relationship to the purpose of procreation.[41] Paul therefore apparently understands procreation as an "index" to broader natural realities, and combines this insight with the heterosexual purpose within God's creating activity as set forth in Gen. 1-3. The logic of Paul's argument requires us to conclude that his objections to homosexuality continue to be applicable as long as creation itself continues.

It is appropriate to mention here that some scholars have argued that since homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world was almost entirely limited to pederasty (i.e., sexual relations between adult males and adolescent male youths) Paul is objecting not to homosexuality among consenting adults but to pederasty, particularly because of its potential for abuse and humiliation of the submissive partner.[42] But the consideration that Paul's argument here makes no mention of these issues of power but rather focuses upon the "unnatural" character of homosexual behavior indicates that this interpretation is problematic and without foundation. Moreover, Paul's reference to lesbianism here also undercuts the notion that the issue of this passage is pederasty. And finally, the fact that Paul mentions homosexual passions and not merely overt activity suggests the issue for Paul is not limited to abusive or dominating behavior.

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any specific proof from ancient sources of the argument from anatomy; and I am aware of no references to the argument from anatomy in the primary sources from the Greco-Roman world. Therefore, the claim that homosexuality is contrary to nature seems (at least according to extant sources) to have been entirely an inference from procreation.

[41] As do Philo and Josephus. See Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice,* 270-73; Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 404-405.

[42] See especially Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality.*

Fourth, when Paul moves to discussing the sinfulness of the Jewish world he insists that those who have the advantage of Torah, i.e., special revelation, and have as a people enjoyed covenant relationship with God have no cause to boast of their moral superiority over the Gentiles (2:1-3:8). This consideration suggests that Paul would object most strongly to heterosexual Christians assuming an attitude of moral superiority and condemnation towards homosexuals. Homosexuality is a sin; but it is one sin among many. And all persons, "both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9). It is thus imperative for Christians to embrace a proper perspective regarding homosexuality in relation to the sinfulness of all humanity, and to adopt an attitude that acknowledges and indeed emphasizes their own sinfulness outside of the grace of God rather than delighting in excoriating the sins of others.

1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10

These two passages are among the several "vice lists" that appear in the Pauline Epistles. Both of these particular lists include the word ʼαρσενοκοιτης/arsenokoitēs, which seems to involve homosexuality. Yet the precise meaning of this term is somewhat disputed.

1 Cor. 6:9 falls within a segment in which Paul discusses matters that have been reported to him as problems within the Corinthian church: immorality, and lawsuits between members of the church (5:1-6:20).[43] The dominant concern is actually

[43] The structure of 1 Corinthians is rather straightforward. In 1 Corinthians 1:10-6:20 Paul responds to matters that were reported to him (1:11, 5:1; although two different Greek words for "report" are employed, the meaning of these words is the same, and thus the NRSV is justified in rendering them with the same English word), and in 7:10-16:9 Paul responds to questions the Corinthians posed to him apparently in an earlier letter (7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). So also Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 21-3. Although this understanding of the structure of 1 Corinthians may suggest that the book contains a series of random and materially unrelated discussions, this epistle is actually

immorality. Paul begins the segment by explicit reference to immorality (5:1:"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you…"); and he discusses incest at the beginning of this segment (5:1-12) and sexual intercourse with prostitutes at the end (6:1-20).

Paul concludes his counsel regarding incest by insisting that the congregation exclude the offender from the fellowship of the church with the hope of the offender's ultimate moral reformation and ecclesial re-instatement, a process that Paul describes as "judging" (5:9-13). This discussion of the legitimate and obligatory judging of the incestuous offender by the church serves as a springboard for Paul's denunciation of the practice of Christians bringing lawsuits against fellow Christians within secular courts and before non-Christian judges, a practice that Paul deems to be anything but legitimate (6:1-7). Paul insists that Christians should not be bringing complaints of fraud against other Christians at all, but if they do so they should at least settle matters within the church, allowing the matters to be judged by Christians rather than by non-Christian outsiders ("the unrighteous"), since Christians ("the saints") will judge the unrighteous. Paul substantiates the claims that Christians will judge the unrighteous and that the unrighteous are incompetent to judge between Christians by the assertion that "wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God" (6:9), followed by the vice list of the wrongdoers who will be excluded from the kingdom; these wrongdoers, mentioned in the vice list, are contrasted with the Corinthians Christians who have now been washed, sanctified, and justified (6:9-11). Paul follows the vice list immediately with his denunciation of sexual intercourse with prostitutes.

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characterized by profound theological unity and development. See esp. Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

This structural analysis reveals that the vice list of 6:9-11 describes the ungodliness of the non-Christian world that will experience deserved eschatological judgment on the basis of these behaviors. And at the same time the passage expresses the expectation, and indeed demand, that those within the Christian community will no longer participate in the activities mentioned in the list. In spite of the claims of some scholars that the list is generic and reflects commonly assumed mores of the Greco-Roman world,[44] we can be quite certain that the list derives from Jewish sources and that the individual items are drawn from the Old Testament.[45] Paul had earlier made clear to the Corinthians that these behaviors exclude persons from the sphere of God's saving rule (6:9, 11), and yet the readers remain vulnerable to the deception that these behaviors are irrelevant for kingdom participation (6:9: "Do not be deceived….").[46] Paul reminds them that these behaviors characterized the pre-Christian lives of at least some of the readers; but they have been liberated from these practices at their conversion by the power of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God (6:11). These behaviors are no longer necessary for them nor are they in any measure acceptable. The whole passage involves, then, an implicit command reflecting the typical Pauline (indicative and imperative) model of exhortation: "Become what you are."[47]

The two terms μαλακοι/*malakoi* and ʼαρσενοκοιτης/*arsenokoitēs* are translated "homosexuals" (RSV, combining the two Greek terms into a single English word), "male prostitutes, sodomites" (NRSV), "male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders" (NIV),

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[44] E.g., Victor Paul Furnish, "The Bible and Homosexuality: Reading the Texts in Context," in Jeffrey Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 26-28.
[45] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 440-51
[46] The Greek construction here indicates that they (or at least some of them) are being deceived; the phrase may literally be rendered: "stop being deceived."
[47] See, e.g., Richard E. Howard, *Newness of Life: A Study in the Thought of Paul* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1975).

"nor effeminate nor homosexuals" (NASB). It is now clear that αρσενοκοιτης derives from the Septuagint (the Greek translation) of Lev. 18:22 and 20:13[48] and thus pertains to a male having sexual intercourse with another male. The word μαλακοι/*malakoi* means basically "soft," and came to mean "effeminate." Although some have claimed that this word refers to any male who manifests effeminate mannerisms or demeanor[49] such an interpretation fails to explain the harsh penalty imposed ("will not inherit the kingdom of God") or the connection with 'αρσενοκοιτης/*arsenokoites*.[50] Certain other scholars have claimed that this word is restricted to male prostitutes or "call-boys;"[51] but this interpretation assumes that Paul is concerned here only with pederasty and founders on the consideration that it is linked with the 'αρσενοκοιτης/*arsenokoites*, which clearly refers to general homosexual practice as prohibited in Lev. 18 and 20. It seems best to conclude that μαλακοι/*malakoi* describes the submissive partner in a homosexual relationship while 'αρσενοκοιτης/*arsenokoites* refers to the dominant partner in the relationship.[52]

The vice list in 1 Tim. 1:9-11 sets forth practices that the law proscribes for the "lawless and disobedient." The claim that 'αρσενοκοιτης/*arsenokoites* refers here narrowly to an adult male who commits prostitution with a male call-boy (and thus

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[48] D. F. Wright, "Homosexuals or Prostitutes? The Meaning of αρσενοκοῖται (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10), *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987): 396-98; Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 85-88.
[49] Dale B. Martin, "*Arsenokoitês* and *Malakos*: Meanings and Consequences," in Robert W. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 117-36.
[50] Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practic*e, *308*; Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 449-50.
[51] Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 106-108; also, with qualifications, Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 243-44.
[52] Thus by far the majority of scholars, e.g., Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexuality, 306-330*; Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 449-51; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 140; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 255-58

pertains only to exercising compulsive power over the relatively powerless)[53] is dependent upon taking "fornicator" (πορνοις/*pornois*) in 1:10 as "male prostitute," a use that it never has in the New Testament and almost never in secular Greek. Rather, its meaning here is the same as in 1 Cor. 6:9.

The vice lists in both 1 Cor. 6 and 1 Tim. 1 mention behaviors that are roundly and repeatedly condemned throughout the Bible and have been universally denounced by Christians throughout the centuries. The joining of the mention of homosexual behavior with these obviously repugnant practices argues for the continuing repudiation of homosexuality within the Christian community.[54]

Additional Biblical Insights

The biblical perspective on homosexuality transcends those passages that explicitly refer to homosexuality. Indeed, the Bible mentions homosexuality very rarely. This sparseness of mention is not due to the unimportance of the issue of homosexuality within the biblical perspective, but rather is due to the fact that homosexual practice was apparently almost entirely absent among the Hebrews, the Jews, and the early Church.[55] The discussions of ethics in the Bible are typically situational, i.e., ethical issues are discussed always in response to problems or anticipated problems among the addressees. Thus, given the rare occurrence of

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[53] Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*, 118-20.

[54] See Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*, 179-201, who speaks of "serial comparison." According to this principle, when one assesses whether the prohibition of a behavior in a given list is limited to the original situation of writing or is of such a character that it should be taken up and directly applied in other times and places one should consider the other prohibited elements in that list so as to determine if these other prohibited practices are bound to the original situation or are intended to be properly applied more generally. If some of the practices that appear in a list are clearly to be understood as violations of basic Christian standards regardless of time or place it is it is likely that such is the case also with the others that appear alongside them.

[55] This fact is virtually universally accepted by scholars. See., e.g, Scroggs, *The New Testament and Sexuality;* Wold, *Out of Order*.

homosexual behavior among those communities to which the Bible is addressed it is somewhat surprising that the issue receives as much attention as it does.

The Bible's view of homosexuality is necessarily part of broader biblical themes and concerns. Three of these broader biblical concerns are especially relevant for the topic of homosexuality in the Bible.

First, the Bible's understanding of homosexuality is part of a broader concern with human sexuality in general. Readers of the Bible throughout the centuries have agreed that the Bible always and without exception presents God's design for human sexual relationships exclusively in terms of heterosexual marriage. In accord with this claim, every reference to homosexuality within the Bible presents homosexuality negatively.[56]

Second, the Bible deals with sexual issues, including homosexuality, within the larger framework of the sovereignty and ultimate reality of God. According to the Bible, human sexuality and that which is proper to it do not derive from individual feelings or impulses, but rather from God, the Creator and Lord of the universe. The fact that God created humankind "male and female" means that human beings are constitutionally heterosexual. From the biblical perspective it is problematic for anyone to claim "God made me gay." Homosexual impulses may be very real to certain persons; but such impulses do not define these persons. Persons properly find their identity in the God who made them and has redeemed them in Jesus Christ; and their vocation is to find fulfillment by submitting to the God who is at work in some measure even now to heal creation and to cause human beings to experience the goodness for which God has

[56] J. Glenn Taylor, "The Bible and Homosexuality," *Themelios* 21 (1995): 4-9; Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 389-90.

created them. Persons who establish their identity on the basis of their sexual orientation are in danger of committing idolatry, since they allow their sense of sexual identity to assume the ultimate reality in their lives, a role that properly belongs to God alone. As Richard Hays puts it: "never within the canonical perspective does sexuality become the basis for defining a person's identity or for finding meaning and fulfillment in life."[57]

Third, the Bible recognizes that human existence, including sexuality, involves a corporate and not merely individual aspect. As mentioned above, the laws prohibiting homosexual behavior in Lev. 18 and 20 are part of warnings regarding the corruption of the nation as-a-whole, with the assertion that such behavior has led to national destruction in the case of the Canaanites and the threat that it will lead to the destruction of the entire nation of Israel from the land. The behavior of individuals affects the fabric and the destiny of the entire community. The same claim is made in the New Testament; speaking of immorality Paul declares: "Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?" (1 Cor. 5:6). On the other hand, the Bible makes clear that God manifests God's salvation and healing through the dynamics of participation within the community of faith.[58] The power of robust, welcoming, nurturing Christian communities to engender healthy sexuality and to bring about the emotional and spiritual healing of homosexuals deserves much greater attention than it has thus far received. We should not dismiss too quickly the power of the Gospel

[57] Hays, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 391.
[58] Note, e.g., that the Old Testament notion of חסד/*ḥesed* , God's powerful, healing covenant faithfulness, is typically directed toward the people of Israel as-a-whole; and note, too, the central role of the community in the soteriology of the Book of Acts. See Bruce C. Birch and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989).

through the Spirit at work within the dynamics of Christian community to effect sexual healing, at the very least for some persons and in some real measure.

One dimension of the corporate aspect of homosexuality involves the occurrence, or experience, of homosexuality. It is an arresting observation that life-long homosexual orientation ("constitutional homosexuality") was unknown both in the biblical world and in the ancient world more generally.[59] If fixed, or permanent, homosexual orientation is a basic, persistent human phenomenon it is passing strange that this notion is absent from every ancient society. This observation gives credence to the thesis set forth by David Greenberg that homosexuality is at least in part socially conditioned. [60]

Conclusion

Although homosexuality receives little direct mention in the Bible it is roundly condemned wherever it appears. The Old Testament insists that God made human beings male and female, with the result that persons may experience wholeness when they join with persons of the opposite sex. The Old Testament law prohibits homosexual intercourse, describing it in strong terms of moral denunciation and threatening the most severe penalty for violation of this commandment. Paul draws upon both the creation narrative of Gen. 1-3 and the Levitical laws prohibiting homosexual activity in his repudiation of homosexuality in the three New Testament passages that mention homosexuality. Paul does not find the need to mount an argument against homosexual practice, but rather mentions homosexual behavior as an example of the debauchery

[59] This fact is virtually universally recognized.

[60] David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

characteristic of the peoples who do not know God and of individuals who have no inheritance in God's kingdom. On the basis of considerations within the Bible itself, there is every reason to believe that the insistence upon the exclusive legitimacy of heterosexual marriage and the corresponding denunciation of homosexuality is not limited to the specific times and places originally addressed by the biblical writers but rather is directly applicable to all persons in all places and at all times, including our own.

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