
HOMOSEXUALITY?

When a group of representative laypersons and clergy in a major Protestant denomination was asked to indicate the sources that had contributed to their “present attitudes and opinions concerning homosexuality,” Scripture was named significantly more often than any other source as having contributed the most. The same poll disclosed that a high percentage of those questioned believed that “homosexual activity is a sin.” As it happens, several of the scriptural passages that people cite as the most definitive for this topic are found in the letters of Paul. We have already taken account of places in which the apostle identifies adultery, incest, prostitution, and immoderate or uncontrolled sexual desires as forms of sexual immorality (ch. 2). Now we must ask what he had to say about homosexuality.

Immediately, however, we face a serious difficulty. The question mark I have placed after the title of this chapter is intended to signal what is actually a twofold difficulty. There was no word for *homosexuality* in any ancient language, including the biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek); nor were there any words for *heterosexuality* or *bisexuality*. Both the physical and the behavioral aspects of sex were matters of observation and discussion. But the ancient world had no conception of *sexuality* as it

is commonly understood today, as a “person’s sexual identity in relation to the gender to which he or she is typically attracted; the fact of being heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual; sexual orientation” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

To be sure, there were various ancient attempts to account for the fact that some people are erotically attracted to persons of their own sex. According to the myth famously recounted by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*, 189-93 (fifth century B.C.E.), there were originally three sexes: man, woman, and a combination of the two, each of these three having two faces, four hands, four feet, and so on. But when these human beings attacked the gods, Zeus punished them by cutting each in two, so each ended up severed from its other half. From that time on, as the myth relates it, each half has wandered the earth looking for the other half: the man-woman, now two, desiring to be reunited with the opposite sex; the woman, now two, desiring to be reunited with her female half; and the man, now two, desiring to be reunited with his male half.

There were also other “explanations” of sexual attraction, including two theories advanced in the second century C.E. Ptolemy, the famous Egyptian astronomer and astrologer, believed that the nature of a person’s sexual desires is determined by the constellation under which she or he is born. And Soranus, a Greek physician, regarded sexual desire for a person of the same sex as a disease of the mind. These theories, like Plato’s myth, are clear evidence that ancient cultures were interested in accounting for same-sex attraction. But no ancient account of sexual attraction comes close to the understanding of sexual identity and orientation that has been gained in the last hundred years or so, through painstaking biological, psychological, and sociological research. Moreover, it is significant that no biblical writer or tradition shows any awareness of these ancient myths and speculations. The biblical accounts of creation, for instance,

take no account of same-sex attraction, presuming that sexual attraction occurs only between males and females (see below).

Strictly speaking, then, there is nothing in the Bible, including the letters of Paul, about homosexuality. This concept emerged only in the second half of the nineteenth century with the advent of modern medical and psychological research into human sexuality. The word *homosexual* seems to have been coined first in German by a Hungarian-German physician, Károly M. [Kertbeny] Benkert. He used it in a private letter (to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, May 6, 1868), and later in pamphlets, with reference to “male or female individuals” who “from birth” are erotically oriented toward their own sex. The use of the word in English is attested only from the last decade of the nineteenth century, and as we shall see, it made its first appearance in an English Bible only in 1946. When the words *homosexual* and *homosexuality* are used in this chapter in reference to ancient sources, one should always think of them as enclosed in quotation marks. In general, it is better to speak of same-sex or homoerotic relationships and the like.

Our first steps on the way to understanding what Paul says on this topic will be to consider, in turn, how same-sex activity was viewed in the Jewish Scriptures known to the apostle, and by the ancient Mediterranean world in general.

Paul’s Bible

Even after his call to apostleship, Paul’s faith and thought continued to be shaped by the Jewish Scriptures, although he read them now from the standpoint of his new life in Christ. All of his scriptural citations are to the Bible that was shared by Jews and Christians of his day—which the church first started calling the Old Testament only many decades after Paul’s death. He ordinarily cited it according to the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), which was a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible.

As we turn to a consideration of several Old Testament passages that have loomed large in modern discussions of homosexuality, we need to keep two important points in mind. First, same-sex activity is not a prominent topic in any of the biblical writings or in the traditions that they incorporate. There are only a few scattered passages where same-sex relationships are mentioned or portrayed. Second, Paul never specifically calls on these texts for what they say or imply about same-sex activity. He certainly knew them, however, and they may have helped inform his thinking on this matter. We shall consider, first, a story about Sodom; second, a rule in the book of Leviticus; and third, the Genesis creation accounts.

The Men of Sodom: Genesis 19:1-25

The ancient tale of Abraham's nephew, Lot, and the men of Sodom has been cited for centuries as proof that homosexuality is contrary to the will of God. In English, terms derived from the name of the city have been used at least since the end of the thirteenth century to designate (male) same-sex activity (sodomy) and those who engage in it (sodomites). However, in every instance where the word *sodomite* was used in the King James Version (1611), the Hebrew expression is properly translated as "male cult prostitute," as it is in almost all modern versions. In fact, no word for sodomite appears in the Hebrew Bible, and in the Septuagint Sodomite appears only in Gen 19:4, where it refers to male residents of Sodom.

The overall plot of the story about the men of Sodom is readily summarized. One evening, Lot (himself an "alien" in Sodom, v. 9) comes across two strangers who seem to have nowhere to spend the night. In accord with ancient customs concerning hospitality to strangers, Lot offers them lodging in his home (vv. 1-3). He does not know that they are actually angels—extraterrestrial beings!—in disguise (vv. 1, 15). When

some men of the city surround Lot's house because they want to have sex with these guests, Lot offers them his virgin daughters instead (vv. 4-8). Here we see ancient expectations concerning hospitality to strangers and the protection of male honor taking precedence over even a father's protection of his daughters. When the ruffians decline Lot's offer and threaten to break down the door, the angels—being angels—strike them with blindness, thereby keeping themselves and their host from harm (vv. 9-11). The subsequent destruction of Sodom and neighboring Gomorrah is interpreted thereafter as God's judgment against the evil designs of Lot's neighbors (vv. 12-25).

This is not a story about homosexual behavior in general, and certainly not a story about homosexual acts performed by consenting adults in a committed, loving relationship. It is a story about hospitality, male honor, and violent intent—which, had it been carried out, would have been in this case same-sex rape. Eventually, Sodom did come to stand for homosexuality in general, hence the coining of the words *sodomy* and *sodomites*. But in the Bible itself, Sodom stands for evil of various kinds, and for the judgment that God will visit upon all who continue in it. One notes, for example, that the "abominable things" specifically attributed to Sodom in Ezek 16:49-50 are pride, gluttony, excessive prosperity, and indifference to those in need: "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it."

A Levitical Rule: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

The only direct prohibition of same-sex intercourse anywhere in the Bible, Old Testament or New Testament, is a rule that occurs in two different formulations in Leviticus: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (18:22); and "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” (20:13). This rule occurs in a section of Leviticus (chs. 17–26) known to scholars as the Holiness Code, a compilation of various kinds of laws, which, in its present form, is usually dated to the sixth century B.C.E. The underlying aim of this legislation, most of it addressed to adult males, was to ensure the distinctiveness and integrity of Israel as the chosen people of the one true God.

Situated between sections that are addressed, respectively, to both the priests and the people of Israel (17:2) and to just the priests (21:1), chapters 18–20 are addressed to just the people (18:2). The importance of the extended family in ancient Israel accounts for the inclusion in this section of a number of laws intended to preserve the family’s integrity by prohibiting incestuous relationships (18:7-16). Following on these, there are prohibitions that forbid relationships considered to be “unclean” and “defiling”: there shall be no intercourse with a menstruating woman or with the wife of a blood relative; there shall be no offering of a child in sacrifice to a foreign god; there shall be no intercourse with another male; and there shall be no intercourse with an animal (18:19-23). In chapter 19, the legislation is somewhat miscellaneous, ranging from instructions about sacrifices and harvesting to appeals concerning just actions and loving the neighbor. Here we find, as well, rules against crossbreeding cattle, sowing two kinds of seed in one field, wearing two kinds of fabric, eating meat with blood in it, and so on. The legislation in chapter 20 is probably later than and based upon the laws in chapters 18 and 19. Here again there is a list that identifies prohibited sexual relationships (vv. 10-16), including male same-sex intercourse (v. 13); but now the death penalty is specified for these and some other offenses (vv. 1-9), presumably because they were considered to be especially grave.

There is no question that the Levitical rule in 18:22 and 20:13 explicitly and unequivocally condemns male same-sex intercourse. We must

ask, however, *why* this was regarded as such a serious offense and so unconditionally condemned. Light is shed on this question when we take into consideration the overall aim of the Holiness Code and several details about the rule.

1. The most fundamental summons of this code is to *holiness*, and this summons, like holiness itself, has a theological basis: “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (19:2; see also 20:7-8). To be holy means to be set apart for the service of the holy God; and to be set apart *for* the service of God requires being set apart *from* all foreign gods and the ungodly ways of those who worship them: “You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine” (20:26).

Accordingly, the intent of the rules in Lev 17–26 is to identify what is required and what is prohibited if Israel is to remain faithful to its calling as God’s holy people. We may think of these rules as boundary markers designed to separate Israel from its godless neighbors: “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” (18:3). To help secure these boundaries, the code calls on Israel to obey the commandments that bring life (e.g., 18:4-5)—for example, the commandments to honor one’s parents (19:3), provide for those who are poor (19:9-10), be just in dealing with others (19:11, 13-16), and love one’s neighbor (19:18). But most especially, the code prohibits actions that were regarded as polluting and defiling because they involve the mingling or mixing of *kinds* that God, from the beginning, ordained to be separate. The rules against having incestuous relationships, sowing two kinds of seed in a field, wearing two kinds of fabrics, and engaging in male same-sex intercourse are all prohibitions of this sort. Hence the warning, “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by

all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves" (18:24). In these and numerous other instances, the concern is not about *moral* impurity but *ritual* impurity—defilement in a physical sense. The rule about same-sex intercourse demonstrates this very well.

2. In both versions of this rule, male same-sex intercourse is identified as an "abomination" (18:22; 20:13). Here and elsewhere, the Hebrew word is used of actions that are "taboo," which is to say, totally unacceptable within the Israelite community. As Phyllis Bird has indicated,

[Abomination] is not an ethical term, but a term of boundary marking. In its basic sense of taboo it describes a feeling of abhorrence and revulsion that requires or admits no rational explanation. . . . It belongs to the language of separation and distinctness from the nations that came to expression during the exile and was applied retroactively to earlier stages of Israelite history.

In other words, when something is called an abomination, that does not represent the end result of a process of moral reasoning. It is, rather, an expression of revulsion rooted in long-standing cultural conventions and habits of thought. How this works in the case of the rule about same-sex intercourse is evident in two ways.

First, neither version of the rule reflects or allows for any sort of moral reasoning. No consideration is given to what the circumstances or character of a male same-sex relationship might be. Is it consensual? Has one party, perhaps an adult male, forced himself on the other, perhaps a boy? Has one party purchased the sexual favors of the other? Nor is consideration given to whether the relationship is good or just or loving. And since no account is taken of particular circumstances, the parties involved are assumed to be equally at fault; even if one has been victimized by the other, the rule decrees that *both* have committed an "abomination" and that *both* deserve to die (20:13).

Second, the rule refers to the prohibited act as a man lying "with a male as with a woman." This phrasing shows the patriarchal orientation of the prohibition and why specifically *male* same-sex intercourse is so unconditionally condemned. From the point of view of the Holiness Code, male same-sex intercourse violates the honor of both partners; the penetrated male dishonors himself by submitting as only a female should submit, and the penetrating male dishonors himself by dominating another male. Both are departing from the culturally defined expectations concerning the distinctive sexual roles of men and women.

The Creation Accounts: Genesis 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–24

The creation accounts of Gen 1–2 are often invoked in discussions of marriage and sexuality, including homosexuality. The account in 2:4b–24 is the earlier of the two and derives from the Yahwistic tradition (so named because its usual designation of God is Yahweh), while the account in 1:1–2:4a is from the later Priestly tradition (so named because of the circles in which it arose). Neither account mentions or alludes to same-sex attraction or activity. Despite this, it is often alleged that what they say, respectively, about the creation of male and female (1:26–28) and the sexual attraction that brings man and woman together (2:20–24) rules out thinking of homosexuality as in any way compatible with God's intention and will. Such a claim, however, goes quite beyond anything the accounts themselves say or imply.

In the Priestly account (1:1–2:4a), creation is presented as God's bringing order to chaos through a process of separation and distinction. God creates, in turn, light and darkness, the waters above and the waters below, the earth and the seas, the sun and the moon, and so on. On the sixth day,

God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness. . . ." So God created humankind in his image, / in the image of God he created them; / male and female he created them. / God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (1:26-28)

Here "humankind" translates the Hebrew word *adam*, which refers to the whole of humanity. God's differentiating humankind as "male" and "female" (biological terms) and his blessing them to "be fruitful and multiply" doesn't distinguish them from other living creatures. What sets them apart from all other beings is, rather, their creation in God's own "image" and "likeness." This gives them a special relationship to their Creator and, in turn, to all other creatures (see 1:28b).

The earlier account (2:4b-24) is less interested in the divine ordering of the cosmos and nature than in God's provisions for the well-being of creation and those who inhabit it. In keeping with this focus, human beings are designated not by the biological terms "male" and "female," but by the social terms "man" and "woman."

The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken."

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (vv. 20-24)

There is nothing here about marriage as such, or even about monogamy, and unlike Gen 1, there is no mention of procreation. In this account the woman is created because the man is lonely and in need of a companion. Remarkably, what makes her a fit companion is not that she is sexually different from the man, but that she is "bone of [his] bones and flesh of [his] flesh." It is, therefore, not specifically to produce offspring that a man is attracted to a woman and "they become one flesh." It is because they belong to each other and need each other. This account highlights the *relationship* of man and woman, not male and female sexuality.

There is, then, nothing in these accounts that can be reasonably understood as either endorsing or condemning same-sex relationships. Both accounts are *etiological*, in that they intend to explain why things are as they are—or, more exactly, why things are as they are *assumed* to be. The Priestly account seeks to explain why the world is constituted as it is and works as it does: why there are separate species and kinds of creatures, and why they are to be kept separate (thus the Priestly concern for ritual purity); why God created humankind as male and female (to "be fruitful and multiply"); and why the Sabbath day is different from the others and should be kept holy (because God rested on the seventh day). Similarly, the Yahwist's account seeks to explain why a man is so powerfully attracted to a woman and they become "one flesh." This point of view, of course, is that of a male-dominated society; nothing is said about the attraction of a woman to a man.

Finally, the kinds of considerations that are usually involved when one struggles with *moral* issues are not present in these accounts. No consideration is given to *variations* in nature, to *exceptional* conditions, or to *particular* circumstances. The Priestly account, for example, simply *presumes* that every human being is born with unambiguously male or female sex organs and is fully capable, physiologically, of having offspring. And the

Yahwistic account simply *presumes* that the desire for physical union with the opposite sex is universal. No attention is paid to those who are incapable of sexual relations or involuntarily deprived of them, to those who are voluntarily celibate, or to those whose erotic desires are for union with their own sex. These accounts provide no scriptural basis for the claim, frequently made, that homosexuality is inherently and unconditionally evil because it is a perversion of the created order.

Paul's World

Paul's thinking was shaped not only by his Jewish heritage and, of course, his life experiences. It was shaped also by his engagement with various religious and intellectual currents in the Greco-Roman world. It is, therefore, important to approach the apostle's references to same-sex activity with an awareness of what his contemporaries were saying on the topic. We shall consider the relevant sources that are representative of Hellenistic Judaism, Hellenistic moral philosophy, and emergent Christianity.

Hellenistic Judaism

Among the Jews of Paul's day, same-sex activity seems to have been less in evidence than in the ancient Mediterranean world as a whole. Indeed, Jews commonly named such conduct as a typical Gentile vice, one of the abhorrent perversions that results from idolatry. The contrast drawn between Jewish and pagan morality in a Jewish writing from the second century B.C.E. is typical:

[Jews] are mindful of holy wedlock, and they do not engage in impious intercourse with male children, as do Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Romans, spacious Greece and many nations and others, Persians and

Galatians and all Asia, transgressing the holy law of immortal God, which they transgressed. (*Sibylline Oracles* 3.595-600)

Such accusations were also made by later rabbis, who regularly interpreted the Levitical prohibition of male same-sex intercourse as applying equally to females. A tale told by the Jewish historian Josephus (37–ca. 100 C.E.) shows that this stereotype of Gentiles was deep-seated in Jewish culture. He reports that when the Roman general Marc Antony (83–30 B.C.E.) asked Herod to send his young brother-in-law, Aristobulus, to Rome, Herod decided that it “would not be safe” because Antony might actually want to use the handsome youth “for erotic purposes” (*Jewish Antiquities* 15.6 §§28-29). Elsewhere, explaining Jewish marriage laws for the benefit of Gentile readers, Josephus speaks more directly of (male) same-sex activity:

The law [of Moses] recognizes no sexual intercourse except the natural intercourse of man and wife, and this only for the procreation of children. It abhors sexual intercourse between males, and punishes with death anyone who is guilty of an assault. (*Against Apion* 2.24 §199, my translation)

This description of the intercourse between husband and wife as “natural” implies that same-sex intercourse is “unnatural,” and later on in the same writing Josephus says that explicitly (2.37 §§273, 275). The same view surfaces regularly in other ancient Jewish sources. In the *Testament of Naphtali* (second century B.C.E.), for example, Sodom is mentioned as a case in point: “In the firmament, in the earth, and in the sea, in all the products of his workmanship discern the Lord who made all things, so that you do not become like Sodom, which departed from the order of nature” (3:4).

Jewish writers regarded same-sex intercourse to be a perversion of nature for two principal reasons: because no children can be born of such relationships, and because (it was presumed) same-sex partners, whether males or females, defile their true maleness or femaleness. The first reason is succinctly stated by the Jewish philosopher Philo (ca. 30 B.C.E.–45 C.E.): the man who lies with another man “pursues an unnatural pleasure and does his best to render cities desolate and uninhabited by destroying the means of procreation” (*Special Laws* 3.39). The second is found, for example, in a compilation of moral advice that dates from between 30 B.C.E. and 40 C.E.: “Do not transgress with unlawful sex the limits set by nature. For even animals are not pleased with intercourse of male with male. And let not women imitate the sexual role of men” (Pseudo-Phocylides, *Sentences* 190-92).

The warning here that women should not transgress the role of men is typical of the patriarchal, male-dominated cultures of the ancient world. This viewpoint is also operative when, as happens more often, and in accord with Lev 18:22 and 20:13, the males in a same-sex relationship are accused of shaming themselves. Philo, for example, claimed that such conduct “forces the male type of nature to debase and convert itself into the feminine form, just to indulge a polluted and accursed passion” (*Special Laws* 2.50).

Philo’s embellishments of the biblical story of Lot and the men of Sodom provide further evidence of Jewish abhorrence of homosexual behavior. He describes the Sodomites as consumed by insatiable lusts and driven into all manner of excesses, including sexual. Corrupted by their opulence,

they threw off from their necks the law of nature and applied themselves to deep drinking of strong liquor and dainty feeding and forbidden forms of intercourse. Not only in their mad lust for women did they violate the marriages of their neighbors, but also men mounted males

without respect for the sex nature which the active partner shares with the passive; and so when they tried to beget children they were discovered to be incapable of any but a sterile seed. Yet the discovery availed them not, so much stronger was the force of the lust that mastered them. Then, as little by little they accustomed those who were by nature men to submit to play the part of women, they saddled them with the formidable curse of a female disease. For not only did they emasculate their bodies by luxury and voluptuousness but they worked a further degeneration in their souls and, as far as in them lay, were corrupting the whole of mankind. (*On Abraham* 135-37)

Hellenistic Moral Philosophy

Homosexual relationships had a relatively prominent place in Greek society from the sixth century B.C.E. onward. As several historians have noted, this coincided with the development of a commercial economy based on the institution of slavery and the use of money in business transactions. It coincided also with the increasingly subordinate role that women played in Greek life. In this male-dominated society, even when the young female form became the model for beauty, the youthful male was regarded as embodying the ideal. Similarly, the Greek ideal of friendship was considered to be that between two free males of equal social standing. Male-female relationships could not realize this ideal, for females were regarded as inferior to males; and marriages were honored primarily for producing and nurturing children.

This was the sociocultural context within which the Greek practice of *pederasty* developed. A *pederast* (literally, “lover of boys”) was an adult male who showered his attentions on attractive boys in their early teen years. Pederasty was often extolled by the philosophers as the purest form of love because it was not burdened, like the love between a man and his wife, with the goal of producing children. On the island of Crete it was

thought shameful for a boy not to have a lover, a custom that may have derived from ancient puberty rites. In Boeotia, it was reported, men and boys paired off into actual marriages. But there was a dark side of pederasty, for the youth in such a relationship was highly vulnerable to the erotic demands of the older male and often a victim of sexual abuse. Thus, in Plato's *Phaedrus* (241) Socrates warns: "These things, dear boy, you must bear in mind, and you must know that the fondness of the lover is not a matter of goodwill, but of appetite which he wishes to satisfy: 'Just as the wolf loves the lamb, so the lover adores his beloved.'"

Pederasty was still practiced in the Greco-Roman world, and its merits were still sometimes argued in the philosophical literature. Increasingly, however, two other forms of pederasty claimed the attention of moral philosophers contemporary with Paul, evoking from most of them strong words of condemnation. One behavior condemned was the sexual exploitation of youthful male slaves by their masters, and another was the sale of sexual favors by teenage boys to older male clients. These would have been the types of male homoeroticism most evident in the urban centers of the Roman world, and the forms of which the apostle would have been most aware. The works of several writers of Paul's day suggest what he himself likely had in mind when he referred to same-sex conduct and why he too judged it to be reprehensible.

Seneca (already cited in ch. 2) was named a Roman praetor in 49 C.E. and simultaneously appointed tutor to the young Nero, whose mother was at that time married to the emperor, Claudius. When Nero succeeded Claudius five years later, Seneca became Nero's political adviser. In 62 C.E., disillusioned with Nero's policies, Seneca retired from public life. During his retirement, he wrote a series of essays in which he expressed concern about the lack of moral reason and responsibility in the Roman world. One evil that Seneca deplored was the exploitation of slaves by

dissolute men of luxury. Seneca asked his readers to envision a banquet at which the youthful slave who serves the wine

must dress like a woman and wrestle with his advancing years; he cannot get away from his boyhood; . . . he is kept beardless by having his hair smoothed away or plucked out by the roots, and he must remain awake throughout the night, dividing his time between his master's drunkenness and his lust. (*Moral Epistles* 47, "On Master and Slave," 7)

Here Seneca identifies homoerotic activity as driven by raw passion and involving the exploitation of a male slave who, by reason of his subservient position, is vulnerable to the degenerate whims and fantasies of his master. By being forced to dress like a woman and appear to be beardless, he has been reduced to a mere object of erotic desire. Dandied up as a smooth-faced male, he embodies the ideal of beauty; attired as a woman, he embodies subservience and sexual vulnerability.

Plutarch (already cited in ch. 2) was a prolific Greek biographer, essayist, and moralist. He, too, provides helpful information about the social environment in which Paul's ministry was conducted. For several decades he served as a priest in the famed temple of Apollo in Delphi; he knew Athens well; and he had traveled in Egypt and lectured in Rome. In his *Dialogue on Love* he has several young men debate whether handsome young Bacchon should marry the rich widow of Thespieae, a certain Ismenodora. Anthemion and Piasias, rivals for Bacchon's affections, have been asked to decide. Anthemion, joined by his friend Daphnaeus, is for the marriage; but Piasias, joined by his friend Protogenes, is against it.

Piasias argues, against the marriage, that decent women are incapable of either receiving or giving sexual pleasure (752 B, C). Daphnaeus, on the other side, insists that "if union contrary to nature with males does not destroy or curtail a lover's tenderness, it stands to reason that the love between men and women, being normal and natural, will be conducive

Not the least significant part of the life of luxury and self-indulgence lies also in sexual excess; for example those who lead such a life crave a variety of loves not only lawful but unlawful ones as well, not women alone but also men; sometimes they pursue one love and sometimes another, and not being satisfied with those which are available, pursue those which are rare and inaccessible, and invent shameful intimacies, all of which constitute a grave indictment of manhood. (12.1-10)

Dio and Musonius are typical of their age in regarding homoerotic sex as representing not simply an attraction to one's own sex rather than to the other, but "sexual excess" and uncontrolled passions.

Emergent Christianity

Paul's first contacts with the followers of Jesus were during his years as a Pharisee when, as he himself tells it, he "was violently persecuting the church of God and . . . trying to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). By the time he had embraced the gospel and embarked on his apostolic mission—most likely around the year 35 or shortly thereafter—the church already had a cadre of respected leaders who had been among Jesus' closest disciples, and various still-developing traditions that were formed in the course of its preaching, teaching, and worship. Whether we think of that earliest faith community as the Jesus movement, a designation preferred by many present-day scholars, or choose to speak simply of emergent Christianity, it is worth asking whether Paul's thinking about same-sex relationships could have been shaped in some way by earlier Christian views.

The traditions concerning Jesus were, of course, critically important for his followers as they sought to understand the significance of his death and resurrection and what they were now called to be and do. Chief among the Jesus-traditions were accounts of his crucifixion and of his resurrection appearances, but there were also accounts of his ministry and collections of his sayings and parables. We have access to these traditions

only where they happen to be echoed or employed by later writers. Although Paul's letters (the earliest surviving Christian writings) offer some help in identifying them, we are dependent mainly on the gospels of Matthew and Mark, and the two-volume work, Luke–Acts.

The claim that Jesus was silent on the topic of homosexuality has to be qualified in several respects. As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the whole Bible is silent about homosexuality as this term is employed today. Indeed, if we replace the word *homosexuality* with some expression like *same-sex intercourse*, we can still speak of Jesus' silence on the subject. But even then, we can claim only that the *traditions* concerning Jesus say nothing about same-sex intercourse. There is no reason to suppose that all of his sayings have survived in those traditions. Moreover, the traditions do present Jesus as citing the very texts from Gen 1–2 that some invoke to condemn homosexuality as incompatible with the will of God. Before we look at those references, however, several other general observations need to be made about the Jesus-traditions.

1. The Levitical prohibition of male same-sex intercourse is neither cited nor echoed anywhere in the Jesus-traditions.
2. In a few instances Jesus mentions Sodom, alluding to the story in Gen 19 (Matt 10:15, parallel Luke 10:12; Matt 11:23-24; Luke 17:29). But in none of these instances are the residents of the city identified with any particular transgression. Only God's judgment and the city's destruction are in view. This is consistent with the way Sodom is usually represented in the Old Testament, as in Isa 1:9—Paul's citation of which (Rom 9:29) accounts for the only reference to the city in his letters.
3. A comment about "eunuchs" attributed to Jesus in Matt 19:11-12 has nothing to do with male same-sex relations. It occurs in Jesus' response to his disciples' suggestion that it may be "better not to marry" than to have to commit oneself to a marriage with no option for a divorce (v. 10):

He said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." (vv. 11-12)

In other words, celibacy is appropriate only for those who have been born without the needed sexual organs, who have subsequently suffered their loss, or who have been "given" the ability to remain single for the purpose of serving God's kingdom more fully (compare Paul's view of celibacy, discussed in ch. 2 above).

4. Like Jesus' references to Sodom and eunuchs, his comments about creation have nothing to do with the subject of homosexuality. According to Mark 10:2-9 (parallel Matt 19:3-6),

some Pharisees came, and to test [Jesus] they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Here, passing over the provision for divorce contained in the law of Moses (Deut 24:1-4), Jesus calls on the creation accounts to show that divorce is in every case a perversion of the created order and thus always contrary to God's will. As in Gen 1-2, it is simply *assumed* that male and female were created for sexual union with each other. The question of same-sex unions is nowhere in view; it is a matter that lies completely beyond the scope of the Pharisees' question and Jesus' response.

As noted above, the silence of the Jesus-traditions about homoerotic conduct does not allow us to conclude that Jesus had nothing to say about this subject. Yet it does suggest that he had nothing *distinctive* to say about homoeroticism, pro or con; and also that this topic was of no special concern in the Christian communities where Jesus' teachings were being collected, interpreted, and applied.

Paul's Letters

The path we have been following toward Paul's letters has been a long one, but necessary. What the apostle says about homoerotic conduct—which is very little, indeed—can be best understood when we are aware of what he would have read in his Bible on this subject, of the forms that homoeroticism took in his own day, and of why it was condemned by many of his contemporaries, both Jewish and pagan. It is worth emphasizing, however, that despite the frequency with which Jewish and pagan writers took up the topic of homoerotic attraction and conduct, Paul's letters are the only Christian sources from the first century in which the topic surfaces. Moreover, we will see that the apostle never actually *addresses* homoeroticism as a topic in its own right, and that he never invokes the Genesis creation accounts, the story of the men of Sodom, or the rule in Lev 18:22 and 20:13 to support his implicit condemnation of same-sex intercourse. Only two passages in the certainly authentic Pauline letters, one in 1 Corinthians and one in Romans, need to claim our attention. As we turn to these passages, we need to keep several key points in mind.

1. In Paul's day, the critics of homoerotic activity invariably associated it with insatiable lust and avarice. Seneca portrayed it as a rich man's sport, Dio Chrysostom as the ultimate sexual debauchery, and Philo, with reference to Sodom, as one of the vile consequences of wanton luxury

and self-centeredness. The old Platonic ideal of the pure, disinterested love between a man and a boy had come to ruin on the hard realities of Roman decadence. One of the speakers in Plutarch's dialogue could acknowledge the possibility of genuine homosexual love, but even he saw a need to repeat Plato's warning about homoerotic seduction.

2. Although Paul's Bible and many of his contemporaries had much to say about sexual *conduct*, the ancient world had no conception of sexual *orientation*. Both Musonius and Dio Chrysostom, for instance, presumed that the same lusts that drove men to engage female prostitutes could drive them eventually to seduce other men. Similarly, Philo wrote of the Sodomites' sexual intercourse with men as if it were one form of their "mad lust for women." Moreover, all three of these writers presumed, with their contemporaries, that one could by force of will *control* these appetites and conform oneself to the prevailing cultural norms for sexual conduct.

3. In ancient Mediterranean societies, homoerotic relationships were widely regarded as a violation of the "natural" order. This judgment was based in part on the fact that same-sex intercourse produces no offspring. Primarily, however, homoerotic relationships were viewed as violating the cultural assumptions and expectations concerning male superiority. This is evident in the Levitical rule that prohibits a man lying with another male "as with a woman." It is equally evident when writers of Paul's day speak of the shame that is brought on a man who, like a woman, has sex with another man, and of women who insolently imitate men when they engage in homoerotic pleasuring. What was called a violation of nature was, in fact, a violation of culturally defined gender boundaries, and that was regarded as shaming and dishonoring the male and diminishing his manliness.

4. Homoerotic conduct was also commonly assumed to involve, necessarily, one person's exploitation of another. Plutarch's Daphnaeus

admitted that even if the passive male has consented to homoerotic intercourse, by taking on the "weakness" and "effeminacy" of a woman, his shame is greater than a woman's because he has surrendered his manliness. From this point of view, if there is exploitation of one person by another even where there is consent, how much more where there is none. One thinks of the Sodomites' attempted rape of Lot's visitors, of the sexual favors a master could demand of his slaves, and of a pederast's sexual abuse of a pubescent boy. To ethical teachers in the Greco-Roman world, it would have seemed just as obvious that homoerotic conduct was inherently exploitative as that it was driven by untamed lust.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

This passage appears on the radar screens of those engaged with the topic of homosexuality only because of two words that stand, one after the other, in a list of people whom Paul identifies as unworthy of God's kingdom (vv. 9b-10a). Unfortunately, however, the translation of precisely these two words is somewhat problematic.

In English alone, the first word (Greek: *malakoi*, a masculine plural adjective) has been variously rendered as "effeminate" (KJV; ASV); "catamites" (JB); "male prostitutes" (NIV, NRSV); "boy prostitutes" (NAB, 1986); "the self-indulgent" (NJB); and "a pervert" (CEV). The second (Greek: *arsenokoitai*, a masculine plural noun) has been translated as "abusers of themselves with mankind" (KJV), or ". . . with men" (ASV); "sodomites" (JB; NJB; NRSV); "homosexual offenders" (NIV); "practicing homosexuals" (NAB, 1986); and "a homosexual" (CEV). Moreover, and misleadingly, some versions have used just one expression to stand for the two words together: "homosexuals" (RSV, 1946); "homosexual perversion" (NEB); "homosexual perverts" (TEV); "sexual perverts" (RSV, 1971); "sexual pervert" (REB); "sodomites" (NAB, 1970); and "male prostitutes" (NTPIV). It is worth noting that the first use of

the word *homosexuals* in an English Bible (in 1 Cor 6:9b) was as recently as 1946, with the publication of the original edition of the Revised Standard Version.

Despite this rather astonishing range of translations, we can be reasonably confident about the *general* connotations of the words as they occur in this context. The basic meaning of the first one (*malakos*) is “softness” (used in this sense in Matt 11:8, parallel Luke 7:25) or “weakness” (the related noun means “sickness,” e.g., Matt 4:23). Because ancient Mediterranean cultures regarded softness and weakness as typically female traits, the word was also applied, in a derogatory way, to “effeminate” males, and sometimes specifically to the receptive partner in same-sex intercourse, including male prostitutes fancied up for their trade.

The second word (*arsenokoitēs*), found in no source earlier than 1 Corinthians, is a compound of two words that mean, respectively, “male” and “bed.” It could refer to “a male who lies [has sex] with a male” or to “a male who lies [has sex] with” either a male or a female. In this case the first meaning is likely because the word that immediately precedes it in 1 Cor 6:9b often has a homoerotic reference (as we have noted above). In addition, there is a good chance that Paul (or the source he used in drawing up this list of vices) was prompted to coin the term by the Greek version of Lev 20:13, where the words “male” and “bed” stand side by side (*arsenos koitēn*) in the rule against same-sex intercourse.

It is possible, then, to take *malakoi* as a reference to “male prostitutes” (e.g., NRSV) and *arsenokoitai* as a reference to males who pay to have sex with them. But it is equally possible, and probably better, to take the words as referring, respectively, to the “receptive” and “aggressive” males in any homoerotic encounter. We may therefore translate the first term as “effeminate males,” and the second as “males who have sex with males.” Our next task is to consider the context in which these references occur.

In 1 Cor 5 and 6, Paul is discussing various problems of sexual immorality, and beginning in chapter 7, as we have seen (above, ch. 2), he will deal with several questions about sex and marriage that had been put to him in a letter from Corinth. In chapters 5 and 6, however, he is responding, first, to troubling news that he had probably heard from the bearer of that letter. Some unnamed man in the Corinthian congregation had apparently been living with his stepmother, presumably now widowed (5:1). Paul directs that the man should be put out of the church because of his aberrant behavior (5:2-5). It seems that the Corinthian Christians had not been very worried about the matter. Paul is astonished at their smug complacency (“And you are arrogant!” 5:2), and he criticizes their spiritual pride (5:6-8).

This specific case of sexual immorality in Corinth—we should note that it involved heterosexual, not homosexual behavior—prompts Paul, in 5:9-13, to clarify something he had said in an earlier letter (now lost). There he had apparently warned the Corinthians not to associate with persons guilty of any kind of immorality, sexual or otherwise (5:9). The Corinthians had taken this to mean (or at least Paul thought they had taken it to mean) that they needed to withdraw from society in order to protect themselves from its evils. Not at all, says Paul; that is quite impossible (5:10). He meant, rather, that they should break off fellowship with other Christians whose conduct, like that of the man living with his stepmother, threatened the moral integrity of the whole believing community (5:11-13).

Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians about disciplining errant members of their congregation moves him, in 6:1-11, to comment on the impropriety of Christians taking their disputes to secular judicatories for settlement. Of course, it is a shame that any such disputes even arise within the church (6:7-8), but if they do, they should also be heard and settled there, not before “unbelievers” (6:6). Implicit in the argument of

these verses is the apostle's conviction that Christians do not belong, ultimately, to this age—they are presently in the world (see 5:10) but they are not “of” it. Paul identifies those who belong to the world as “unbelievers” (6:6) and, later, as “wrongdoers” (6:9), while he identifies Christians as “saints,” people set apart for the service of God (6:1, 2). The question “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?” (6:9a) emphasizes and extends this distinction between believers and unbelievers. On the one hand, there are the “saints” who *belong to God's kingdom* even while they are in this world; on the other hand, there are the “unbelievers” or “unrighteous” people who *belong to this world*, insofar as they submit to its claims and not to God's.

In 6:9b-10, to make this point more concrete, Paul offers ten examples of “wrongdoers” who belong to this world rather than to God's kingdom. The list is similar to those in 5:10-11, in other Pauline letters (e.g., Rom 1:29-31; Gal 5:19-21), and elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Mark 7:21-22; 1 Pet 4:3, 15; Rev 9:21; 21:8; 22:15), but no two of them are identical. Paul would have been acquainted with many similar lists in the moral literature of Hellenistic Judaism. And his lists, in turn, were certainly known to later writers, including the author of the Pastoral Epistles who, decades later, wrote in Paul's name (see below, ch. 4). This perhaps accounts for the inclusion of the word *arsenokoitēs* in 1 Tim 1:9-10, the only place it is to be found in the New Testament apart from 1 Cor 6:9b.

Paul and others who employed lists of this sort assembled them more or less at random from well-known ethical traditions. The intention was not to offer a comprehensive catalog of all or even the chief evils to be avoided. This is evident, for example, when Paul closes a list in Galatians with the phrase “and things like these” (5:21). As a rule, the apostle, like other Jews, lists vices that he associated particularly with Gentile idolaters, and this is clearly the case in 1 Cor 6:9b-10. He is no doubt thinking of the pagan background of the majority of Corinthian Christians

when he reminds them, “This is what some of you used to be” (6:11a). However, their baptism into Christ has now marked them as persons who have been transformed by God's righteousness and God's Spirit, and set apart for God's service.

Clearly, same-sex intercourse is not Paul's topic in 1 Cor 5 and 6. The sexual immorality that he specifically addresses in these chapters is heterosexual, not homosexual. There is, first of all, the case of the man living with his stepmother (ch. 5), and then a warning addressed to the men of the congregation that they should not patronize female prostitutes (6:12-20). While Paul appears to use two terms that refer to participants in homoerotic intercourse, these are merely listed, along with a number of other “wrongdoers” (“fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, . . . thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers”), as a reminder to his congregation that, as believers, they have been graced with a new way of life.

Given the context, we learn only one thing about Paul's view of homoerotic conduct: men who engage in it are thereby disqualified from participation in the kingdom of God. He does not bother to indicate whether the same applies to females who engage in such conduct (we shall presently see that he believed it does). Nor does he offer any *reasons* why males should not have sex with males. Like other writers, he lists behaviors that he assumes all decent people will agree are wrong. Paul does not, either here or elsewhere, call such vices sins, however. Whenever the plural form *sins* appears in his letters, it is either a quotation from Scripture (once) or in a more or less set formula that he has taken over from church traditions (four times). The apostle himself viewed sin (singular) both as a power that drives a wedge between God and humankind and as the condition of alienation from God that results. He regarded specific vices, like the ones that he lists here and elsewhere, as *symptomatic* of sin, not as its essence. This important point becomes especially clear when we turn to a passage in Romans.

Romans 1:24-27

On any reckoning, Romans was written several years after 1 Corinthians. But unlike the earlier letter, Romans was addressed to a Christian community (likely organized into several house churches) that was not of the apostle's founding. He had never been as far west as Italy. One of his reasons for writing Romans was to gain support for a mission to Spain that he hoped to launch from the imperial city with the help of the Roman Christians. The passage that bears on our topic occurs close to the beginning of this letter (Rom 1:24-27):

Therefore God gave [idolaters] 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, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse 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.

This paragraph contains the only biblical reference to *female* homoeroticism (v. 26b) and leaves us in no doubt that the apostle associates all homoerotic conduct with the “degrading passions” and “shameless acts” that follow from idolatry. We must not, however, isolate these verses from their context. The very first word in verse 24, “therefore,” translates a (Greek) coordinating conjunction, and this, if nothing else, requires us to take stock of the preceding paragraphs. What is Paul's topic in this section of the letter? What are his aim and the logic of his argument? What prompts him to mention homoerotic conduct?

We may begin with the observation that Paul has not formulated his reference to homoerotic relationships as a moral directive, and that it does not stand in the section of the letter where most of his ethical appeals and exhortations are to be found (chs. 12–15). Nor does it occur in the sections where he is introducing the Roman Christians to his understanding of the gospel (3:21–8:39; chs. 9–11). It occurs, rather, in a section (1:18–3:20) where his aim is to show that the whole of humankind, Jew and Gentile alike, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (see 3:22b-23); and, therefore, that all are in need of being put right (justified) by God's saving grace. Paul speaks first of sin's power as it is manifested among the Gentiles (1:18-32), and later of sin's power as it is manifested among the Jews (2:17–3:20). The paragraphs in between (2:1-16) emphasize the impartiality of God, who causes “anguish and distress for *everyone* who does evil” and provides “glory and honor and peace for *everyone* who does good” (vv. 9-11, italics added).

The indictment of the Gentiles in 1:18-32 contains terms and arguments that were the stock-in-trade of much Hellenistic-Jewish teaching, although Paul has adapted and configured these in his own way. He allows that the Gentiles, even though they have not been, like the Jews, “instructed in the law” (see 2:18), are nonetheless able to know about God as he discloses himself in creation “through the things he has made” (vv. 19-20a). In Paul's view, however, knowledge *about* God is not enough to qualify as faith in God. He declares the Gentiles to be “without excuse” because “though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (vv. 20b-21a). Instead, “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” (vv. 21b-23).

Even though words for “sin” do not occur until later (the verb in 2:12, the noun in 3:9), Paul's understanding of sin is elegantly stated in 1:21a:

sin is refusing to give God glory (NRSV: “honor”) and thanks, which is to say, it is refusing to acknowledge the grace and the claim that underlie and give order to the whole of creation.

In the case of the Gentiles, sin is manifested as idolatry. When “they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” that looked like themselves or birds or animals (v. 23, echoing Ps 106:20, which refers to *Israel’s* idolatry), they had, in fact, “exchanged the truth about God for a lie” and devoted themselves to “the creature rather than the Creator” (v. 25). This confusion of creature and Creator is not just “theological” in character but also “moral,” because to turn away from the Creator (sin) is to turn away, as well, from the moral order of creation. Paul’s reasoning here corresponds to the attacks on idolatry that were typical of the literature of Hellenistic Judaism. For example, the *Wisdom of Solomon* (a first-century B.C.E. book included in the Septuagint) attributes all manner of evils to the Gentiles’ ignorance of God:

For whether they kill children in their initiations, or celebrate secret mysteries,
or hold frenzied revels with strange customs,
they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure,
but they either treacherously kill one another, or grieve one another by adultery,
and all is a raging riot of blood and murder, theft and deceit, corruption,
faithlessness, tumult, perjury,
confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of favors,
defiling of souls, sexual perversion,
disorder in marriages, adultery, and debauchery.
For the worship of idols not to be named
is the beginning and cause and end of every evil. (14:23-27)

This passage sheds light on the function of Rom 1:24-32. Like the unknown author of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, Paul is illustrating the moral

chaos that follows from idolatry. The vices he mentions are among those that Jews typically attributed to Gentiles and are meant to be representative of “every kind of wickedness” (v. 29). He does not call them sins but lists them as the consequences of the fundamental sin of idolatry, penalties appropriate for those who “did not see fit to acknowledge God” (v. 28).

Given the illustrative function of verses 24-32 within the argument of Rom 1:18-32, it is not surprising that Paul offers no particular reason for mentioning homoerotic conduct as an example of the moral chaos that follows from the refusal to let God be God. But why does he give relatively more attention to homoerotic behavior than to the vices he merely lists in verses 29-31 (“covetousness, malice . . . envy, murder, strife, deceit,” etc.)? Why does he not simply mention it as one vice among others, as he had in 1 Cor 6:9? An important clue is his repeated use of “exchange,” which occurs three times within just a few lines (vv. 23, 25, 26). He apparently found same-sex intercourse to be an especially apt illustration of the moral confusion to which idolatry leads: when the creature has been *exchanged* for the Creator (v. 23) and the truth about God has been *exchanged* for a lie (v. 25), who can be surprised that “natural intercourse” will be *exchanged* for “unnatural” (vv. 26-27)?

Paul doesn’t say, however, *why* he believes that homoerotic sex is against nature, shameless, and evidence of dishonorable passions and burning lust. He assumes that the believers in Rome will know what he means and fully agree. Indeed, the language he uses here is similar and in several instances identical to the language used by others in his day when denouncing homoerotic relationships. It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that the picture of homoerotic conduct Paul had in his mind corresponded closely to its depiction that we have seen in the literature of Hellenistic Judaism (e.g., Philo and Pseudo-Phocylides), and in the works of numerous Hellenistic moral philosophers (e.g., Seneca, Musonius, and

Dio Chrysostom). Like others, Paul regarded homoeroticism as a violation of the created order. Like others, he assumed that one simply decides to abandon “natural” intercourse (“exchanged” [v. 26] and “giving up” [v. 27] imply willful choice). And like others, he viewed this choice as driven by degraded desires and uncontrolled lust. A man of antiquity, he was as unaware as his contemporaries of the complex factors, including biological, that contribute to the shaping of sexual orientation.

In short, the attitude toward same-sex intercourse that surfaces in Rom 1:24-27 was widespread in Paul’s day. Like many others, both Jews and pagans, the apostle was repulsed by such behavior. He provided neither reasoned arguments nor scriptural authorization for his view, presumably because he regarded homoerotic acts as self-evidently evil. What distinguishes this passage is not what Paul has said about homoerotic behavior but the context within which he has said it. The “bad news” about the human predicament spelled out in Rom 1:18-3:20—the whole of humankind has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory—is but the run-up to an exposition of the “good news” that begins in Rom 3:21. The good news is that “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (5:8), and that absolutely nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39). This gospel of the gracious, saving love of God in Christ is the one great theme of all of Paul’s letters and the fundamental theological basis of all of his moral reasoning and instruction.

Observations and Reflections

Our examination of representative ancient sources, including two specific passages in Paul’s letters, has shown that the apostle, strictly speaking, said nothing about *homosexuality*. As noted earlier, this and related terms (including *heterosexuality* and *bisexuality*) were coined only

in the latter half of the nineteenth century during the early phases of research into *sexual orientation*, of which there was no conception in the ancient world. The *physiology of sex*, *sexual desire*, and *sexual conduct* were all matters of discussion, but sexual orientation could not have been a topic for any ancient writer, including Paul. For this reason, the actual subject of the present chapter has not been Paul’s view of homosexuality, but his view of *homoerotic conduct*. The following points need to be kept in mind, especially by those who are tempted to cite Pauline texts as providing unambiguous scriptural proof that homosexuality and all homosexual activity are inherently degenerate, disordered, and degrading.

1. *There are only two passages in Paul’s letters where the matter of homoerotic conduct is even briefly in view, and it is not a topic of moral instruction or exhortation in either one of them.* The list of wrongdoers in 1 Cor 6:9b-10a includes two words that appear to refer, respectively, to the penetrated and penetrating partners in male same-sex intercourse, but Paul neither highlights them nor explains them. And even in Rom 1:26-27, where homoeroticism is given more attention, it is not Paul’s subject.

2. *The apostle’s references to same-sex intercourse have to be interpreted in the light of the wider theological contexts in which they stand.* This is especially true of Rom 1:26-27. There homoeroticism is but one of the vices that Paul names in his indictment of the Gentiles (1:18-32), and this indictment is, in turn, part of a larger section of “bad news” (1:18-3:20) that prepares for the “good news” to follow (3:21-8:39). When this context is taken into account, it becomes evident that Paul identifies homoerotic conduct as an especially obvious example—at least to him and the recipients of this letter—of the moral chaos that has been visited on humankind by reason of sin, which he regards as the refusal to acknowledge that life is God’s gift and that one’s existence stands always under God’s claim.

3. Paul's denunciation of homoerotic conduct appears to have had no distinctively Christian roots, and there is no evidence that he sought to support his views on the subject with any particular scriptural or theological arguments. To the contrary, both the substance and the language of his references to homoeroticism suggest that his attitude toward it had been significantly shaped by prevailing cultural norms and stereotypes, including those that were part of his Jewish upbringing and education. In particular, the widespread condemnation of same-sex intercourse in the ancient Mediterranean world was based on three significant presuppositions (see above, "Paul's Bible" and "Paul's World").

First, it was commonly presupposed that all human beings are erotically attracted to the opposite sex, and that the true and proper reason for this attraction is the propagation of the species.

Again, it was commonly presupposed that all homoerotic sex is against nature (Rom 1:26, "natural intercourse for unnatural") because it violates the male's superior and dominant role in relation to the female. The reasoning was that a man who, like a woman, submits to penetration by another male is surrendering his manliness, that the man who penetrates him is complicit, and that both have shamed themselves by failing to exercise dominance over a woman. And sex between females was denounced because imitating the male's role amounted to a challenge of male superiority. Because this violation of gender roles was understood to dishonor especially the male (Rom 1:27, "Men committed shameless acts with men"), it was widely viewed as undermining the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of the political order and of society as a whole.

Finally, it was commonly presupposed that all homoerotic sex, consensual or not, is the wild raging of inordinate passions and lusts, the wanton indulgence of one's sexual appetites (Rom 1:24-27, "lusts . . . degrading passions . . . consumed with passion").

None of these presuppositions, and none of the stereotypes that went with them, has stood the test of time. More than a century of research in the biological, social, and behavioral sciences has taught us that human sexuality involves much more than physiology, erotic desire, and conduct. The presuppositions about homoeroticism that shaped the views of ancient writers are now as outdated as many of their judgments about human anatomy and the human reproductive system. Especially because of the knowledge that has been gained about *sexual orientation* and the complex factors that are involved in its formation, the ancient presuppositions about sex and gender have been rendered obsolete.

4. To the extent that Paul's letters can inform discussions of homosexuality in our day, they will do so not because of what the apostle had to say about homoerotic conduct but because of what he had to say about the gospel he had been called to proclaim. His two references to same-sex intercourse can be appreciated as part of his *rhetorical strategy* in 1 Cor 6 and Rom 1, respectively. They are not, however, among the core affirmations and claims that are definitive of his gospel. The affirmations at the heart of his gospel are that humankind is the creation of a just, loving, and faithful God, made in God's image as it is revealed in Christ; and that humankind, defiantly refusing to honor and give thanks to God, is being redeemed, renewed, and restored by God's unconditional love. For Paul, the decisive enactment of God's justice and love is Christ's reconciling death and resurrection. He understood that saving event to have inaugurated a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:14-17; Gal 6:15-16), and to have exposed all "human wisdom" as foolishness and everything deemed powerful by "human standards" as weakness (e.g., 1 Cor 1:23-31).

The gospel as it is articulated by Paul cannot and does not provide ready-made, once-and-for-all answers to questions about good and bad, right and wrong, justice and injustice. Rather, Paul's good news that the

whole of creation has been graced and claimed by God's redeeming love is simultaneously a challenge to all of our imperfect, human notions of what is true and just and good, and a summons to be continually questioning and reassessing all of our presuppositions, all of our stereotypes, every cultural norm, and every social convention.

For Further Reading

Quotations in this chapter: "Draft Addition (December 2004)" to the entry on "Sexuality" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1989), online: dictionary.oed.com; Phyllis A. Bird, "The Bible in Christian Ethical Deliberation concerning Homosexuality: Old Testament Contributions," in *Homosexuality, Science, and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (ed. David L. Balch; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 142–76.

Ancient sources cited in this chapter: the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Testament of Naphtali*, and *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides* are cited from the translations in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983); Dio Chrysostom, Josephus, Philo, Plato, Plutarch, and Seneca are cited, except as noted, from the translations in the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, various years); Musonius is cited from Cora E. Lutz, "Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates," in *Yale Classical Studies* 10 (ed. A. R. Bellinger; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1947), 32–147.

In addition to the volume edited by David L. Balch (above), the following books contain essays, contributed by authors of various viewpoints, that are pertinent to an understanding of the texts and issues discussed in this chapter: Robert L. Brawley, ed., *Biblical Ethics & Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); Jeffrey S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the*

Debate (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Choon-Leong Seow, ed., *Homosexuality and Christian Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

Other significant discussions of the texts and issues discussed in this chapter: John H. Elliott, "No Kingdom of God for Softies? or, What Was Paul Really Saying? 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in Context," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 34 (2004): 17–40; Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (trans. Kirsi Stjerna; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, listed with the "Further Reading" at the end of chapter 2.

Commentaries on Romans: Leander E. Keck, *Romans* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); John Reumann, "Romans," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (ed. J. D. G. Dunn and J. W. Rogerson; Grand Rapids, and Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2003), 1277–1313; N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* 10 (ed. L. E. Keck et al.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 393–770. More detailed: Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996); Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

Commentaries on 1 Corinthians are listed with the "Further Reading" at the end of chapter 2.

CHAPTER 29

Homosexuality and the Bible

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.

—LEVITICUS 20:13

God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse 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. —ROMANS 1:26-27

Over the last fifteen years, I've had more questions asked of me about homosexuality and the Bible than about any other topic in this book. It is the most divisive issue facing Christianity in the West today. Americans and Europeans have experienced a shift in attitudes and perspectives on this issue, and that shift spans all generations, though it is most pronounced

among young adults. While mainline and Catholic churches wrestle with the question of homosexuality more than evangelical churches, changing attitudes toward homosexuality are being felt in evangelical churches as well.

Gallup found in 2001 that 40 percent of Americans felt homosexual relations were morally acceptable. By 2013, 59 percent of Americans believed that homosexual relations were morally acceptable.¹ I do not mention these statistics to suggest that Christians should determine what is morally or ethically acceptable by using opinion polls. But the polls show us that our culture, including many Christians in our culture, is questioning the Bible's teaching regarding homosexuality. Hence Christians, particularly pastors and church leaders, will find themselves in an increasing number of conversations about homosexuality and the Bible. In this chapter, I'd like to offer some reflections on homosexuality and the Bible as I've sought to make sense of this issue.

The issues we've described up to this point—about the Bible's humanity, what precisely is meant by its divine inspiration, and how we make sense of the Bible's difficult passages—bear directly on the issue of the handful of verses in the Bible that speak about same-gender sexual relations. If every word in the Bible was virtually dictated by God, as suggested by those who hold to verbal, plenary inspiration, it would *seem* clear that God finds homosexual intimacy to be, in the words of the Law, an "abomination" and in the words of Paul, a "degrading," "unnatural," "shameless act" worthy of divine punishment. Though I reject this concept of inspiration, I believe that even those who hold this view have grounds for rethinking the church's traditional interpretation of the biblical passages related to same-sex intimacy.

I'd like to begin our conversation about homosexuality and the Bible by inviting you to think with me about what precisely Moses

had in mind when he commanded that a man who "lies with a man as with a woman" must be put to death.²

There is no record in the Torah of two men seeking to share their lives together as companions and lovers. There are two instances in the Torah of men lying with men as with a woman. It seems likely to me that when Moses commands the death penalty for a man lying with a man that he was addressing these practices that are described in two separate passages in the Torah. Let's consider each of these two passages.

In Genesis 19, we read the story of Sodom, from which the terms "sodomy" and "sodomite" are drawn. In this story, two angels (in both Hebrew and Greek the word "angel" means "messenger") came from God, and visited the town of Sodom. Lot, Abraham's nephew, invited the men to lodge with him for the night. Here's what Genesis says: "Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. They called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.' Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, 'No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof'" (Genesis 19:4–8, NIV).

Once again we see the strange patriarchal world in which the Bible was shaped, as Lot offers his two daughters to be raped by the men of Sodom rather than giving up the strangers he's just met (a story virtually identical to the one that occurs in Judges 19 with the Levite's concubine and the men of Gibeah).

But here's the question I would ask related to this story: is this story really about loving, committed homosexual relationships?

Had the town's men gang-raped Lot's daughters, would this story be about loving, committed heterosexual relationships? Of course not. Did the men of Sodom consider themselves homosexual? All of them? Or was their attack upon these strangers a way of demonstrating power over them, humiliating them, while violently gratifying their own sexual desires?

I'm reminded of the story of Scott Howard, who was repeatedly raped by members of a prison gang called 211 Crew while serving time in the Colorado Department of Corrections.³ The 211 Crew was known for a vocal hatred of homosexuals. Yet they raped men in prison suspected of being gay. Rape was a means of demonstrating power over others. What relationship does this kind of gang-rape have to loving, committed relationships between two people of the same sex? None that I can see.

I doubt any of the men of Sodom would have considered themselves homosexual by our definitions today. Genesis 18 tells us the people of Sodom regularly practiced evil. This attempted gang-rape was just the latest in a long line of horrible things the people of Sodom had done.

Centuries later, God would say through the prophet Ezekiel, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it." Among the abominable things they did was to attempt to gang-rape two strangers who had come to town, in addition to having pride, hoarding food, and not aiding the poor and needy.

It is worth noting that the story of the attempted gang rape in Sodom is the only example of same-sex sexual activity in the Torah up to this point. Could this have been the backdrop to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:1? Given that this is the only occurrence of a "man

lying with a man" is it at least possible that Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 were condemning homosexual rape rather than anything approximating two people sharing their lives in a loving relationship?

It is also possible that Moses was condemning the pagan use of "sacred" or temple prostitution in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Deuteronomy 23:17–18 says, "None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute. You shall not bring the fee of a prostitute or the wages of a male prostitute into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow, for both of these are abhorrent to the Lord your God." We know little about this practice, but it appears to either have been some kind of fertility ritual or sex for pay with the payment going to support the temple of the pagan deity for which the prostitute worked. If this was the model for sex between men, then Moses's commands in Leviticus 18 and 20 may have been prohibiting Israelite men from visiting pagan male temple prostitutes and thus practicing idolatry. Once again, this practice was a far cry from two people of the same gender sharing their lives together.

There's another possible way of understanding the thinking behind Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The Torah classifies a variety of things as natural and unnatural, normal and abnormal. Natural is normative and, by virtue of its normative status, "clean." What is not "normal" is "unclean." Other words used in place of "unclean" in the Old Testament are detestable, or a practice, act, or animal might be considered an "abomination." Homosexuality did not conform to the norm for sexual relations, and hence it was unnatural, unclean, detestable, or an abomination.

There are a host of things described by the Law of Moses as unclean or an abomination that we would not consider unclean or abnormal today.⁴ Eating pork, or rabbit, or any seafood that does not have scales (lobster, crab, clams) was detestable and an abomi-

nation. Yet we don't consider eating these things an abomination today, nor a violation of God's will. Is it possible that the backdrop for Moses's condemnation of a man lying with a man as with a woman was this sense that something was either clean or unclean, acceptable or detestable based upon whether it was "normal" (i.e. conforming to the norm) or abnormal?

My point in all of this is that we too quickly assume we know what Moses was condemning, but if we look at the only two examples in the Torah of men lying with men as with women—gang rape and temple prostitution—we find practices that have virtually nothing to do with two people sharing their lives in a loving, committed relationship. Likewise, Moses's way of determining that some things were abnormal, therefore unclean, therefore off limits, therefore an abomination is not how we determine what is acceptable or detestable today.

When Paul takes up the issue of same-sex relationships in Romans, he seems to have in mind at least two of the three ideas I've just described from the Old Testament: ritual sexual encounters tied to pagan worship/idolatry and the idea that what was natural or normative was clean, and what was not natural was unclean and sinful. We see this in the way Paul contrasts natural versus unnatural in Romans 1:26–27, "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another." We hear echoes of the Old Testament view of clean and unclean, natural and unnatural, acceptable or detestable. Likewise these verses describing same-gender sex are set in the context of Paul's condemnation of idolatry (see 1:25). It has been thought by many that Paul was describing, as Moses may have been, ritual prostitution practiced in some of the pagan temples. One final same-gender practice that might have been behind Paul's

condemnation of same-gender relationships in Romans 1 was pederasty. This was the practice of mature men taking on pubescent boys as students and lovers, a practice we would still condemn today.

Again what I am hoping to demonstrate is that we might explain the condemnations related to same-sex intimacy in the Bible as pertaining to these kinds of situations: gang-rape, temple prostitution, idolatry, and pederasty. If this is what the scripture writers were condemning, I suspect most of us would agree with their condemnations of these practices. But these practices, and the motivations behind them, are very different from two people sharing their lives together in a covenant relationship.

In the rest of this chapter, I'm going to offer an alternative approach for making sense of the biblical condemnations of same-sex relationships. I'd like to suggest that the handful of verses in Moses and Paul may be similar to other verses in their writings that seem out of sync with God's will as we understand it today, verses that condone violence, accept slavery, or subordinate women.

Before considering this last point, I want to say a word about Jesus. Some are quick to point out that while Jesus never addresses homosexual relationships, he does describe heterosexual marriage as God's will. That is true, but the context of these passages is never in references to loving same-sex relationships. The context of his reference to heterosexual relationships is, if I remember correctly, always about divorce. I don't think we can take Jesus's silence on this issue as approval of same-gender relationships. But it is important, given that Jesus is God's definitive Word by which all other words about God are judged, that he does not speak to this issue at all. That, for me, leaves open the possibility that Moses and Paul did not accurately capture God's will concerning same-sex relationships.

I have suggested above that the handful of passages in the Bible that seem to speak directly to a prohibition against same-sex marriage and companionship could be prohibitions against something entirely different from what we mean today when we talk about two people sharing their lives as loving companions. But even if they are directly condemning same-sex relationships, we've seen already that not everything explicitly taught in scripture captures God's timeless will. Some scriptures seem clearly shaped by the cultural norms and the theological and social presuppositions of their authors. They do not seem to reflect the heart of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We have seen that the New Testament church took the bold step of acknowledging that much in the Old Testament did not reflect God's continuing will for his people, setting aside circumcision, kosher laws, and much more.

Among the biblical teachings that many question today are those we've discussed so far: the propensity toward patriarchal norms that devalue women and even command that they remain silent in the church, and the tragic violence said to be committed in the name of and at the command of God. In addition, slavery is allowed and even regulated in scripture, though we recognize today that it is contrary to God's will.

Let's spend a few minutes on the topic of slavery before coming back to the Bible and homosexuality. Though the defining story of the Israelite people was that they were once slaves who, by the liberating power of God, were set free, the Israelites continued to embrace the practice of slavery. It would be more than two millennia before human beings would finally understand that slavery was wrong. Moses didn't see this as he gave laws, in the name of God, that allowed Israelites to sell their children into slavery, to purchase slaves, and even to beat their slaves.

Sometimes those defending biblical inerrancy and verbal, ple-

nary inspiration say that slavery in the Bible was not like American slavery, as though somehow the biblical form of slavery was more morally acceptable. But when you read passages in the Bible related to slavery, this does not appear to be the case. Consider for instance, Exodus 21:20–21: "When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property." The Israelite is allowed to beat his slave with a rod provided the slave doesn't die within two days from the beating? Do we really believe this was ever God's will for human behavior? Yet Exodus 21:20–21 purports to be the command of God. How do we explain this if not by recognizing that cultural norms played a role in shaping scriptural norms?

Here's the point: There are things commanded in the Bible, in the name of God, that today we recognize as immoral and inconsistent with the heart of God. Rather than attempting to justify such things, we should loudly condemn these teachings and commands and make clear that this did not ever reflect the will of God.

Hundreds of verses in the Bible refer to slavery. These appear in both Testaments. It seems that Paul and Peter could not imagine a world without slavery. The New Testament authors command runaway slaves to return to their masters. Though there were slave owners in the church, they were not commanded to let their slaves go free (though Paul asked Philemon to free his slave Onesimus, this is not commanded elsewhere by the apostles). Instead, Christian slave owners were to treat their slaves justly.

As we read and interpret scripture, I'd suggest that there are three broad categories—let's call them buckets—that biblical passages fit into. There are passages of scripture—I would suggest the vast majority—that *reflect the timeless will of God for human beings*, for instance, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." There are

other passages that *reflect God's will in a particular time but not for all time*, including much of the ritual law of the Old Testament. And there are passages that *reflect the culture and historical circumstances in which they were written but never reflected God's timeless will*, like those related to slavery. The question regarding loving and committed relationships between same-sex people is, in which of the three buckets do the handful of verses that speak about same-sex intimacy belong? Conservatives on this issue believe they fit in the first bucket. Many moderates and progressives believe they fit into the second or, most likely, the third bucket.

Interestingly, most conservatives I know agree that at least half of one of these scriptures fits into the second or third bucket. Leviticus 20:13 states, "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." Does God really want gay men to be put to death? I don't know anyone, not even Topeka's Fred Phelps, who advocates that homosexuals be put to death. Even conservatives see this as a bucket 2 command. Progressives would put it in bucket 3, but no one sees it as a bucket 1 command.

So here's what I want you to notice: First, it is possible that the biblical passages where same-sex intimacy is mentioned could be describing something very different from the loving monogamous relationships that we're currently considering in conversations about homosexuality. The practices Moses and Paul forbade likely were quite different from the idea of two same-sex people sharing their lives. Second, even if Moses and Paul were able to conceive of concepts like sexual orientation, what they wrote does not necessarily reflect the heart and character of God. Ultimately, where you come out on this issue is not a matter of biblical authority. Serious Christians on both the left and the right believe the Bible speaks with authority in our lives. Likewise, Christians on both sides rec-

ognize that some biblical passages don't capture God's timeless will or reflect God's heart and character. Which bucket we put scriptures in, or how we see them in the light of their culture, is not a matter of biblical authority but a matter of biblical interpretation.

My understanding of the nature of scripture has changed over the years. After coming to appreciate the Bible's humanity and recognizing its complexity, I no longer feel compelled to defend passages attributing violence to God. I also no longer make the case that Old Testament slavery "really wasn't that bad," and I've been grateful to welcome ordained women in leadership and preaching roles in our church.

For years I felt compassion for gay and lesbian people. I welcomed them into our church. But I told them that I believed it was not God's will that they share their lives with another person of the same gender because the Bible taught that same-sex intimacy was wrong. (Though I refrained from telling them the Bible called them an "abomination" and commanded their death.) I told them that I understood that this prohibition was a hard saying, but if they wanted to be deeply committed Christians they needed to remain celibate. I was telling them, in essence, that they needed either to change or to forgo romantic love and companionship for the rest of their lives.

This bothered me, in part because I was asking them to give up what was so life-giving to me. I have been married to LaVon for thirty-one years. We married right out of high school. Our relationship is not primarily about sex but companionship. We are each other's helper and companion. I can't imagine life without being able to hold her hand, kiss her lips, sleep next to her in bed, or share romantic moments. On the merit of a handful of verses of scripture, whose historical background and alternative interpretations I had not fully explored, I was telling people who wanted to follow Christ

that they needed to forgo romantic companionship in order to faithfully follow Jesus. I was asking of them something I was not sure I could do myself, and which I was not required to do as a heterosexual Christian.

As I listened to and read the stories of hundreds of gay and lesbian people, I came to love them, to feel compassion for them, and to question whether these biblical passages actually reflected what God would say to his gay and lesbian children. But it was only as I began to recognize the complexity of scripture, its humanity, and the various “buckets” into which its passages fit that I was able to see that the prevailing position within much of Christianity may not, in fact, reflect God’s will for homosexual people.

Are there homosexuals who are emotionally broken and in need of help? Of course, just as there are heterosexuals who are the sexually and emotionally broken and unhealthy. Are there perverse and unhealthy expressions of homosexuality? Of course, just as there are perverse and unhealthy expressions of heterosexuality. But just as there are healthy heterosexual relationships, I’ve witnessed healthy homosexual relationships.

The Bible informs my relationship with my wife, and it should inform how two homosexuals share their life and love. And just as heterosexuals are called to fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness as the highest ideal, so too are homosexual Christians called to such ideals. One doesn’t get a pass for immoral behavior by being homosexual, but most homosexuals I’ve met are not looking for a pass to be immoral; they are looking for a blessing to share their life with another person as “companion and helper.”

I’m told that there is less monogamy and more sexual and relational dysfunction among homosexuals. I don’t know if this is true or not. What I know is that most churches are unwilling to teach what healthy sexuality and romantic relationships look like for

homosexual people. Since it was unacceptable and sinful to the church, many were left to live out these relationships in unhealthy and illicit ways. But it is worth noting that the vast majority of illicit sexual behavior, sexual addiction, and sexual abuse is not related to homosexuality, but heterosexuality.

One more thing I feel compelled to mention: I’ve heard over the last ten years that homosexual marriage is somehow a threat to “real” marriage. I’ve never felt my marriage was threatened by the right of gay and lesbian people to marry. The threats to my marriage come from my own desires, from my failure to listen to and understand my wife, and from my workaholic tendencies, but whether homosexual people can marry or not has absolutely no bearing on the health of my marriage.

It is clear that the younger generation in our society sees this issue differently from those Christians who are older. There is greater acceptance of gay people among younger adults, and a greater willingness to read the scriptures that speak about same-sex intimacy in the same way we read scriptures about slavery or violence or women keeping silent in the church. This is true even among many younger evangelical Christians. As more and more states allow homosexual marriage, gay and lesbian couples who have been married for years, who have children, will show up at churches hoping to find Christ and a Christian community. Will churches ask these families to divorce and divide the children to be faithful followers of Christ? Or, as one pastor suggested to me, will the church allow the family to stay together but insist that the spouses live in separate bedrooms and no longer share any romantic dimension of their relationship?

I believe that within twenty years a large number of Christians, including conservative and evangelical Christians, will have come to see this issue differently—more grace-fully. The issue will lead

many Christians to question their view of the Bible, asking the kind of questions we've been discussing in this book. Mainline churches will have resolved the issue ten years before evangelical churches. A large number of churches will hold to a more conservative interpretation of scripture on this issue, but they will seem increasingly unattractive to younger Christians and to nonreligious and nominally religious people who are drawn to Jesus but not to what will be increasingly perceived as bigotry.

I'm not suggesting that most Christians who are conservative on this issue are bigots or homophobes. While this is clearly true for some, I don't believe these terms apply to most of the conservative Christians I know. Most genuinely wish to love gay and lesbian people and to welcome them into their churches. For most, the issue is what kind of book the Bible is, what it means to call it inspired, and how to understand the Bible's humanity. For some earnest, deeply committed Christians changing their view of homosexuality feels tantamount to apostasy. Yet many of these same Christians already recognize the complexity of scripture as it relates to a host of other subjects. Somehow the issue of homosexuality feels different to them.

My own views on this issue changed as a result of thinking about the nature of scripture, God's role in inspiring it, the meaning of inspiration, and how we make sense of the Bible's difficult passages. As I came to appreciate the Bible's humanity, I found I could at least ask whether the passages in scripture about same-sex intimacy truly captured God's heart regarding same-sex relationships. But what really prompted me to look seriously at this issue and to wrestle with it were the gay and lesbian people I came to know and love, including children I had watched grow up in the church I serve.

I am a United Methodist pastor. My denomination currently

prohibits pastors from officiating in same-sex marriages, prohibits our churches from hosting same-sex marriages, forbids the ordination of "self-avowed practicing homosexuals," and notes that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." I believe these ideas will become increasingly problematic in the years ahead, and as people wrestle with the nature of scripture, I think they will increasingly see the passages related to homosexuality as bucket 2 or bucket 3 scriptures.

Ultimately the key to finding our way forward on this issue will come from our ability to articulate a clear view of scripture that recognizes both its divine inspiration and its humanity. This view must give us tools and guidelines for knowing when we can question scriptures as no longer binding, and when and why others are not to be set aside. The earliest apostles made a dramatic decision at the Jerusalem Council that some scriptures were no longer binding. I think it is critical that we learn from them. I believe there are times when God calls us to ask questions of our Bible, and as we do, we set aside those things that may not reflect the timeless will of God, even as we recognize and guard against a temptation to set aside what is simply inconvenient.

My hope is that this book might aid in that conversation.