

The “Homosexuality” Debate: Two Streams of Biblical Interpretation

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In seeking discernment concerning the controversy over intimate same-sex relationships among Christians, we must learn better to understand points of view different from our own. This essay represents my attempt to do so. I will be describing the main arguments of several recent scholars who, in general, may be seen as reflecting two different understandings of biblical teaching.

I use terms for each of these viewpoints, “restrictive” and “inclusive,” that I hope are essentially value neutral. By “restrictive,” I mean views that support *restricting* the participation in the church of gay and lesbian Christians who are in intimate relationships. By “inclusive,” I refer to those who support inclusion with no restrictions based related to homosexuality per se on the participation of such Christians in the church.[i]

The “Restrictive” Case

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

In Thomas Schmidt’s view, the basic message of the Bible stems from and elaborates on the teaching of the creation story in Genesis one and two. Our understanding of appropriate human sexual expression should follow from Genesis. The creation account makes four crucial points regarding sexuality. (1) Reproduction is good. (2) Sex is good. (3) Marriage is good. (4) Male and female are necessary sexual counterparts (43).

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

The biblical teaching against same-sex sexual intimacy in the rest of the Bible all presupposes the Genesis portrayal of normative marriage and is consistent with that portrayal. The main reason the Bible speaks so clearly about sexual activity which does not occur within the context of opposite-sex

marriage is, in Schmidt's view, because illicit sexual activity is understood to be a threat to the very social foundations of the Bible's faith communities.

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

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

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

Paul's teaching against same-sex sexual intimacy also found expression in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Paul uses a term here that he likely coined himself in condemning same-sex sexual intimacy. The Greek word *arsenokoites* clearly comes from the Greek translation of Leviticus 18:22 that Paul would have used. The Leviticus verse uses two words (*arseno* = "men" and *koiten* = "lies with") which are combined by Paul, presumably to evoke memories of the teaching of Leviticus that forbids "a man laying with another man as he would with a woman" (95-96).

Schmidt concludes that the biblical teaching is being confirmed in our present day as we observe the self-destructiveness of same-sex sexual activity – which is what Paul's teaching in Romans one would lead us to expect. Idolatrous behavior is invariably self-destructive as God "gives up" idolaters to the consequences of their rebellion versus God (100-130).

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

Richard Hays admits that the Bible rarely refers directly to homosexual behavior; however, he asserts, we must recognize that each of these rare references is totally negative and needs to be taken seriously. The two references in the book of Leviticus (18:23; 20:10) establish the basic tone. Their

unambiguous prohibition of same-sex sexual intimacy founded the universal rejection of such relationships in Judaism (381).

Hays focuses most of his attention on pertinent New Testament texts, especially Romans 1:18-32. Romans one plays a special role in Christian sexual ethics because it is the only place in the New Testament that explains the Christian condemnation of homosexual behavior in an explicitly theological framework (383).

Underlying Paul's theology here is his reference to God as creator. This reference grounds Paul's discussion of sexuality in the story of creation in Genesis one and two (i.e., the portrayal of male/female sexuality as the norm, 386).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The extremity of the punishment in Leviticus 20:13 for same-sex sex reflects the seriousness of such a violation of God's intent for human sexuality. Even if we do not use the death penalty for such offenses any more, we nonetheless should recognize the seriousness of the violation that evokes it in Leviticus. The prohibition remains normative for us today, even if the punishment does not (47).

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

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

The creation account in Genesis provides us with crucial information in relation to these questions. Our direction as human beings may be seen in the fact that God created human beings as male and female (Genesis 1:27, 103). Furthermore, Genesis 2:18 tells us that simply as male, the first human being was incomplete. To be complete, human living must include both sexes, different from one another yet complimentary.

Grenz understands the creation stories to provide the normative model for marriage – male and female, complimenting each other, completing each other. From this portrayal, he concludes that sexual intimacy is meant *only* for people in an opposite-sex marriage. Sexual intimacy is meant to

address our incompleteness – the incompleteness that God resolved by creating women to join with men (104).

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

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

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

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

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

The three main points Swartley draws from the Old Testament in developing his case for opposing same-sex sexual intimacy are: (1) Genesis one portrays God's intention with creation being that sexuality is a good gift, with great power and subject to misuse (27-28). The only appropriate context for sexual intercourse is male/female marriage.

(2) The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is rightly understood as focusing on threatened *rape* as an expression of inhospitality, not on "loving homosexual relations." Nonetheless, it is significant that in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 "it is precisely (homo)sexual lust that precludes hospitality" (31-32).

(3) Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 regard same-sex relations as an abomination in the same category as idolatry and child-sacrifice (33). "The fact that same-sex male relations and Molech worship, which involved sacrificing offspring, are linked may be 'telling' of the seriousness of the same-sex offense" (35).

While acknowledging that Jesus did not *overtly* speak of homosexuality, Swartley draws a number of points from Jesus' teaching that are relevant for our ethical discernment. He believes that Jesus combines a commitment to holiness (e.g., a condemnation of *porneia*["fornication," defined by Swartley as "as sexual genital relations outside heterosexual marriage," 40]) with mercy (e.g., be loving toward even those you must critique for transgressing holiness requirements, 47). In relation to Paul, Swartley focuses on Romans 1:24-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9. He proposes that the Romans passage is particularly important because it links same-sex practices with idolatry – a rejection of the God-ordered normativity of heterosexuality. For people to turn to others of the same sex as sexual partners, according to Paul, reflects a substituting of worship of creation for worship of the creator (51-52).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most of the arguments in favor of the churches taking a welcoming stance toward gays and lesbians utilize at least to some degree various analogies that are interpreted as providing support for the churches devaluing the explicit anti-homosexual practice texts. Gagnon discusses various of these (e.g., Gentile inclusion as reflected especially in the book of Acts, the Bible's apparent support for slavery that is rejected by modern Christians, the recent acceptance of women's leadership in the church, and the acceptance of remarriage after divorce for church members). He argues that none of these analogies holds much weight (43-47).

By far the clearest moral analogy, in Gagnon's view, is the parallel between the Bible's perspective on incest and its perspective on homosexual practice. For Gagnon, just as the Bible's prohibition of incest remains normative for contemporary Christians, so too does the parallel prohibition of homosexual practice (48-50).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The "Inclusive" Case

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

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

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

Scanzoni and Mollenkott do turn to the traditional texts that overtly refer to same-sex sex. They begin, however, by emphasizing that the context for the mention of same-sex sexual activity in

scripture is always that of other negative acts – for example, adultery, failure to propagate, promiscuity, violence, idolatrous worship. The sexual acts themselves are not condemned in isolation from the other problems (56).

For example, the story of Sodom in Genesis 19 tells not about same-sex sexual orientation and intimate loving relationships. The story there is about heterosexual males who were bent on gang rape (58). A second example, Leviticus 18–20, reflects a deep concern for ritual purity as a means of showing Israel's distinctiveness as a people set apart for God. Activities that reflected conformity with surrounding cultures, particularly their religious practices understood by Israelites to be idolatrous, were strictly forbidden. It appears that Israelites associated male/male sex with such practices.

A third example of the Bible's references to same-sex sexual activity being connected with other problems is seen in the New Testament – the book of Romans. In chapter one, Paul says nothing about homosexual *love*; rather, the focus is on sexual activity in the context of lust and idolatry (68). The final examples of the Bible's mention of same-sex sexual activity come in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. In both of these cases, Scanzoni and Mollenkott argue, the writer is referring to particular types of sexual abuse, *not* homosexual orientation in general (76).

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

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

Daniel Helminiak argues that we must not draw strong conclusions about the applicability of biblical texts to present-day issues when we do not have adequate historical background to determine what the texts meant to their writers and first readers (32). This uncertainty applies to all the small handful of biblical texts that appear to address issues of same-sex sexuality.

As well, Helminiak argues, from what we can tell about the biblical teachings concerning same-sex sexuality, it appears clear that the Bible was not addressing the same types of relations that are under scrutiny in today's context. The Bible did not know of homosexuality as a sexual orientation; only of homogenital acts. Hence, it gives no answer "about spontaneous affection for people of the same sex and about the ethical possibility of expressing that affection in loving, sexual relationships" (33).

In Helminiak's view, an action is not wrong simply because a Bible verse seems to label it as such. "A thing is wrong for a reason. If the reason no longer holds and no other reason is given, how can a thing still be judged wrong" (33)?

Genesis 19, the story of the judgment of Sodom, tells of a violation of hospitality expectations – not of a society that is judged because of its tolerance of loving same-sex intimacy (40). The second Old Testament passage commonly referred to in discussions of sexuality, Leviticus's double mention of the prohibition of "men laying with men as with women" (18:23; 20:10), stemmed from concerns about idolatry – not from scruples about sex per se (45).

The prohibitions in the Holiness Code include a wide variety of actions with the common theme of being actions that were characteristic of those outside of Israel. Many of these actions were not understood to be wrong in and of themselves, but because they were connected with Gentile, and not Jewish, identity. Hence, Helminiak asserts, "no thought is given [in Leviticus] to whether the sex *in itself* is right or wrong" (46-47).

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

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

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

Helminiak understands the other brief references to same-sex sexuality in Paul's writings (1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10) to be similar in meaning. The key term, used in both verses, is the Greek word *arsenokoitai*. According to Helminiak, Paul uses this term (translated "sodomites" in the NRSV) to indicate a type of male/male sexual activity that is "wanton, lewd, and irresponsible."

Paul is not meaning to focus on the fact that this activity happens between people of the same sex so much as on its nature as exploitative and obsessive (85). That is, Paul is concerned about the harm done to people when they are out of control sexually, *not* about mutually edifying intimate relationships.

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

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

Nissinen links sex roles with the prohibition of male/male sex. The Code focuses exclusively on males because it would have been impossible for female/female sex to challenge male domination (the domination being symbolized by the active, penetrating role males played in sex). What made male/male sex an "abomination" was one of the males taking the female role (being penetrated), thereby transgressing sex boundaries and confusing sex roles (43-44).

The Holiness Code prohibits such sexual activity because of a desire to maintain clearly distinct sex roles and because of a specific concern about rejecting non-Israelite religious practices. Neither of these concerns applies to modern-day Christians; hence, the prohibition has no direct application for us.

In Genesis 19, the story of Sodom is basically a story of inhospitality, not a story of sexual behavior. The story makes this point by presenting two positive examples of hospitality, Abraham (18:1-5) and Lot (19:1-3), that contrast with the inhospitality of the Sodomites.

The story of the murdered concubine in Judges 19 parallels the Sodom story in important respects and reinforces the point that the mob's concern was the expression of dominance and inhospitality, not same-sex sexual desire (51).

Nissinen calls the relationship David and Jonathan had "homosocial" (a close friendship between men that may or may not have erotic expressions, 17). He suggests that their kind of friendship, based as it is on love and equality, may be "more comparable with modern homosexual people's experiences of themselves than those texts that explicitly speak of homosexual acts that are aggressive, violent expressions of domination and subjugation" (56).

In addressing Paul's writings, Nissinen states initially that in the Hellenistic world of Paul's day, same-sex sex was considered "against nature" for two reasons. First, it did not lead to procreation, and, second, it signaled a violation of sex roles wherein the male always was "active" and the female always "passive" (88).

Paul himself uses the phrase "against nature" several times in his letters as "a matter of the common order of things as Paul had learned it." "Unnatural" or "against nature" means, for Paul, something beyond normal experience – good or bad. When he uses the term in Romans 1:19-32, he is not using it as a technical term with specifically Christian content. "Against nature" here simply means "unusual" or "not what one would expect" (105). Paul does not have "the created order" in mind when he uses "against nature." He is not alluding to Genesis 1-3. He is simply reflecting the Hellenistic sense that these people he's speaking of in Romans one are not practicing the kind of sex one would expect (106-107).

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

The specific meaning of the terms used in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 that are often translated as referring to same-sex sexuality is actually quite obscure. In both passages, though, the context makes it clear that both *arsenokoites* and *malakos* are examples, along with numerous other terms used in these verses, of the exploitation of persons. Paul is concerned with the wrong that people do to others, not with non-harmful intimate relationships (118).

David G. Myers and Letha Dawson Scanzoni. *What God Has Joined Together? A Christian Case for Gay Marriage*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.

David Myers and Letha Scanzoni address, as their fundamental concern, the issue of marriage among gay and lesbian Christians. Human beings thrive best in life-giving intimate relationships, as our most basic human drive is for loving connections with other people (11). Human happiness tends to be linked with the possibilities of covenanted attachments in marriage partnerships. Married people tend to be happier than unmarried people (16-17).

Myers and Scanzoni assert that we do not yet know *why* people end up attracted to others of their same sex; we do know, though, that for some people this attraction is irreversibly fixed. Hence, to forbid people with such attraction to enter into possibility of marriage is highly problematic. In doing so, we may be consigning a significant number to people to lives that will be less fulfilling and

fruitful than they could be. We face, in the authors' perspective, a major benefit of the doubt against so limiting the options of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.

So, Myers and Scanzoni ask, do we have clear bases in Scripture for taking a stance that seems, in face of the life-enhancing possibilities of marriage, to be morally problematic? They do not think so. The Bible does not use the actual word "homosexuality." The few references to same-sex sexual acts all seem to have in mind other kinds of problems as well – e.g., idolatry, violent rape, lust, exploitation, promiscuity. The Bible seems to have no awareness of our contemporary understandings of homosexual orientation or the possibility of covenanted same-sex partnerships (84-85).

In regard to the New Testament, Myers and Scanzoni point to the story in the book of Acts about how Peter gave up his long-held assumptions and came to a more open view concerning Gentiles. Peter's change of heart stemmed in part from his personal contact with Cornelius and recognition that Cornelius truly was a person of faith. Peter ultimately stated, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). This experience of Peter's sheds light on how Christians today might approach issues related to homosexuality. As heterosexual people get to know devout gay and lesbian people of faith, they may well be "forced to reconsider long-held assumptions and interpretations of Scripture" and come to see God as showing "no partiality" (102-103).

Jesus himself did not directly speak to homosexuality. However, Myers and Scanzoni believe that Jesus' general orientation of compassion and care should mark the churches' approach to same-sex relationships (103-104).

They reject the argument that Jesus established an exclusive norm for heterosexual marriage in his comments about marriage in Mark 10:6-9. He was responding to a direct question about the permanence of marriage, not making a philosophical statement about sexual differences and about the idea that human wholeness requires the merging of two incomplete halves. As did Paul, Jesus spoke positively about singleness with no hint that single people were not whole human beings (109).

The notion of innate sexual differences and the need for heterosexual marriage to provide the context for a needed "complementarity" that uniquely allows for human wholeness in practice ends of foster a continued attitude of the dependence of women on men for their completeness. According to Myers and Scanzoni, such an approach hinders everyone's call to "be whole persons who can develop both their active and affective sides" (111).

They cite Hosea 2 characterization of the marriage covenant as including "justice, fairness, love, kindness, faithfulness, and a revelation of God's personhood," asserting that these characteristics can just as likely be part of a same-sex marriage as a heterosexual marriage (113).

Jack Rogers. *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*. Westminster John Knox, 2006.

Jack Rogers starts with an affirmation that discriminating unjustly against anyone in the church is a terrible problem (x). He develops the argument that discrimination against gays and lesbians in the churches is an important example of such *unjust* discrimination.

Rogers links the present-day movement to secure full inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians in the churches with earlier movements in which the church, "guided by the Holy Spirit in understanding the Scriptures," came to affirm the full inclusion, including ordination, of African Americans, women, and divorced and remarried Christians. In each case, he argues, Christians moved from a more literalistic reading of the Bible to one that centered on the life and teaching of Jesus (15-16).

Following the way of Jesus should empower Christians to show love for all, including especially the "outcasts of society." Rogers believes it is unthinkable that Jesus would turn away people who had been treated harshly by society, including those whose treatment had pushed them to attempt suicide. (56-57)

If we read the Bible in light of Jesus' compassion toward those labeled as outside of the boundary lines of "pure religion," we will seriously question the applicability of biblical statements that in their context spoke against same-sex sexual behavior as expressions of idolatry and unbridled lust to present-day instances of monogamous, covenanted intimate partnerships among Christians whose lives reflect fruitful relationships with God. That is to say, the "plain sense" of the "anti-gay" texts requires consideration of the contexts of those texts – and such consideration will make it clear how different the biblical contexts are from the present context of 21st-century North American churches (58).

According to Rogers, the Bible's condemnation of sexual contact between two men reflects cultural assumptions that saw such conduct as a confusion of sex roles – assumptions totally ignorant of what we understand today to be the innate sexual orientation of many who are attracted to those of their same sex (65). The cultural embeddedness of these assumptions renders them non-normative for present-day Christian ethical discernment.

The Bible's strongest anti-male/male sexual relationship statements are found in the book of Leviticus. The cultural context for those statements is the need Israelites felt for strong cohesiveness as a means of sustaining their identity as a people in relation to the Egyptians and Canaanites. A key aspect of maintaining this separation was to avoid "mixing" in any way with Canaanites and their social and religious practices. This priority on the avoidance of "mixing" came to apply to a wide range of behaviors, not having more than one kind of seed in a field and not having more than one kind of fabric in one's clothing. For two men to have sex would be to "mix" sex roles, one taking on the role of a woman, thus crossing a cultural boundary in intolerable ways (72). Thus, the

condemnation of male/male sex in Leviticus applied to a specific cultural context. It was not a timeless, absolute directive.

Rogers also does *not* believe that the texts in Paul's writings that are often cited actually support exclusionary approaches to gays and lesbians in the church. Partly, this view is based on his understanding of the meaning of the words Paul uses, *arsenokoitai* and *malakos*. He concludes that *arsenokoites* is best understood as alluding to economic exploitation, likely related to sexual activity – not as a general condemnation of all same-sex sexual intimacy (73-74). *Malakos* likely refers to effeminacy and/or general lack of self-control (74). In both cases, to accurately understand Paul's meaning, we must think much more in terms of specific cultural contexts and not general, meant-for-all-time ethical prescriptions (75).

In discussing Romans 1:18-32, Rogers again emphasizes reading the text in its cultural context, arguing once more that the meaning of the text when read thus does *not* have direct relevance to present-day same-sex intimate partnerships. Paul's main concerns here are with idolatry as expressed in excessive, lustful sexual behavior. When Paul uses the idea of the behavior he is referring to being "unnatural," he is not speaking about "homosexuality" versus "heterosexuality." Rather, he means to be saying that the excessive, lustful aspects of the behavior are "unnatural" (that is, unconventional, out of the ordinary, contrary to social expectations). Hence, his point does not speak same sex relationships per se (77-78).

Finally, Rogers also rejects the argument that the biblical understanding of creation (male and female as the exclusive norm for covenanted partnerships) provides a basis for discriminating against gay and lesbians in the churches. He points out that nowhere in the Bible is creation used as a supporting motif in the formulation of norms for sexual relations and marriage. Genesis 1–2 are not about homosexuality or marriage; that passage is not intended to speak to present-day questions concerning homosexuality (85).

What Are the Key Issues?

My concern in this essay has been simply to summarize diverse theological and biblical perspectives on the issues related to homosexuality. In conclusion, I will simply identify some of the key questions that arise from our comparative report.

Applicability of biblical materials

Our two groups seem clearly to differ on how we should *apply* biblical materials, though not necessarily on the authority of the Bible per se. One of the basic issues here is how clear do we understand the Bible to be? Is it possible categorically to equate *the* biblical teaching with a certain present-day position? One side seems fairly comfortable with such an equation, the other seems more to be saying that when studied carefully, the Bible does not yield *a* clear position. These latter writers do not dismiss the Bible out of hand but rather come to a different understanding from what is found in the Bible.

Another issue concerning the applicability of the biblical materials may be framed as a question of how directly these materials should be applied to the present day. How seriously must we take the great distance in time, geography, language, and culture between the Bible times and ours? What are the implications of this distance?

One crucial text where this issue is central is the one direct biblical prohibition of male/male sex, the Holiness Code in Leviticus. One side understands that, even carefully considering the distance, the Levitical prohibition does provide us with a clear and directly applicable directive; the other side tends to understand Leviticus as part of an entirely foreign context that at most has *general* relevance for Christians.

Meaning of core references

The handful of biblical texts that speak directly of same-sex sex lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. A central difference can be seen in responses whether or not these texts are referring to relationships that are in any relevant way analogous to present-day same-sex intimate relationships. The differences in relation to this question may be the most substantial in this controversy – certainly at least among the writers I have summarized here.

For progress toward rapprochement in the controversy, focusing some serious energy on this issue of the extent that legitimate analogies may be drawn between the biblical cases and present-day cases is crucial. I actually believe that some progress could be made, but that this would require careful work in constructing criteria for what would constitute legitimate analogies – followed by applying those analogies to the biblical materials.

Differences related to specific texts are also obvious. Four of my “restrictive” writers do not draw upon the Sodom story in Genesis 19 as central to their arguments, though certainly others do, including Robert Gagnon.[iii] The “inclusive” writers all reject such an application.

The three texts whose interpretations are the most conflicted are Leviticus 18–20, Romans 1, and 1 Corinthians 6. Is Leviticus reflecting an underlying, universal, creation-based principle as the basis for the prohibition of male/male sex, or is it reflecting instead time-bound contextual concerns that no longer are directly relevant for Christians? Is Romans one relevant to all same-sex relationships or only same-sex sex that is practiced by people who are heterosexual in orientation? Does the critique of the sex in Romans one as “against nature” rest on an understanding of a God-ordained created order in which male/female sex is the exclusive norm or does it rest on a more practical view that this is sexual activity that is “unexpected”? How certain may we be about the meaning of the Greek terms in I Corinthians 6:9 that have in recent years been translated in English as “homosexuals” and similar terms? Are these terms referring to same-sex sex per se or rather to exploitation and moral laxity?

“Creation” and marriage

The “restrictive” writers understand the creation account of Genesis 1–2 and its later use by Jesus as crucial to establishing the exclusive normativeness of male/female marital sex. People on the other side reject that interpretation and application.

What is the significance of human beings being portrayed as male *and* female? Is this simply a descriptive statement centered on saying that we come from procreative sex without the implication that such sex is the only morally legitimate type? Or is it more a normative statement meant to establish that male/female marital sex is all that God endorses?

How should we apply Jesus’ use of the creation story in a passage such as Matthew 19? Is he echoing a normative portrayal of the only appropriate type of sexual intimacy? Or is he merely focusing on male and female relations because that was specific concern he was addressing in speaking on divorce?

Even if one understands the Bible to affirm the centrality of male/female marriage to human community lived before God, does it follow that same-sex intimate relationships must be rejected as morally inappropriate? Does seeing male/female marriage as the norm mean that any alternative to that is a threat to the norm? Or are these actually two separate issues, with a small minority of Christians living in same-sex intimate relationships no more a threat to male/female marriage and procreation than are singleness and childless male/female marriages?

“Sin” and purity

The basic question under the rubric of “sin” is how one interprets the basic biblical moral thrust. Are the sins that Christians should be most concerned about threats to the purity of the community and direct violations of biblical law codes? Or is the sin problem understood to be centered on mistreatment of marginalized and vulnerable people? That is, should the church be focused on the “sin” of the alleged misbehavior of homosexual people – or should the church be focused on the “sin” of the alleged misbehavior toward homosexual people?

Concluding thoughts

To the extent that the controversy over sexuality lends itself to rational resolution, we would do well to devote more energy to trying to find common ground in relation to biblical interpretation. I do not believe the differences are so much based on different understandings of biblical authority as they are simply on different people finding different meanings in the texts. Hence, in theory we should be able to progress toward some common ground.

To do so, we need to take each other’s good faith attempts to grapple with the Bible seriously. Perhaps our biggest challenge is to make the effort to understand one another before launching into our critique. Rather than treating this controversy as an argument to win or lose, we would do much better to think more in terms of a puzzle to solve – and that we all have a contribution to make to

such a solution. No one is benefiting from the acrimony of the current impasses in which the churches find themselves.